Novelistic Inquiries into the Mind
Novelistic Inquiries into the Mind

Edited by
Grzegorz Maziarczyk
and Joanna Klara Teske
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INTRODUCTION

GRZEGORZ MAZIARCZYK
AND JOANNA KLARA TESKE

Questions of consciousness trouble the postmodern novelist and the postmodern reader; witness David Lodge’s novel *Thinks...* The key dilemma that the book investigates is summed up by Helen Reed in her lecture. It is the dilemma between the so-called liberal humanist notion of the self, “that is to say, the sense of personal identity, the sense of one’s mental and emotional life having a unity and an extension in time and an ethical responsibility, sometimes called conscience,” and the contemporary supposition that the self is “a fiction, construction, an illusion, a myth. That each of us is ‘just a pack of neurons,’ or just a junction for converging discourses, or just a parallel processing computer running by itself without an operator” (Lodge 2002, 319). Indeed, neurobiology and cognitive studies, evolutionary theories of the mind, poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and studies on Artificial Intelligence have all undermined the traditional notion of an autonomous, conscious and free self, which, though immaterial, is capable of interacting with material reality. Lodge also considers some of the currently available justifications for either belief and, perhaps more importantly, the psychic and social consequences of holding them.

However, there are many other urgent, mind-related issues which the contemporary novel tries to investigate: love and whether, if the self is an illusion, so must be all relations connecting any two selves, love included; death and whether it means anything to consciousness that possibly has never existed in the first place; identity and whether, if the mind constructs reality, it might also construct the self by re-arranging and re-interpreting or inventing memories and future projects; free will and whether it is defensible in the possibly deterministic universe; human sense of morality and whether good and evil are not merely social constructs, useful when it comes to organizing a community but ultimately arbitrary, with only a misleading appearance of absoluteness about them; human embodiment and whether the mind can be separated from the body. All these issues are
permeated by the central question of human creativity and the ontological status of the human mind’s products, the question implied in most metafictional texts – are meanings and values that the mind creates and assigns to encountered and self-created reality real (i.e. ontologically as substantial as the world around us)? So far science and philosophy have not found conclusive answers to the above questions and the tentative hypotheses they can offer are often mutually exclusive. This is why people eager to know the truth strive introspectively to find the answers inside themselves, or turn to art, the novel in particular: not only does it explore all the facets of consciousness mentioned above but it also depicts the confusion of people driven by the cognitive imperative to “know thyself” and frightened by the answers they might find in the course of their reckless quest.

Though questions concerning the subject of consciousness came to the foreground first in the modernist novel, the strategy chosen by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, or William Faulkner, with its direct focus on consciousness as such, might retrospectively be perceived as burdened with a methodological error: to cite Patricia Waugh, “modernism aimed at the impossible task of exploring pure consciousness” (1985, 27). The postmodern choice is to approach the mind indirectly by examining its products, above all, the mind’s ability to tell tales, to create fictional reality, to use language. However, the contemporary novelist is also aware and wary of the possible consequences and side effects of this investigation. It is especially the possibility that the mind (and thus also the human sense of self, identity, gender and the like) might be a function of language that seems to constitute the centre of the current postmodern explorations, as suggested in Linda Hutcheon’s *Postmodernist Poetics*.

It is sometimes argued that art, unable to provide proper justification for its interpretations of reality, cannot be recognized as a mode of cognition competitive with science. But if art is taken as a human endeavour to inquire into the mind (as opposed to extramental reality in the first place investigated by science), and if the novel uses language not only as a tool but as its basic artistic medium, if finally postmodern art is aware of all kinds of problems involved in the linguistic construction of reality, the cognitive function of art and the uncertain status of consciousness, then the contemporary novel might perhaps have the best credentials in the world (whether real and autonomous or fictional and mind-and-language dependent) to approach the task. The papers collected in this volume seek to justify this contention.

The elusive nature of consciousness is at the heart of the essay opening the collection. Katarzyna Fetlińska argues that Iain Banks’s early novels,
The Bridge (1986) and The Player of Games (1988), show that it is not reason but emotion that lies at the core of the human self. The body’s presence in the mind and the primary instinctual-emotional systems allow the emergence of higher brain functions and, consequently, the construction of self-awareness. In Fetlińska’s reading of Banks’s novels, sensations, affects and dreams constitute crucial components of fully developed consciousness, which in turn becomes the biologically rooted basis for culture.

The subsequent chapter explores related states of consciousness in John Kennedy Toole’s novel A Confederacy of Dunces (1980). Drawing on psychological studies of dreams, Olga Colbert highlights the manner in which the subjective experiences of the protagonist, Ignatius J. Reilly, are expressed in daydreams and night dreams permeated with medieval and modern apocalyptic imagery. These states of his consciousness reveal Ignatius’ anxieties over his sexuality and separation from his mother.

Samantha Harvey’s The Wilderness (2009), in turn, uses the tropes of order and chaos as models of memory processes characteristic of an individual suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Sonia Front demonstrates that the loss of temporal continuity, the bounded randomness of mental processes and the atemporal mode of imagination, memory, dream and – on a different plane – the text itself constitute a spiral that traces the movement of the protagonist’s consciousness. The trajectory of the text, which follows the trajectory of the protagonist’s thoughts, assumes a repeating pattern in the multiple revisits of the past events from different perspectives, sabotaging thus causal links and questioning the fixed truth of the past.

Approaching the novel-mind nexus from yet another perspective, Małgorzata Myk examines Leslie Scalapino’s Defoe (1994), whose form has been compared to the automatic writing of André Breton and Philippe Soupault, as a mental experiment in mind formation. Since Scalapino’s project foregrounds the concept of self-consciousness, combining the phenomenological perspective with the poststructuralist one in its effort to grasp the paradoxical syntax of the real, Myk reads Defoe’s focus on one’s being in events and mind formation in the context of Katerina Kolozova’s non-philosophical stance on subjectivity and her effort to rehabilitate and unfetter the thinking subject’s agency and self-awareness.

The connection between unreliable narration and novelistic representation of consciousness is the subject of Irena Księżopolska’s essay on Ian McEwan’s Enduring Love (2006). The ingenuity of the text consists in its use of the first-person narrator, whose excessively scientific/rational frame of mind seems to drive him into a delusional behaviour that may be
read as a form of mental illness. Księżopolska suggests that the two appendices, which appear to subvert this reading by lending credibility to the narrator’s account, can actually be interpreted as his fabrications, the whole novel thus becoming an exploration of the multiple projections of the delusional mind.

Robert Mirski applies Monika Fludernik’s notion of conceptual network created by the repetition of keywords to Will Self’s *The Book of Dave* (2006) in order to demonstrate that it designates a potent literary strategy whereby consciousness can be represented. Drawing on the theoretical apparatus of cognitive science and semiotics, he describes the technique as consciously coherentist in its employment of an intratextually created framework to engender meanings independent from extratextual semiotic structures. In Self’s novel, the device aims at reproducing the protagonist’s cognitive categories and thus re-enacting the phenomenology of his consciousness in the mind of the reader.

Departures from purely verbal strategies of consciousness representation in the novel are the subject of Wioletta Chabko’s chapter. She juxtaposes a theory of the discursive conception of the mind with the notion of embodiment in an attempt to answer two key questions: to what extent verbal narratives serve as a means of making sense of experience and to what extent these are nonverbal elements that generate meaning. By analysing selected examples adduced from Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) Chabko demonstrates that contemporary fiction turns to the multimodal use of multiple semiotic modes in order to represent integrative processing of sensory data.

In her analysis of J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) Urszula Gołębiewska illustrates how the novel can call into question the traditional notion of the self. As a woman in eighteenth-century Britain, the narrator, Susan Barton, initially engages in the pursuit of power and autonomy typically associated with male subjectivity. It is only the encounter with the Other that allows the narrator to transcend the limitations of her own consciousness and become a Levinasian ethical subject.

While Gołębiewska reads *Foe* in terms of gender and alterity, Jayendrina Singha Ray highlights the significance of mankind’s obsession with isolation and escape for our understanding of Coetzee’s novel. She examines how *Foe* deconstructs the notion of the island space as an outward colonised space/penitentiary by extending the carceral meme to spaces other than the external/outward. The island is thus frayed and reflected into several such island-like spaces, which are socially and historically created. For Ray the novel ultimately becomes the representation
of postmodern consciousness in that it reveals the carceral dimensions of body, language and narrative.

The relation between the motif of confinement and consciousness representation is further explored in Cristina Paravano’s discussion of the young-adult post-apocalyptic saga The Maze Runner Series (2009-11) by James Dashner. This dystopian trilogy investigates the themes of self-consciousness, self-cognition and self-creation, showing how mental experiments can take the human mind to its extremes. Dashner concentrates on the ethical issues generated by various forms of manipulation of/control over other people’s minds that technological progress might soon be able to offer.

Representations of the human mind in genre fiction are also the subject of Oskar Zasada’s chapter devoted to Christopher Moore’s speculative fiction Practical Demonkeeping (1992). Zasada examines the intricacies of the relationship between Travis, the protagonist, and Catch, a demonic entity bound to the young man, granting him biological immortality as an unexpected side effect. Adopting the framework of analytical psychology developed by Carl Gustav Jung, Zasada argues that the novel represents a rather innovative approach to the question of self-development.

Taken together, the essays collected in this volume exemplify a variety of relations between the mind and the novel. They examine, contextualise and evaluate the significance of multiple literary strategies and motifs for the representation of consciousness and thus demonstrate the representational potential of the novel as genre. By investigating a wide range of mind-related problems that contemporary novelists introduce into their works, the essays confirm the human urge to understand possible meanings of human existence.

References

CHAPTER ONE

THINKING BY FEELING:
CONSCIOUSNESS IN IAIN BANKS’S THE BRIDGE
AND THE PLAYER OF GAMES

KATARZYNA FETLIŃSKA

By rejecting dualisms and transcendent qualities of the mind promoted by philosophers, such as Plato, Descartes, Kant or Freud, in the late 1980s neuroscientists and philosophers began to define themselves as both materialists and monists. Publications like, for instance, Jean-Pierre Changeux’s Neuronal Man (1985), Antonio Damasio’s Descartes’ Error (1994) or Joseph LeDoux’s Synaptic Self (2002) incited a paradigm shift in the ways we think about the mind, finally bringing the studies of consciousness into the biological context (Nalbantian 2011, 3). Scientists, artists, writers, and philosophers alike began to inquire about the substrates of self-awareness, asking whether a gap really exists between what is natural and what is cultural. In my analysis I discuss Iain Banks’s ideas concerning the genesis and the function of consciousness. First, I focus on The Player of Games (1988), Banks’s early science-fiction novel, in order to argue that the Scottish writer perceives visceral sensations and affects as the building blocks of “higher,” autobiographical self-awareness. Then, I proceed to Banks’s early mainstream novel, The Bridge (1986), in order to explain why for Banks dreams are not the products of a Freudian unconscious, but an altered state of awareness. I examine how emotions and dreams promote the appearance of a mature, unified self, in order to illustrate Banks’s views on the characteristics of consciousness understood as the biological foundation of culture.
In *The Player of Games*, Iain M. Banks\(^1\) presents a vision of a distant future, in which the universe is ruled by the hedonist Culture. In this reality money or state-power is no longer needed: thanks to bioengineering and ultra-advanced technology all citizens of the Culture have instant access to anything they want, no one suffers from illnesses, hunger or poverty, while crime cannot exist due to constant supervision of humans realised by sentient and omniscient machines. Jernau Morat Gurgeh is the Culture’s celebrity, a master player of games, who, in spite of remarkable success, is unhappy in his life. Gurgeh has fallen into a trap of inertia and bitterness, wasting his time on endless artificial competitions possessing no real value and no purpose. In the first part of Banks’s novel, Gurgeh is presented as a depressed man who drifts from party to party, from game to game, and from lover to lover, unable to get rid of the prevailing sense of meaninglessness.

Contact, the Culture’s special diplomatic force, offers Gurgeh an opportunity to change his life. Contact’s representatives want him to travel to the planet of Eä in order to play the game called Azad, which is also the name of the pan-Eachic empire of human-like aliens. Unlike the democratic and communitarian Culture, the Empire of Azad is obsessed with power, domination, and violence. It is ruled by one game, in which all social positions, including the emperor’s, can ultimately be won. The Culture, intent on unrigging Azad’s extremely unjust social structure, chooses a diplomatic conquest-solution: Gurgeh is supposed to play in the Azad games in order to overthrow the planet’s emperor, and dismantle Azad from within. Gurgeh does not know the ultimate purpose of the Culture, but, at the same time, he does not care about politics. All he is interested in is the game itself.

Banks’s narrative is dense with descriptions of the characters’ feelings and affects. When Gurgeh is playing games, he is

> [a] wash with a bitter-sweet flood of new and enhanced emotions; the terror of risk and possible defeat, the sheer exultation of the gamble that paid off and the campaign which triumphed; the horror of suddenly seeing a weakness in his position which could lose him the game; the surge of relief when nobody else noticed and there was time to plug the gap; the pulse of furious, gloating glee when he saw such a weakness in another's game; and the sheer unbridled joy of victory. (Banks [1988] 2012, 194)

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\(^1\) Iain M. Banks was the pseudonym used by Iain Banks to publish his science fiction works, as explained in the BBC interview *Five Minutes With: Iain M Banks*. 
According to the traditional James-Lange “read out” theory of emotions, which was proposed over a century ago, feelings emerge only when one is able to conceptualise the unconscious forces of the mind. In line with this approach, affects are created only when the neocortex analyses the physiological expression of emotion within the brain. In other words, if an individual clenches his fists, the higher cognitive part of the brain (the neocortex) “reads out” the physiological response as a particular emotion, which in this particular case equals anger. Therefore, consciousness is, in general, purely cognitive (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 1). Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven point out that scientific works abound in descriptions of how people interpret bodily experiences, only subsequently defining them as particular emotions. This stems from the fact that the neocortex, regarded as the most evolutionary advanced part of the brain, has long been perceived as the most important element in the “brain-hierarchy”: researchers have not considered the deeper, more ancient parts of the brain as worth studying (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 1). Emotions were analysed separately from the so-called reason, if they were considered at all: usually they did not constitute a worthy scientific topic. As for literature, the status of emotions was slightly different. Iain Banks’s novelistic endeavours, for instance, exhibit an obsession with the workings of the human brain including the production of affects. The Player of Games offers countless descriptions of emotions, some of them following the traditional “read-out” approach: when Azad’s emperor, Nicosar, threatens Gurgeh with a sword, the main protagonist feels a strange metallic taste in his mouth, which he subsequently terms as fear (Banks [1988] 2012, 289). In Banks’s universum, emotions are, nevertheless, far from being unimportant. They are regarded as crucial for the construction of self, constituting a building block of consciousness. This goes in line with new research and scientific observations, which prove that feelings constitute a fundamental substrate for the emergence of awareness.

Since the 1980s it is common knowledge that the brain is a part of the body, enmeshed in a closely-knitted network of biological substrates. Panksepp and Biven argue that all mammals, and maybe even all animals, share a set of emotional systems embedded in the primitive parts of the brain which regulate behavioural and psychological expressions of emotions, spanning from rage to joy (2012, chap. 1). According to them, affects are primary experiences, which “shape our subjective lives, influence our behaviours, and mould our relationships,” while the neocortex itself plays a minor role in the generation of emotional responses (Siegel 2012). Affects allow us to learn about the world, think consciously and make decisions. It is, of course, without doubt that higher
brain functions allow for experiencing life at extraordinary cognitive levels, while human uniqueness arises from the complexity of neocortical expansions. Nevertheless, “our higher minds remain rooted in our ancestral past” (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 1). When a friend of Gurgeh asks him what is really true in the world, the player of games puts “intellectual achievement” and “the exercise of skill” alongside “human feeling” (Banks [1988] 2012, 6). The most cherished, critical moments in Gurgeh’s life are connected with fierce emotions, experienced simultaneously on sensory and psychological levels:

The circular wafer was lying, uncovered, almost right in front of him on the table. “Ah,” he said, and only then felt the blood rise to his face. “Here it is. Hmm. Couldn’t see it for looking at it.” He laughed again, and as he did so felt a strange, clutching sensation coursing through him, seeming to squeeze his guts in something between terror and ecstasy. He had never experienced anything like it. The closest any sensation had ever come, he thought (suddenly, clearly), had been when he was still a boy and he’d experienced his first orgasm . . . that first time had nevertheless been one of his most memorable experiences; not just because it was then novel, but because it seemed to open up a whole new fascinating world, an entirely different type of sensation and being. ([1988] 2012, 39-40)

For Banks, sensation and emotion are inseparably connected with self-awareness, and his point stays in accordance with Panksepp and Biven’s thesis that feelings create consciousness full of affective intensity, in other words, an affective consciousness (2012, chap. 1). Banks perceives affects as primary ontological experiences that are something more than just arbitrarily-named changes in the body.

Panksepp and Biven distinguish at least seven subcortical systems: SEEKING, RAGE, FEAR, LUST, CARE, PANIC/GRIEF, and PLAY2, which orchestrate emotional feelings with instinctual behaviours and relevant visceral responses (2012, chap. 1). Gurgeh feels pure rage when he watches the cruel behaviour of Azadians: he does not flinch, nor turn away, while he confronts the outrageous scenes of injustice and exploitation (Banks [1988] 2012, 209). When rage begins to interact with Gurgeh’s cognitive patterns, he uses it to feel victorious and to subjugate his rivals ([1988] 2012, 191). Fear is also well known to the game player: at a certain point of the novel, Mawhrin-Skel, the Culture’s Special Circumstances drone, paralyses Gurgeh and threatens him with death. It

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2 Biven and Panksepp capitalise the names of the primary affective systems so that these words’ meanings would not be confused with their everyday usage (2012, chap. 1).
purposefully engenders tension as well as immobility, so that Gurgeh may feel fear in its purest form ([1988] 2012, 58-59). Banks also shows that at the most advanced levels of cognitive activity we tend to be voluntarily “entertained by having our primary-process systems manipulated in situations where we are in fact safe” (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 1). Whilst playing, Gurgeh feels “the rush of that delicious fear” (Banks [1988] 2012, 52), therefore he engages in risky confrontations. Nevertheless, at least at the first sight, the central affect around which the novel is organised seems to be the joy associated with play.

According to Panksepp and Biven, PLAY is a neural mechanism that provides the experience of social joy, and helps to understand the emotional states of others. Daniel Goleman states that it opens the door to advanced cooperation, as well as “fellow feelings of camaraderie, compassion, empathy, and solidarity with and toward others” (quoted in Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 10). For Gurgeh

[i]t added a lot to the game to play as part of a team; he felt genuinely warm towards the apices he played alongside. They came to each other's aid when they were in trouble, they trusted one another during massed attacks, and generally played as though their individual forces were really a single side. As people, he didn't find his comrades desperately engaging, but as playing partners he could not deny the emotion he felt for them, and experienced a growing sense of sadness – as the game progressed and they gradually beat back their opponents – that they would soon all be fighting each other. (Banks [1988] 2012, 237-238)

A widespread definition proposed by Gordon Burghardt states that play is a spontaneous and pleasurable behaviour whose adaptive functions are not clear at the moment of playing, and which repeatedly appears among unstressed, healthy individuals (2005, 81). In the empire of Azad, playing games usually means something utterly different, since it is a carefully organised, ritualized and planned activity. The game of Azad serves a clear function: individuals engage in it in order to gain better positions in the heavily stratified society. This game cannot be distinguished from the political, economic and cultural system on Eä. It basically equals life with all its dangers (Banks [1988] 2012, 76). The purpose of Azad is not play itself, but the regulation of political life through oppression, segregation and the imposition of hierarchies (Lippens 2002, 139). The narrator in The Player of Games states: “the story starts with a battle that is not a battle, and ends with a game that is not a game” (Banks [1988] 2012, 3).

The Player of Games begins with Gurgeh engaging in a safely simulated fight, which could easily be called a rough-and-tumble play, and ends with
a game which is very distant from being innocent. Among the Culture citizens, pure play is a virtue, since by providing joy it enhances social connectivity and empathy. The victory does not matter: only the fun does (Banks [1988] 2012, 21). Gurgeh seems not to fit into this society, since play for him equals the anticipatory euphoria, an irresistible urge for something more ([1988] 2012, 196). He plays with an egocentric purpose, so that he can “feel real” ([1988] 2012, 21).

Panksepp and Biven note that the basic, oldest and dominant instinctual-emotional system of the brain is the SEEKING system, which allows creatures to search for and acquire resources indispensable for survival. Arousal of this system promotes “anticipatory euphoria as opposed to any pleasure of consumption: initially, it is just a goad without a goal” (2012, chap. 3). It is easy to see this system in action when resources are scarce, and one has to find them in order to survive. However, Panksepp and Biven note that the primary role of this system is not as visible in modern human societies. In the realm of Culture it is obsolete. Discussing one of the ancient games adapted by the Culture, Gurgeh argues that

[i]f somebody wanted a house like this they'd already have had one built; if they wanted anything in the house . . . they’d have ordered it; they'd have it. With no money, no possessions, a large part of the enjoyment the people who invented this game experienced when they played it just disappears. (Banks [1988] 2012, 21)

The arousal of the SEEKING system allows for “an enhanced sense of oneself as an effective agent in the world. In the social world, this entails feeling important, attractive, successful, and superior” (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 3). Gurgeh lacks these feelings, craves them, and thinks that the Culture is a flawed society in which the individual is useless, having no influence on reality (Banks [1988] 2012, 22). According to Michael Cobley, playing is a symbol of life in Banks’s novels (quoted in Kincaid 2013, 26-27), and Paul Kincaid adds that “by codifying games, the characters impose at least the semblance of control upon lives that are out of control” (2013, 27).

SEEKING keeps us in constant engagement in the world. If this state is impossible to be sustained, depression creeps up. In their discussion of affective consciousness, Panksepp and Biven resort to scientific evidence that animals may even sacrifice their lives in order to achieve some stimulation of the SEEKING brain circuitry. The dopamine-mediated feeling of euphoria is highly addictive: “many of us are workaholics. Drug addiction is rife. We are overeager to check our emails, to gamble . . .
Thinking by Feeling: The Bridge and The Player of Games

without our stopping to carefully consider what we are doing” (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 3). The more Gurgeh plays Azad, the more domination and power he craves, feeling “like a wire with some terrible energy streaming through him . . . a god with the power to destroy and create at will” (Banks [1988] 2012, 272). Gurgeh finally loses control of his own endogenous drugs, possessing only one absolute determination to “win, dominate, control” ([1988] 2012, 272). He is so fiercely possessed by the addictive euphoria that he has to be reminded by the drone to eat and sleep ([1988] 2012, 274). Over-stimulation of the SEEKING system leads also to the emergence of ritualistic, repetitive behaviours (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 3). Banks shows that the empire of Azad is obsessed with tradition and ritual in spheres as diverse as politics and clothing ([1988] 2012, 127). Rituals emerge, because, as the narrator notes, people need to feel that they are effective agents, even if it is just an illusion in a reality ruled by luck and chance ([1988] 2012, 52).

Regarding oneself as an important subject requires, of course, being conscious. Banks (1988) argues that self-awareness is created on the basis of a diversity of visceral reactions and emotions. Immersion in the reality of Azad is for Gurgeh the first step on a way to self-discovery. While he is waiting for the games to begin, his hands are shaking, his belly churns, he feels thrilled and sharp-witted ([1988] 2012, 141-42). He finally gains a direct experience of his own body, connected with nothing but pure life. Before he visited Azad, he used to artificially analyse and suppress his sensations:

There: that red-black scent of roasted meat; blood-quickening, salivatory; tempting and vaguely disagreeable at the same time as separate parts of his brain assessed the odour. The animal root smelled fuel; protein-rich food; the mid-brain trunk registered dead, incinerated cells… while the canopy of forebrain ignored both signals, because it knew his belly was full, and the roast meat cultivated. ([1988] 2012, 8)

Only on Eä does Gurgeh learn to truly feel and act: his earlier life could be defined as a state of more-or-less senseless inertia. In the Culture, free, instinctual action and the expression of strong emotions was undesirable, as is especially visible in the case of drone Mawhrin-Skel ([1988] 2012, 14-15). Panksepp and Biven, together with Antonio Damasio, suggest that the body map in the mind creates a proto-self, which evolves with the emergence of emotional and motivational systems into the more complex core self-focused especially upon acting in the world (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 11, Damasio 2010, chap. 1). The narrator of The Player of Games, drone Mawhrin-Skel, states that “we are what we do, not what we
think. Only the interactions count (there is no problem with free will here; that's not incompatible with believing your actions define you) . . . I say again; you is what you done. Dynamic (mis)behaviourism, that's my creed” (Banks [1988] 2012, 231). Instinctual actions are foundation for consciousness (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 11), the brain is not a passive medium, a film, on which different objects and sensations can be faithfully recorded (Damasio 2010, chap. 6). Neither is brain a disembodied, computer-like device: “minds evolved to make things happen . . . Minds make motions, and they must make them fast – before the predator catches you, or before your prey gets away from you” (Clark [1997] 1998, 1).

The mind allows for sensing, feeling and acting. The game of Azad awakens in Gurgeh powerful emotions, an intention to act, so that he can “survive” the fierce competition. While Gurgeh learns how to play Azad in a laboratory setting of a starship, he realises that only complete immersion into the game (with all the accompanying vulnerabilities and worries) will shape proper cognitive processes, allowing him to master Azad fully (Banks [1988] 2012, 82). Panksepp and Biven argue that affects promote evaluating the external and the internal realm in relation to survival, thus:

The midline systems that generate and regulate emotionality are continuously involved in self-related (“What’s in it for me?”-type) processing of external information. In this way we can again envision how all mammals are “active” information-seeking creatures rather than just “passive” information-integrating ones. (2012, chap. 11)

Neuroscience proves that the motor-action areas of the neocortex are heavily invested in executive functions, such as attentional focus, motor planning, imagination, and higher social emotions such as guilt, shame, and empathy . . . In this way, one can see that the superficial contents of consciousness may be sensory, while the basic capacity to be conscious may rely definitively on the action-generating apparatus of the brain. (Panksepp and Biven 2012, chap. 11)

Affects and actions are at the core of who we are. If areas of the brain responsible for the execution of movement or emotions are damaged, consciousness is lost (Damasio 2010, chap. 3). The body as represented in the mind plus all the emotional systems interacting with higher brain functions finally allow for the emergence of higher, autobiographical consciousness: that is, self (Damasio 2010, chap. 1).
Iain Banks’s third mainstream novel, *The Bridge*, originally published in 1986 also deals extensively with the topic of awareness. It is a study of a society which is utterly different than the Culture: it suffers from space and resource scarcity. Banks tells the story of Alex Lennox, a rich, well-educated Scot, who suffers from a car accident and, consequently, falls into a coma. Alex in his dreams re-visits not only episodes from his previous life, but also becomes John Orr, an amnesiac living on the bridge (an endless, stratified structure housing thousands of people). Orr undergoes psychotherapy with Dr Joyce (so that he can regain his memories) and searches for the truth about the bridge. In some of his ruminations, Alex changes also into a barbarian warrior who, describing his ventures in a broad Scottish dialect, fights monsters, rapes women and pillages castles somewhere in a mythical realm, all the while accompanied by a talkative familiar perched on his shoulder. These three characters constitute one person: as the bridge collapses, the different voices merge, and Alex Lennox finally wakes up. Banks’s work could easily be analysed from the perspective of Freudian theory with all its references to the dream work and the tri-partite structure of consciousness: Alex Lenox could be seen as the ego, the barbarian as the id, and John Orr could represent the superego. Banks’s narrative is, however, neither an excursion into the territory of dream theory, nor a traditional psychoanalytic tale of self-discovery. The novel is post-, or rather anti-Freudian.

As in *The Player of Games*, in *The Bridge* Banks is preoccupied with the questions concerning how consciousness is born, and what truly constitutes the sense of self. Views concerning the human mind are expressed in a straightforward manner even in Alex’s hallucinatory stream of consciousness:

> Respool, rewind; back to the beginning it was the mind/brain identity problem. Ah HA! No problem (phew, glad that’s settled) no problem of course they’re exactly the same and totally different; I mean if yer mind isnae in yer fukin skul wharethefuk is it, eh? (Banks [1986] 2013, 125)

Alex is a geologist and an engineer, believing in science, reason, and “a sort of Unified Field Theory of the consciousness . . . emotions and feelings and logical thought together; a whole, an entity however disparate in its hypotheses and results which nevertheless worked throughout on the same fundamental principles” ([1986] 2013, 139-140). *The Bridge* mirrors *The Player of Games* in its obsession with affects, such as the euphoria of seeking which accompanies Alex both in his professional career and his love-life. Alex wants “more than he can handle” ([1986] 2013, 323) even in his dreams, which constitute the narrative’s major part.
Banks opposes Cartesian dualism and the resulting split between the brainless mind and the mindless brain, while he believes in a unified consciousness which incorporates different states of the mind and the body, such as being awake and the REM sleep. According to J. Allan Hobson, the Freudian division of mind into ego, superego and id, as well as the discrepancy between dreams and being awake are remarkably superficial attempts at transposing dualist philosophy onto the sphere of brain science (2013, 143). Thanks to the popularity of psychoanalytic theories, throughout most of the twentieth century “dreaming was seen as an unconscious mental process,” while it is, in fact, another facet of consciousness whose content is transparent and shall not invite any antiscientific, symbolic interpretations (Hobson 2014, 4). Nicholas Tranquillo states that according to Hobson dreams are not built from day residue: they recombine elements possessing strong emotional connotations and biographical bearing (2014, xii). Moreover, chance plays a huge part in the shaping of dream plot (Hobson 2014, 17). No wonder that Dr Joyce, Orr’s psychiatrist, does not find any hidden meaning in his patient’s dreams (Banks [1986] 2013, 23-24, 59-61). Orr wanders hither and thither in a reality that does not make any sense: planes come from nowhere to skywrite in Braille, television shows only some random hospital bed, and Orr cannot even identify the language in use. Although the dream-world is Alex’s/Orr’s/barbarian’s creation, he is unable to control or explain it (Kincaid 2013, 28).

Without doubt, REM sleeping tends to be like a “drunken sailor’s walk” from association to association (Stickgold 2011, 89). According to Hobson’s activation-synthesis hypothesis, dreams are narratives glued together by the forebrain to justify biochemical changes and electric pulses arising in the brainstem (Hobson 2014, 32). Dreams are, nevertheless, building blocks for waking awareness: a state of altered consciousness which paves way to a coherent sense of self, emotions, motility and sensations (Hobson 2014, 5). Thomas Metzinger, a German philosopher, writes that “dreams are conscious because they create the appearance of a world” (2009, 135). It is now known that REM-like neuronal activation is responsible for early brain development, subsequently becoming a link to a fully self-aware waking state (Hobson 2014, 53). Dr Joyce tells Orr that not only must he realise that the bridge is a dream, but he has to notice at the same time that dreams are the first step on a path towards something different, a land on the other side (Banks [1986] 2013, 24). Through merging memories and free associations, sleep facilitates the emergence of regularities as well as meaning metaconstructs. Pre-existing information is integrated to enhance future action, “helping to create both an understanding
of the world and a sense of the self in time” (Stickgold 2011, 76-77). In Alex’s dreams, speed-driving is a prominent motif, memories of his romantic relationships are relived in a fantasy setting, beloved Forth Bridge turns into a gigantic, state-like structure, tourist trains invite Orr into a reality consumed by war and chaos, while he himself becomes his own childhood nightmare: the bloodthirsty warrior, destroying everything and everyone on his path.

Dream stimuli come from the brain itself. There is no sensory input, and still data generated internally mirrors this originating in the external reality. As I already noted in the discussion of The Player of Games, the human brain possesses a model of both the body and the outside world. Because of all the endogenous activation and stimulation, the dreaming brain is tricked into feeling awake (Hobson 2014, 32). People usually do not question anything that happens in their dreams: Orr is sweating and panicking, when a vicious train chases him, and he is absolutely unable to escape via leaving the rail-tracks (Banks [1986] 2013, 164). Panksepp and Biven note the importance of emotions in dream generation, focusing most prominently on the dopamine-mediated SEEKING arousal. The stimulation of emotional circuitry allows for creating novel cause and effect relationships (2012, chap. 10). Hobson also points to the fact that dream protoconsciousness is charged with emotions which are more powerful than these present in waking, and anxiety, anger or elation are the principal ones (2014, 19). Orr invariably emphasises his growing frustration and annoyance (Banks [1986] 2013, 51, 89, 151), his hands shake with anxiety when he does not succeed in finding the doctor’s office ([1986] 2013, 57-58), or when he is moved to a much worse part of the bridge ([1986] 2013, 173). Alex’s dreams contain explicit sexual desires, especially when he becomes the barbarian ([1986] 2013, 105). In fact, emotions that tend to appear in dreams play a basic role in survival. Inducing them in REM sleep prepares the mind to react with fight, approach or escape in waking life (Hobson 2014, 40-45).

In REM sleep, logical reasoning is inhibited, while emotionality takes over (Stickgold 2011, 81-82). The brain is self-activated and offline to the outside world, deprived of working memory, self-reflective awareness and planning abilities (Hobson 2014, 32, 45). This is why the barbarian lacks any insight, engaging instead in pure action (Banks [1986] 2013, 94-98). When Orr makes up dreams for Dr Joyce (because he is ashamed of his feeble memory), it is clearly visible that his creations are an artifice rooted in a folk theory of dreams. His characters are thoroughly self-reflective ([1986] 2013, 17), and this is why Dr Joyce looks “profoundly unconvinced” ([1986] 2013, 20). Real, non-lucid dreamer has glaring
cognitive defects, which he is unable to comprehend (Hobson 2014, 39), and Alex may serve as a perfect example of this phenomenon. He does not realise that the man shown lying on a hospital bed is he himself (Banks [1986] 2013, 40), while the barbarian is absolutely single-minded, unable to logically infer the reason for events happening around him. When during one of his conquests he cannot find the source of smoke rising in the air, the familiar on his shoulder says:

> You still lost? I thought so... A smarter chap would solve both problems at once by watching the way the smoke's drifting; it will try to rise, and there aren't many windows on this floor. Not that there's much chance of you making that sort of connection I imagine; your wits are about as fast as a sloth on Valium. (Banks [1986] 2013, 96)

As I have already mentioned, dreaming supports the synthesis and activation of waking awareness. Brain-formed emotions, sensorimotor imagery and narratives together with a conviction that all things happening are real, create “a model of the world of truly remarkable similarity to the outside world itself” (Hobson 2014, 64). Hobson argues that unconscious forces are not the enemy of consciousness, and the function of dreaming is far from protecting awareness from unrealised impulses. On the contrary, dreams promote reality testing in an entirely virtual world mirroring the real one (2014, 69). Orr constantly exercises his motor reactions, while escaping from trains and jumping to “be damn quick” and outrun the bridge (Banks [1986] 2013, 190). Dr Joyce is convinced that dreams will allow Orr to regain his consciousness, thus his sense of self ([1986] 2013, 22, 25). In fact, in The Bridge subchapters bear the names of geological eras (Oligocene, Miocene, Pliocene), which mirrors the gradual evolution of the self in the novel. On its final pages, a unified “I” finally appears, which induces Alex’s waking:

> I want to come back. Can I come back? beep beep beep this is a recording; your conscious mind is out at the moment but if you'd care to - clunk.
> Let's go there. (Banks [1986] 2013, 381-382)

The protagonist’s senses gradually awaken ([1986] 2013, 384-385). Dreaming cures Alex and proves to be something Hobson calls “a treasure chest of supportive allies to the analytic, executive, and creative functions
of the brain mind” (2014, 72). At the end of the novel, the ontological insecurity of Orr’s and barbarian’s experiences abruptly ends. The protagonist learns once again to “wanna do things”:

I want to go back to the Grand Canyon and get further than just the rim rock this time, I want to see the aurora borealis from Svalbard or Greenland, I want to see a total eclipse, I want to watch pyroclastic displays, I want to walk inside a lava tunnel, I want to see the earth from space, I want to drink chang in Ladakh, I want to cruise down the Amazon and up the Yangtze and walk the Great Wall; I want to visit Azania! I want to watch them push helicopters off the aircraft carriers again! I want to be in bed with three women at once! (Banks [1986] 2013, 379)

The sleeping brain is a marvellously plastic scenario generator. At a certain point The Bridge’s narrator notes that the outside world is just another dream: a collective one (Banks [1986] 2013, 380). Dreams form narratives and construction of each one is intertwined with the emergence of awareness. Banks suggests that REM sleep experiences are a basis of consciousness, together with emotions and sensations. As The Player of Games progresses, Gurgeh becomes a brilliant Azad player obsessed with victory, anticipation and control. Mawhrin-Skel thinks that the reason for this change in Gurgeh is him speaking mostly Eáchic language “which substituted sentimentality for compassion and aggression for cooperation” (Banks [1988] 2012, 247), but it is rather the emotions that accompany playing Azad that shape Gurgeh. In The Player of Games, Banks points to a tension between a safe world in which basic human predilections have to be suppressed, while individuals do not know their true selves; and a dangerous, cruel reality in which it is possible to act on the basis of emotions: feeling eager, self-aware, effective and important. In fact, as Banks shows, some affects are so pleasurable, that they become excessive, leading to pathologies, extravagant individualism, greed and corruption, as it happens in Azad. Emotions not only lead to an emergence of self-awareness: they also lead to a construction of a socio-political system organised around affects, a reality in which only those most actively, egoistically emotional can win.

If affects play such a crucial role, Banks wonders whether it is possible to create a society based on a set of chosen emotions: sense of togetherness instead of individualistic competitiveness and aggression. He concludes that even though the empathetic, communitarian Culture succeeds in quenching Azad, and even though Azad is shown as evil, the emotions around which its structure revolves are extremely powerful, perceived as more “real” than those promoted in the Culture. The Culture
is a society under constant surveillance of sentient machines, which, in fact, incapacitate the citizens or even deprive them of freedom. Drones immediately fulfil all of the people’s desires, while the emotions associated with SEEKING are suppressed via boosting other emotional systems, such as that of PLAY, CARE or LUST. Banks seems to imply that staying conscious ultimately means being both overtly emotional and able to construct narratives about the self and the outside world.

According to Banks, stories hold societies fast: they bear strong emotional content, and may enhance altruism, empathy, and social cohesion. On the novel’s last pages, Gurgeh summarizes his Azad adventure to his friends ([1988] 2012, 304-305), while the whole of The Player of Games is a first-person narrative told by the drone accompanying Gurgeh on his long journey. If any culture, be it past, present, or future, is based on stories created, told and retold, then consciousness is the prerequisite for the emergence of cultural life, a radical biological revolution in human history.

Antonio Damasio argues that all healthy human beings aim at sociocultural homeostatic balance in order to punish misconduct, help those who suffer, prevent harm and promote good. In the history of humanity storytelling, intertwined with the emergence of consciousness, began to serve as the ultimate solution allowing for transmission of emotions and wisdom (2010, chap. 11). Banks suggests that storytelling pervades contemporary societies, and it will be equally vital in the survival of the future ones. Building blocks of narratives are strong emotions, and they also awaken affects in the recipient, consequently enhancing his or her awareness. “Biology and culture are thoroughly interactive,” points Damasio (2010, chap. 11). Possessing the capacity to learn through the experiences retold by others is crucial to human existence in a chaotic reality, and fictional narratives can thrive only thanks to strong emotional content and the delights the stories invoke (Flesch 2009, 9). People do not learn dispassionately: anxiety, euphoria, curiosity, anger, desire or playfulness all underlie curiosity and enable spreading crucial information about the world (Flesch 2009, 11), while vicarious experiences underlie direct ones and contribute to sociality (Flesch 2009, 33). According to William Flesch, humans exert “strong reciprocity”: an innate desire to track others, including fictional characters, and to learn their stories which involve punishing the bad and rewarding the good (2009, 21). Consciousness is built on emotions and stories revolving around them: no matter whether these narratives are dreams, retold memories or fictions, no matter whether they are ours or originally belong to someone else. As Damasio states, feelings present in stories have survival value for whole
societies, since they help individuals enhance their sense of self and cope with the world (2010, chap. 11). For Damasio, as for Banks, culture is a biological revolution, which places the self in the context of social homeostasis, allowing for both the experiences of past and the anticipations of future (Damasio 2010, chap. 11).

References


CHAPTER TWO

APOCALYPSE AND A-BOMB:
STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS
IN JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE’S
A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES

OLGA COLBERT

John Kennedy Toole’s novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* looms large in the mind of readers not only because of the sad and thrilling tale of its publication ordeal, but also because of the compelling experiences of an unforgettable cast of characters unapologetically led by the misanthropic hedonist, Ignatius Reilly.¹ The present article is an exploration of states of consciousness in this novel. I argue that John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces* captures the anxiety of the Cold War period about nuclear annihilation, as well as the personal anxiety of the protagonist over his sexual identity and separation from his mother. These anxieties are concealed and at the same time revealed by the novel’s reliance on medieval rhetoric and iconography, particularly the use of apocalyptic themes and imagery. A close examination of the protagonist’s states of consciousness, such as daydreams and night dreams, reveals those fears and the layers of religious rhetoric and popular culture pastiche masking the very real pain of unacknowledged sexual identity and the stifling closeness of the filial-maternal bond. I will demonstrate how the explosive conflict between separation and dependence is manifested on the textual level in the novel. Drawing on the work of Jerome Singer on daydreaming as well as the studies by J. Allan Hobson and Stephen LaBerge on night dreams, I examine the role of these states of consciousness in the construction of the narrative, as well as in the insights they offer about the

¹ *A Confederacy of Dunces* was published eleven years after the author’s suicide, as a result of his mother’s efforts.
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protagonist’s subjectivity. I will use Hobson’s dream analysis based on formal features in addition to more recent theories of dream content analysis, such as Antti Revonsuo’s Threat Simulation Theory of the function of dreaming.

Confederacy takes off as the protagonist, Ignatius J. Reilly, waits for his mother under the clock of the D. H. Holmes department store at the edge of New Orleans’ French Quarter. Although Ignatius is initially alone, a series of recognizable New Orleans types who will become the novel’s ensemble of colourful characters, quickly gather around him as Patrolman Mancuso attempts to arrest him for loitering. In the crossfire of gazes that constitute the novel’s first pages, Ignatius, unaware of the curiosity he has awakened in the dopey policeman, is at the same time surveying the human landscape around him. He is not just casually looking but “studying the crowd for signs of bad dress.” In his survey of peoples’ clothing, he determines that “several of the outfits . . . were new enough and expensive enough” to be offensive “against taste and decency,” and he adds that “possession of anything new or expensive . . . could even cast doubts upon one’s soul” (Toole 1980, 1). This harsh judgment of his contemporaries is puzzling, since Ignatius’ own clothing, the now iconic green hunting cap with earflaps and the rest of his garments do not suggest someone knowledgeable or even remotely interested in fashion or style. This sets the stage for the entire novel and provides its first interpretive clue: the conflation of ethics and aesthetics. Even before we know of the protagonist’s interest in the Middle Ages and his respect for medieval values, the odd juxtaposition of the words “theology and geometry” in the novel’s first paragraph clearly points in that direction. According to Evgeny A. Zaitsev, geometry during the Middle Ages “was a means of understanding the world’s construction, the nature of things” (1999, 529).

As Ignatius observes the world around him, he takes a judging position, looking down disapprovingly with his “supercilious blue and yellow eyes” (Toole 1980, 1). His prideful, haughty, contemptuous demeanour, his arched eyebrows (the word supercilious comes from the particular raised eyebrow position that conveys pride or contempt) place Ignatius physically and morally higher than the other people in the crowd. In the previous lines Ignatius appears characterized as a God-like figure, higher than the rest of the crowd, looking at them from above. Ignatius sees himself as more majestic than the rest of the people standing there, basing this superiority on ethical qualities made apparent by his clothing, even though his outfit (that never changes) is repeatedly characterized throughout the novel as inadequate, odd, and soiled. As a God-like figure, he is a kind of Pantocrator, a majestic and apocalyptic image commonly