

Artifice and Dehumanization: Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory* and *Hatred for Life*

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Abstract

In this article I seek to explore the dark, twisted world of Iain Banks' masterpiece of speculative weird fiction, The Wasp Factory. Specifically, I attempt to grasp the aesthetic function of the Wasp Factory, a bizarre contraption utilized by the narrator to ritually murder wasps. What meaning, if any, does this construct convey? More generally, what is the purpose of this bizarre, gloomy novel? And what implications does it have for literary theory in general? So as to diversify scholarly reception of Banks' extraordinary work, I seek to utilize two concepts of aesthetic theory that may be of help in this regard. The first is Ortega y Gasset's notion of „dehumanization”, expounded in a little-cited 1925 essay, entitled „The Dehumanization of Art” (La deshumanización del arte). The second key concept I seek to utilize is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the „literary machine.” Through the posthumanist merging of these two very different, albeit analogous philosophical ideas, I hope to shed new light on Banks' literary method and the radical anti-vitalist potential of his novel.

Key Words: aesthetics, death, dehumanization, expenditure, literary theory

We see blurred photographs of long-dead relations, stains of dust upon our shaking hands. The secret has no face, it would seem, in the sacred world evoked in the 1984 novel, *The Wasp Factory*. This is a world wherein thought has become separable from life itself. Nothing individual can remain in the proximity of the Factory. It has an operativity all of its own, a power of separation that exerts a malignant allure upon its surroundings. Banks' novel evokes a sense of sacrifice, a lived spirituality without any hope of salvation: „I thought again of the Sacrifice Poles; more deliberately this time, picturing each one in turn, remembering their positions and their components, seeing in my mind what those sightless eyes looked out to, and flicking through each view like a security guard changing cameras on a monitor

screen.” (Banks 12-3) The narrator never alludes to which deity these „Sacrifice Poles” are dedicated to, what kind of religious rite demands the sacrifice of wasps. The teenage protagonist, Frank, spends his days collecting, entrapping and murdering these hapless insects in various shamanistic acts of senseless violence. Yet this is most manifestly a shamanism without object, driven by a sightless vision. Remembrance oozes through the eyes of dead insects, jamming itself into a tight place that has become all but inseparable from the Factory. In *The Wasp Factory*, there seems to be no opportunity for redemption or salvation. Rather, we as readers are encouraged to feel „the simple but ultimate surrender of death.” (13) Indeed, Frank later confides in us that he has never confined his murderous interests to merely one particular lifeform: by the time he was ten years of age, Frank had already murdered three fellow children. This aggression is hence not limited to an annoying, irritating lifeform: Frank is animated by a burning hatred for life itself.

But is hatred not the mirror-image of love and attraction, a longing for that which only sightless eyes may see? Death and the love of dying permeates *The Wasp Factory*. At first blush, it seems absurd, even preposterous to suggest that one may harbor in oneself an aesthetic appreciation of death. The mere suggestion of such a desire to visualize death would indicate a perversion of aesthetic sense. Whatever we may think of such an urge, whether we view it as madness or moral evil, this desire to see and feel death is what drives Frank: „I decided to watch the television in my room, or listen to the radio, and get to sleep early so I could be up just after dawn to catch a wasp for the Factory.” (12) In a quite literal sense, the narrator seeks to rid the cold Scottish island, his place of residence, of any and all lifeforms that may pose a danger to his own bodily comfort. Would this then constitute a process of methodical extermination? As we shall see, the situation is not so simple. It is our contention that the Wasp Factory functions as a ”literary machine”, a dehumanizing becoming that refuses to reduce itself to the self-enunciation of any subject, living or dead. Before we may explore Banks’ contraption, we must construct a theoretical assemblage of our own, through the creative mating of three very different thinkers.

The first human ingredient of our planned synthesis is Ortega y Gasset. A Spaniard of notably humanist persuasion, Ortega seems, not altogether unreasonably, a most definitely unsuitable candidate for any posthuman aesthetics. However, in Ortega’s 1925 essay, „The Dehumanization of Art”, we may discover a key concept that can be of some help in unpacking Banks’ anti-vitalism. This is the idea of „dehumanization.” For Ortega, the most revealing characteristic of modern art is its manifest unpopularity. His claim is that „the unpopularity of modern art... is of a very distinct kind.” (Ortega 65) It is not merely a case of innovative artistic ideas too far ahead of their time. In the contemporary unpopularity of modern, conceptually laden art forms, Ortega sees an essential scission, one unparalleled in

previous art. The vast majority of people simply do not understand modern art, it divides the masses into „those who understand it and those who do not.” (66) Modernist art, especially abstract painting, is irritating for most people, because it falls so far outside of reality. Art has become separated from life and experience. For Ortega, as distinct from many contemporary critics, this is not a cause for concern. Quite the opposite! The anti-representational slant of modernist art is an opportunity to leave the human element behind, to sever the ties that limit art to a slavish re-presentation of everyday life and banal topics. For the majority of art consumers, those works are enjoyable that keep them within their sphere of everyday concern, without threatening the boundaries of their existence. Only limited, subjective enunciations are considered beautiful by the uninformed. Modern art, on the other hand, severs us from human narratives and desires. There is an irredeemable contradiction between authentic appreciation and humanity: „such concern with the human element of the work is strictly incompatible with aesthetic gratification.” (68) Aesthetics, in Ortega’s view, must transcend human reality, for life excludes art and art excludes life. Artistic vision must become trapped among the corridors, labyrinths, chambers and traps of unreality. True art only begins once the human element is marginalized. (67) Ortega pulls no punches. In a thrillingly audacious and powerful move, he drives a wedge between art and reality: „the artistic object is artistic only to the extent that it is not real.” (68) Art cannot be real, because art is self-referential. This impassioned astronomy is the instrument of a desire that breaks away from alterity, otherness. It is an assemblage that triggers exit from social reality, nature and time. Art is what gives back, impassionately exploring realms divorced from any passion. Banks’ protagonist sees the nothingness that dead wasp-eyes open to. Similarly, the artist envisions a something that the uninitiated pass over, an „artistic nothingness” born in solitude. Although notions of purity have become, in the decades since Ortega first published his essay, somewhat problematic, we may nevertheless emphasize this idea. He himself recognizes that pure art is an abstraction. But does that mean that one cannot adhere to such an ideal? Self-reference, far from being a limitation of artistic expression, a deficiency that must be addressed, is viewed by Ortega as constituting the very essence of art:

Although a pure art may not be possible, there is no doubt that there is room for a movement towards it. This would lead to a progressive elimination of the human or too human elements characteristic of romantic and naturalistic works of art, and a point will be reached in which the human content of the work diminishes until it can scarcely be seen. (69)

Modern art is a process of disfiguration and dismemberment, a process of progressive elimination that separates itself from living themes. It is a burning of the human image, a scission driven into the very heart of reality, a hole that expands until nothing is left that resembles anything real. The only authenticity, within the realm of art, is an artificial reality of its own making. This demands the construction of a milieu, be it literary, musical or poetic, that is all but unbearable for any living thing. As distinct from naturalistic directions, abstract artists follow deviations „leading directly away from the human object.” (71) Hatred and avoidance of natural themes are directly predicated upon a lovingly, yielding acceptance of artifice. Ortega explicitly connects anti-vitalism with artistic self-referentiality: modernism „tends towards the dehumanization of art; to an avoidance of living forms; to ensuring that a work of art should be nothing but a work of art; to considering art simply as play and nothing else.” (70) Dehumanization is the mere correlate of a much deeper hatred for existence, born of decadent exhaustion. It would be a mistake to read Ortega’s words as the laments of some conservative aesthete, hell-bent on restoring traditional art at the expense of artistic free expression. At the conclusion of his essay, Ortega points out „the impossibility of going back.” (83) We cannot return to an age wherein art is full of meaning. Rather, we must make the most of the present situation. Extending this point, we would also highlight the impossibility of restricting the realm of meaning to human desires, aesthetic forms that are amenable to recognition by human entities. Dehumanization and hatred for life, once awakened, simply cannot be reterritorialized any longer. Failure of representation equates acceptance of artifice, the liberation of the artificial and inorganic at the expense of any and all living beings. Banks’ novel underlines Ortega’s emphasis on the artificiality of dehumanization. *The Wasp Factory* is full of minute details, carefully enacted scenes, meticulously curated stages. Life must give way to the congelation that is artificial nonbeing:

I'd found the candle-making kit in the cupboard under the stairs five or six years ago, and experimented with the colours and consistencies for months before hitting on the idea of using the wax as a wasp-prison. I looked up then and saw the head of a wasp poking up from the top of a candle on the altar. The newly lit candle, blood red and as thick as my wrist, contained the still flame and the tiny head within its caldera of wax like pieces of an alien game. As I watched, the flame, a centimetre behind the wasp's wax-gummed head, freed the antennae from the grease and they came upright for a while before they frazzled. The head started to smoke as the wax dribbled off it, then the fumes caught light, and the wasp body, a second flame within the

crater, flickered and crackled as the fire incinerated the insect from its head down. (Banks 33-4)

Experimentation anchors formerly living, animated living objects to a state of absolute death, a purified, eternalized immobility. Frank is careful, and spends months, indulging himself in the seemingly pointless alchemical task of melting candles, until he uncovers the correct consistency, perfectly suited to entombing wasp-bodies previously killed in the Wasp Factory. The purpose of this posthumous „alien game” is an almost meditative alternation of coagulation and dissolution. In one moment, the wasp cadavers lie trapped, hopelessly sealed up by wax coffins – in the other, they are liberated from their confines, only to meet their final dissolution in the crackling of a candle-caldera. Those killed are kept by Frank, so as to be incinerated at a later stage. Banks’ protagonist betrays a perverse fascination with the microscopic aspects of life, inhuman perspectives that lie outside of ordinary human presence. We cannot even begin to fathom what it is like to be a „wax-gummed head.” Ortega identifies this fascination with the inorganic and the microscopic with the inherently anti-vitalistic impulses of modern poetry. „The lyrical weapon”, Ortega writes with characteristic rhetorical flair, „is turned against natural things and damages, even assassinates them.” (Ortega 77)

How else could one characterize Banks’ prose, if not as a radical assassination of everything animated, everything that lives, breathes and flies? Not only living entities must perish, but even their very forms must be eradicated, if Banks’ Factory is to triumph. As Ortega emphasizes, „the processes of dehumanization are many.” (76) There is no single sure-fire method of eliminating life, in a literal or literary sense. The Wasp Factory knows multiple ways of murdering the wasps entrapped among its walls. No single way of dying enjoys an exclusive monopoly in this unspeakable setting. Abstract art and abstracted, anti-vitalist writing alike divorce themselves, decadently and violently, from life, letting loose „unimaginable characteristics” into the world. (71) Dehumanization may be aptly compared to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of „deterritorialization.” Deterritorialization, for Deleuze and Guattari, is inseparable from „minor literature”, a term they use to denote all methods of writing that break free of representation. (Deleuze and Guattari 18) Deterritorialized literature is a writing that ungrounds literary expression, ideally to the point wherein „nothing remains but intensities.” (19) Minor literature is not minor in a quantitative sense. Rather, it is a literature that opens up lines of flight for the qualitatively enhanced artistic subject. This resonates well with Ortega’s assertion that modern art constitutes a method of escape from reality. For us, what is interesting at this point is Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of „literary machine.” „The modern work of art”, claims Deleuze in his

book on Proust, is a machine, and functions as such.” (Deleuze 145) What does this mean, and how does it relate to the inner workings of Banks’ Wasp Factory? Furthermore, what are the primary characteristics of this construct? Uncannily echoing Ortega, Deleuze writes that „the modern work of art has no problem of meaning, it has only a problem of use.” (146) Art, through its modernist dis-anthropomorphization, has become a machinery whose sole function is the perpetuation of its own usage. For Ortega and Deleuze alike, this is a productive opportunity, a chance to unleash unfathomable power. Throughout *The Wasp Factory*, we are confronted with the energetics of sacrifice, the sacred power of ritual and the dark forces of death. Frank expresses, at one significant point, his doubts as to whether the Factory is a worthwhile enterprise, but the spectacle of the dying wasps, gifted to him by his machine, is enough to dispel these anxieties: „parts of me thought all this was nonsense, but they were in a tiny minority. The rest of me knew this sort of thing _worked_. It gave me power, it made me part of what I own and where I am. It makes me feel good.” (Banks 46) The nonsense of the Factory as a dehumanizing, murderous literary machine are enough to fill Frank with a sense of purpose. He believes in his own acts, and this belief in itself is sufficiently empowering for him to continue operating the literary machine. Moments of disjointed, incoherent nonsense become, for the narrator, meaningful engagements with an unreality of his own making. Nothing can take away the solitary, secret joy of putting to death, at least not from Francis („Frank”) Cauldhame. Such moments, such inner experiences „become the effect of a literary machine.” (Deleuze 153) The literary machine expresses the dark energy of life exhausting itself through bizarre, unhealthy spectacles of expenditure and depravity. Surrounded by the Factory, the subjectivity of the narrator is also dehumanized, dismembered, in other words, rendered collective in the most exalted sense of the word. It is because he produces moments of death that these moments become Banks’ very own literary realities. What the narrator does is to extricate the „diabolical power” of the Wasp Factory as literary machine. (Deleuze and Guattari 29) Deleuze and Kafka, through a speculative rendition of Franz Kafka’s writing, envision the literary machine as a recombinative power, a potency that acts through destroying and refabricating linguistic, cultural and material realities, all in the context of a becoming-unreal. The literary machine has no need of symbolic representation or realism, for it itself is generative of new, unfathomable, unimaginable realities. Desire, once the productivity of the literary machine is rendered open, tends to „take flight on the whole line, carried away by a freed expression, carrying away deformed contents.” (59) Deformation, for Deleuze and Guattari, is a liberating force that allows one to take flight, including those authors we choose as the objects of our study: commentary as a method of escape, this is the goal that lies at the heart of their methodology. Secret enunciation „hides itself or deforms”; the production of pure immanence, „a pure,

moving material of expression”, can only be performed in a minor position, a place of secrecy unopen to direct contact. (65)

If anything, its status as minor literature would explain the esoteric and elusive atmosphere evoked by *The Wasp Factory*. Insofar as it allows Frank to produce instances of enunciation, the Factory performs an explicitly emancipative function. Frank does not feel his life of mutilation, destruction and meticulous murderousness to be lacking in meaning, quite the reverse: his inner emptiness is a productive interiority, connected to a childish world that gravitates around a killing-machine:

All our lives are symbols. Everything we do is part of a pattern we have at least some say in. The strong make their own patterns and influence other people's, the weak have their courses mapped out for them. The weak and the unlucky, and the stupid. The Wasp Factory is part of the pattern because it is part of life and - even more so- part of death. Like life it is complicated, so all the components are there. The reason it can answer questions is because every question is a start looking for an end, and the Factory is about the End - death, no less. Keep your entrails and sticks and dice and books and birds and voices and pendants and all the rest of that crap; I have the Factory, and it's about now and the future; not the past. (Banks 88)

The masses can keep their „pendants” and „all the rest of that crap”, for Frank believes he has uncovered the alchemical secret. The Wasp Factory is his literary machine, a construct of his own making that nevertheless reveals realities far beyond the confines of the human. It is a line of flight, precisely because it is the End of every beginning. The Factory itself is but a mere component, a refrain in the vast rhythm of life. Vitality must end, surrendering to the sovereignty of death. This does not mean, however, that we must equate the end of life with the absolute lack of a future. According to Frank's perverse worldview, annihilation of natural forms opens a pathway to a futurity characterized by absolute lack and overwhelming emptiness. Patternmaking already entails a Darwinian struggle among the strong and the weak. In the final instance, every organic being will prove weaker than the realm of the inorganic. At its heart, the minor writer knows full well that his machine does not really work, its gears do not function in any real sense. (Deleuze and Guattari 45) In any ordinary human being, this knowledge of futility would be enough to render oneself impotent, unproductive. The minor writer, however, uses this opportunity, this ennui, to take flight from reality, the reality of oppressive life. For Deleuze and Banks alike, art is superior to life.

(Deleuze 41) Art, in Deleuze's philosophy, functions as a telescope that unearths newer and newer layers of signification. The meaning of the sign resides in itself, in the self-referentiality of collective assemblages of miniature enunciations. As Deleuze notes, „the sign is an ever-equivocal, implicit, and implicated meaning.” (92) Signification is a movement, a becoming that fabricates the preconditions of its own literary narration. Rather than mechanical laws of causation, it is Deleuze's contention that signs, making themselves manifest through explicit styles, are what constitute the ever-present texture of the world.

Essence, in all art forms –literature in particular – is constituted by self-identity. „Identity of a sign as style and of a meaning as essence: such is the character of the work of art.” (50) The Factory is a sign of the End, for it is the limitless ocean into which all functionality flows, the wasteland into which life collapses. Solitude opens Frank up to the absence of a cause. No longer is he master of his own artifice. The narrator himself is dehumanized, rendered into a channel for malignant enunciations, communications and forces. As both experimenter and experimental subject, he himself is exposed to bodily harm, through inhalation of toxic chemicals. In another ritual, Frank positions the cadaver of a long-dead wasp into a tin filled with a poisonous mixture. Instead of fresh air, this production of absence pollutes the atmosphere with unbearable smoke: „the mixture of sugar and weedkiller sizzled and glared; the intense light seared through me and clouds of smoke rolled up and around my head as I held my breath and my eyes watered.” (Banks 35) Even the experimenter's own interiority cannot escape pollutive exposure, for the setting wherein signs manifest themselves is a place of impurity. Essences are not to be found in places of sunlit clarity. Rather, we must search for essence in territories that fall outside of purified, sterile, placid and domesticated space. Frank must search for meaning in the darkness of inner exile, enclosed within a solitude that no external agents may disturb.

The alchemical Magnum Opus demands the disposal of presence and separation from light, for „the essences dwell in dark regions, not in the temperate zones of the clear and the distinct.” (Deleuze 100) The literary machine, as an instrument dedicated to liberating flows of desire, cannot be allowed to come into contact with anything associated with the surface. Frank, from the commencement of his deranged experiments, finds himself surrounded by the Factory („the Factory surrounded me”); his life is also an instrument of the Wasp Factory's own, sovereign desire. Literature is a husk of a life that has become integrated into desiring machines. Minor writing is a trap that cannot but enclose writer and written alike in an infernal relation. Were they separable, we would never find figures such as Banks or Kafka enwrapped within their own unspeakable narratives. Banks' alter ego, Frank, is affected, his health endangered by fumes of his own creation. In this sense, his situation is analogous to that of Deleuze and Guattari's Kafka, trapped by a tyrannical form of literature that consumes

its own creator, „his whole body broken by the trap that almost caught him.” (Deleuze and Guattari 33) Of course, the body of the inventor, even though polluted by the emissions of the Factory, is nevertheless relatively intact, in comparison with the degraded remnants of the unfortunate wasp: „In a second the blaze was over, the mixture and the wasp a single black lump of scarred and blistered debris cooling from a bright yellow heat. I closed my eyes to inspect the patterns, but only the burning after-image remained, fading like the glow on the metal plate. It danced about briefly on my retinas, then disappeared.” (Banks 35) Signs escape cognition. In a moment, they are gone, rendering themselves scarce, fleeing from the gaze that would seek to capture them. Entrapment is always a game of hide-and-seek. Reduced to a black, abject debris, the cadaver is transfigured into a dancing dream, an „after-image” staining the experimenter’s exhausted retinas. This husk reveals the secret of all signs. Secrecy, including minor writing, is dependent upon an oppression that builds up intensities, resulting in an unavoidable overflowing, an oversaturation of meaning. Repression results in overaccumulation, „the concealed things unceasingly accumulate and grow larger like a black snowball.” (Deleuze 78) Is the „single black lump” described in Banks’ novel the literary equivalent of Deleuze’s philosophical „black snowball”? Furthermore, what possible theoretical applications could we envision for an experimental colliding of the Banksian lump with the Deleuzian snowball? Without a doubt, such an occurrence would necessitate some degree of waste disposal. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, „each segment is a machine or a piece of the machine.” (Deleuze and Guattari 56) Neither segment may be removed from the literary machine without rendering it dysfunctional. The goal of Banks’ literary machine is to free the death drive working itself through the protagonist and his irrational actions. Every element, including every description of materiality is important in creating an atmosphere conducive to methodical destruction. In Bruhn’s view, the following sentence in *The Wasp Factory* implies that Banks’ novel must be read as a heteromedial work: „Zap! Pow! Dams burst! Bombs go off! Wasps fry: _ttssss_!” (Banks 138) Jørgen Bruhn suggests that we read the sentence, with its iconic description of a wasp frying, as a dual communication of the „symbolic sign” and the „iconic sign” because „the text wishes to operate in two different dimensions at the same time.” (Bruhn 228) Heteromediality would entail a comparison of medial relations with texts, as distinct from relations among different media. The transformations enacted by Banks’ protagonist are heteronomous, not only from a medial perspective, but also because of their extra-moral nature. In order to create his own solitary world, Frank must become an ethical innovator beyond good and evil. Heteromediality designates any media that transgresses boundaries. (230) Banks’ dark world is filled with such transgressions. Signs necessitate openness to their own force, „one must be endowed for the signs, ready to encounter them, one must open

oneself to their violence.” (Deleuze 101) Banks’ intensity resides in his ability to render the violence of signs manifest, tangible and audible. We not only read the signs, but also feel their violence upon our skins. Indeed, Bruhn fails to fully capture the intensity of this heteromediality. Not only does Banks force us to simultaneously „read” and „see”, as Bruhn claims, but also compels us to „feel.” Pure intelligence requires that we feel the signs and their attempts to ascend to truth.

Here in this dark brightness, we cannot hold ourselves and our inner tendencies. back. Why restrain back those who seek an exit, those daring adventurers who attempt, however clumsily, to flee from life? Banks’ protagonist takes leave of life by exterminating all he can. Life, once emplaced within the Wasp Factory, must die, because its purpose is its own death:

It didn't even need a few tries to catch; it went first time, and the thin flames, still quite bright in the early gloom of the morning-lit loft, curled and licked about the open mesh of the strainer. The flames did not go through, but the heat did, and the wasp flew up, buzzing angrily above the silent flames, bumping against the glass, falling back, hitting the side of the strainer, going over the edge, starting to fall into the flames, then flying back up again, knocking off the steel tube of the funnel a few times, then falling back into the steel-mesh trap. It leaped up a final time, flew hopelessly for a few seconds, but its wings must have been singed, because it was crazily erratic in its flight and soon fell into the gauze bowl and died there, struggling, then curling, then staying still, smoking slightly. (Banks 92)

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