Deconstructing Utopia in Science Fiction: Irony and the Resituation of the Subject in Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games*

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Summary

Utopian formulations, in some form or another, formed the basis of science fiction (SF) at its inception and can be said to still lie at the root of most SF texts. Nevertheless, as Carl Freedman (2000: 62) points out, "today the dominant Anglo-American colloquial meaning of the word is mildly pejorative: to describe an idea or plan as utopian usually connotes that it is naïve and wildly impractical, though perhaps well-intended". Such views of the function of utopia seem to suggest that utopian forms have become redundant and unproductive, a perception that also extends to SF. Whether it envisages the creation of an ideal or forewarns of the apocalyptic, the utopian is teleological; therefore the subject (both the individual and the subject matter) in the utopian narrative has no choice but to be what has already been decided for it to be. However, I wish to argue that through SF's ironic deployment of utopia's fixation with ends, the subject (matter) is liberated. Irony offers a bothand kind of logic that transgresses the bounds of predetermined definitions, allowing room for the suspension of choice so that the subject may continually interrogate the possibilities of its own existence. The process of interrogation describes a deconstructive trajectory in which the text evades termination, so as to discern a difference between utopia and SF. This article considers the notion that there are, indeed, certain SF texts that consciously perform this difference, of which Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games* (1996) is an example. References to this text will demonstrate that, in a coincidental gesture, irony both preserves the utopian fixation with ends and abolishes it, presenting utopia as a site of deconstruction in which the genre can continually interrogate the possibilities of its existence.

Opsomming

Utopiese formulerings, in die een of ander gedaante, het by sy ontstaan die grondslag van wetenskapfiksie gevorm, en daar kan gesê word dat dit steeds die kern van die meeste wetenskapfiksietekste uitmaak. Nogtans, soos Car Freedman (2000: 62) tereg opmerk, "today the dominant Anglo American colloquial meaning of the word is mildly pejorative: to describe an idea or plan as utopian usually connotes that it is naïve and wildly impractical, though perhaps well-intended". Sodanige sienings van die funksie van utopie suggereer oënskynlik dat utopiese vorme oorbodig en onproduktief geraak het, 'n persepsie wat ook wetenskapfiksie insluit. Hetsy dit die skepping van 'n ideaal in die vooruitsig stel of vooraf oor die apokaliptiese waarsku, die utopiese is teleologies; dus kan die onderwerp (sowel die individu as die leerstof) in die utopiese narratief nie anders as om dit te wees wat reeds vir hom besluit is nie. Ek argumenteer egter dat,

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danksy wetenskapsfiksie se ironiese benutting van utopie se fiksasie met eindes, die onderwerp bevry word. Ironie bied 'n soort logika wat die grense van voorafbepaalde definisies oorskry, en ruimte laat vir die opheffing van keuse, sodat die onderwerp voortdurend vrae oor die moontlikhede van sy eie bestaan kan stel. Die proses van ondervraging beskryf 'n dekonstruktiewe trajek waarin die teks afhandeling vermy en sodoende 'n onderskeid tussen utopie en wetenskapfiksie tref. Hierdie artikel besin oor die idee dat daar inderdaad sekere wetenskapfiksietekste is wat doelbewus hierdie verskil implementeer, waarvan Iain M. Banks se *The Player of Games* (1996) 'n voorbeeld is. Verwysings na hierdie teks sal aantoon dat, in 'n toevallige gebaar, ironie die utopiese fiksasie met eindes behou en dit terselfdertyd afskaf, en utopie aanbied as 'n dekonstruksieterrein waarin die genre voortdurend vrae oor die moontlikhede van sy bestaan stel.

Utopian formulations, in some form or another, formed the basis of science fiction (SF) at its inception[1] and can be said to still lie at the root of most SF texts. Thomas More's initial conception of an ideal society that exists in a space and time that is both *ou topos* (no place) and *eu topos* (happy place) is frequently played out in these texts in various poses of either thesis (where utopia proposes some positive ideal) or antithesis (where dystopia, or anti-utopia, warns of destruction), all in the interest of creating what Edward James (2003: 222), in his deliberations on utopias and anti-utopias, refers to as "alternate possibilities" for "a better world". Nevertheless, as Carl Freedman (2000: 62) points out when he discusses the relationship between science fiction and utopia, "today the dominant Anglo-American colloquial meaning of the word is mildly pejorative: to describe an idea or plan as utopian usually connotes that it is naïve and wildly impractical, though perhaps well-intended". In the words of Michel Foucault, as he explains his conception of heterotopias, utopias now are generally seen to "afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold" (Foucault in Brown 1996: 57). In a postmodern climate, where the general inclination is to "deconstruct our unexamined assumptions about basic things" (Hutcheon 2006: 115), such placidity hints at obsolescence; there is a pervasive sense that utopias are currently "producing a risibly impractical blueprint for a future society rather than (in most cases) a trenchant critique of contemporary institutions in fictional form" (James 2003: 220).

Such views of the function of utopia seem to suggest that utopian forms have become – may indeed always have been – redundant and unproductive, a perception that traditionally, and by virtue of their aforementioned interrelatedness, also extends to SF. As a result we are faced with an apparently spurious homogeneity of these two forms that, aesthetically speaking, presents a closed context in which the definition of one concept, either utopia or SF, merely reflects back on the description of the other in an endless and sterile pattern of repetition, creating a kind of apathy that Fredric Jameson, in his discussion on utopia and death, describes as "a sameness of change as far as the eye can reach" (1994: 123). This implies that change, or difference, in a

1. In fact, there are those who regard Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) as the first modern SF text (see James & Mendlesohn 2003).

closed context of this kind, is merely a rehearsal in which the subject (or subject matter, of both SF and utopia) is forever trapped in its own likeness, eventually to be killed off by self-absorption. As a result, as Lucy Armitt (1996: 28-29) argues in her exposition of the fantastic, we find that "[however] progressive, the generic requirements of any utopian narrative necessitate the adoption of a static narrative framework that will always be primarily dependent upon structural closure for success .... [S]peculative fictions, however progressive in ideological terms, always remain at least partially compromised by the generic enclosures which give them their voice".[2] This dynamic, or lack of it, may serve to explain those perceptions of SF that tend to dismiss it on the grounds of its failure to offer incisive comment on the social conditions of existence.

The structural closure that Armitt speaks of suggests that utopian formulations are teleological, bent on closure, a characteristic which is then, even if simplistically, transferred to SF by virtue of both being speculative fictions. Jameson (2005: 3), when he discusses utopian varieties, describes this tendency towards closure as "one intent on the realisation of [the ideal of] the Utopian program". Such a fixation on the ideal, insofar as it refuses to allow room for negotiation or compromise, threatens to present a so-called "closed" text, one that partakes of an either-or logic which inevitably restricts choice, particularly as far as the subject matter of the text is concerned. Predetermined definitions of the subject matter (as quintessentially utopian, or science fictional) in turn serve to circumscribe the position of the individual subject, be this the text, the author, a character, or even a reader; by dint of the "closed" text's fixation on the ideal, the subject seems to have no choice but to be what has already been decided for it to be. From a deconstructive position, where the workings of *différance* are aimed at opening up such closed texts, there is, as Andrew Benjamin observes, "a termination brought about by an already determined and thus already given definition" (2006: 83). I wish to argue here, however, that through SF's *ironic* deployment of the utopian fixation with ends, the subject (and subject matter) can be regarded as liberated, albeit in complicated ways. The logic of irony, what Linda Hutcheon in her conception of a poetics of postmodernism (2006: 116) calls a "both-and" kind of logic that is by its very operation deconstructive, transgresses the bounds of predetermined definitions, allowing room for the suspension of choice so that the genre may continually reconsider the utopian possibilities of its own existence. Moreover, in some cases this irony acts out the reader's dawning realisation that future existence (so often the object of both the utopian and the science-fictional narrative) is, paradoxically, only possible if utopian ideals for the future are shown to fail – are, in fact, shown to be dystopian – so that new and profuse possibilities of existence are constantly emerging. This implies that the

2. This presumably would be the case both when an SF narrative were used to give voice to utopian speculations and when a utopian narrative were employed to give voice to science-fictional concepts.

creative SF text is constantly performing its awareness[3] of the difference between itself and utopia, that it must evade "the truth" that the utopian ideal proclaims, even while relying (illicitly, it would seem) on that truth to make room for its own creative potential. In other words, such texts are ever conscious of their being utopian and dystopian all at once, which allows them to imagine some of the prospective (but, for the present, wholly indefinable) meanings of autonomy and freedom, of subjectivity and self-preservation.

In view of the above, this article offers a reading of the deconstructive strategies in Iain M. Banks's *The Player of Games*, a so-called "Culture" novel published in 1989. Banks's Culture novels are valued for their self-conscious social and political critique and, in this novel, this self-consciousness is perhaps most evident in the text's calculated deployment of irony. My discussion will therefore focus on the utopian scheme of the text, illustrating the ways in which all of its utopian constructs are infused with irony, and deconstructed by way of this irony in, as Raman Selden notes when he explains the mechanisms of Derridean deconstruction, "the moment[s] when the text transgresses the laws [of utopia] it appears to set up for itself"[4] (1997: 173). In this case, the transgressive gesture, of which irony is both the cause and the effect, is the one which preserves the utopian fixation with ends (or the utopian ideal) in the same gesture that abolishes it. In such a deconstructive manoeuvre utopia is repurposed to become, according to Andrew Benjamin's description of Derridean deconstruction, a "space opened between a strategy of ends and one of closure" (2006: 83).[5] Banks's text evades conventional closure; moreover, as will be seen, it does so knowingly by effecting the continuance of the text after the principal character's story has ended, so that the "death" of meaning which characterises the teleological is constantly deferred. This evasion, by time and again declining to foreclose on meaning, allows for the continual resituation of the subject (the principal character, Gurgeh) in the text, while simultaneously and recurrently resituating the subject (matter) of SF in discourse. *The Player of Games* deals, as do all the Culture novels, with the engagement of cultures, describing an encounter between the advanced symbiotic machine-humanoid civilisation that calls itself "the Culture" and another, ostensibly less sophisticated, society known as Azad. The text takes pains to depict the Culture-order as one where all customary hierarchical divisions of class, race, and gender have been dismantled, setting up an apparently (and often fondly imagined) utopian vision of a society in which a

3. From a socio-political perspective this awareness is shared by the author as constructor of texts, as well as, in Barthesian terms, by the reader as co-writer of texts.

4. The setting up of laws is, it could be argued, a utopian exercise in itself if we read utopian to mean idealistic.

5. Benjamin distinguishes between "termination" and "closure", where the first refers to a programme that forecloses on meaning, while the second suggests a process that opens up possibilities of meaning.

subject may enjoy unparalleled freedom. This vision is supposedly bolstered by the dystopia that is the Empire of Azad, a society based on a hierarchy of dominance and power rife with inequality and injustice, the complete antithesis of the Culture. The text deliberately installs this binary to foster the ideal of absolute freedom; however, it is gradually made clear that this kind of autonomy is illusory. The Culture is shown to be devious and manipulative in ways that consistently transgress the laws of this utopia it purports to have set up for itself, so that the idea (and the ideal) of the subject's freedom is compromised; insofar as freedom is an integral part, even the object, of the utopian dream, this in turn casts doubt on the feasibility of this, or any, utopia. In effect, then, the text deliberately installs the ideal of utopia as the backdrop for its dismantling of that ideal; in other words, it makes use of a deconstructive double gesture so as to interrogate the meaning of freedom, a political intervention that is achieved mainly by means of irony.

The first indication of such irony is found in the plot of the novel, which revolves around the endeavours of Jernau Morat Gurgeh, one of the greatest Game Players ever to be produced by the Culture. He is master of every board, computer and strategy, and enjoys acclaim throughout the Culture. But Gurgeh is bored with success, afflicted with a feeling of ennui that casts a pall over his prestige; as a result, he easily succumbs when induced, by the disenfranchised drone Mawhrin-Skel, to cheat so as to secure his status as the all-time greatest Master Player. (Mawhrin-Skel, as it turns out, has his own agenda, and is acting on behalf of the Culture.) Afterwards Gurgeh is distressed by guilt and the sense of persecution that results from Mawhrin-Skel's threat to expose his transgression; when subsequently (if not consequently) he is offered the opportunity by the Culture to travel to the far-off Empire of Azad to learn their unique game (also called Azad) and take part in their quaternary competition, his very limited choices – stay and be exposed, or go and preserve his reputation – compel him to accept. As it transpires, this game is used as an absolutely integral part of the hierarchical power-system of the Empire, to the extent that whoever wins the game becomes Emperor. Gurgeh is assured by all and sundry that, because of the complexity of the game, he cannot win. However, in due course it becomes clear that both Gurgeh and the Empire had been deceived on a grand scale by the Culture – in a spectacularly cataclysmic final confrontation Gurgeh is set to beat the Emperor to win the game, but the board (along with the Azadian high command) is, for a complex mix of political and personal reasons, destroyed by the Emperor before Gurgeh can seal his victory. The Empire's governing systems self-destruct through lack of leadership, and Gurgeh returns to his Culture-world to resume his previous existence, filled with a vague and inexplicable sense of despondency at the apparent futility of the whole exercise.

Upon review of this plot-line we find that the chief irony in the novel is not that Gurgeh cheats, or that the Culture deceives him as to their plans for the Empire, but that the utopia offered by the Culture-order as a fait accompli is a facade that can be preserved only through the destruction of the dystopian Empire; this is a move which ironically draws attention to the fact that

Culture's utopia *is* a cover-up. Indeed, in a sense the irony in the plot-line reveals that the whole idea of utopia, insofar as it is imagined to offer absolute freedom, is probably a disguise for the limited choice, between tyranny and democracy, which comprises lived experience. Hand in hand with this goes the realisation that utopia is not a reality – cannot, as Jameson points out when Gurgeh explains the political function of the utopian genre, be a reality – because of the "systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" (2005: 289). Physical destruction of the supposedly dystopian system thus leads to the dystopian aspects of utopia being exposed, simultaneously destroying the ideal of utopia, and leading to a deconstruction of these two binary terms precisely *because* they are not absolute opposites, are indeed each complicit in the other. This operation inaugurates a different space in which, as Benjamin notes, "the nature of what counts as definition [of, in this case, utopia and dystopia] is transformed" (2006: 83-85).

Such a deconstructive operation also comes into play in various other ways in *The Player of Games*, for instance when we consider the general definition of Banks's Culture novels as "space opera". This term was coined by Wilson Tucker in 1941 to describe a subgenre of SF that deals with hackneyed adventure stories involving spaceships and galactic battles, and is somewhat derogatorily seen, according to John Clute in his overview of the genre, to consist of stories that revolve around "the plot-friendly entrepreneurial freedoms enjoyed by space opera protagonists in galaxies governed by rigid oligarchies" (2003: 75), through which, we could say, a specifically capitalist utopia is envisioned. Banks's Culture novels are broadly seen to be exempt from this deprecatory view, though, and are noted, as Clute goes on to point out, for their "radical commentary on some of the inherent assumptions" about the aforementioned plot-friendly entrepreneurial freedoms depicted in the more formulaic of these stories (p. 75). Farah Mendlesohn, for her part, lauds the Culture novels as "revisionist, political" space operas that "take place in a postscarcity society which, while currently unavailable to us, is perhaps the one [utopian] vision that is still within our grasp" (2005: 556-557). Carolyn Brown, in turn, puts aside any detailed consideration of Banks's Culture novels as space opera, concentrating instead on the way in which they draw "upon the repertoire of SF, in [their] development of ideas of language, worlds, and perspectives [to] represent an exploration, not only of [a utopian] state of existence, but of its limitations, and contradictions" (1996: 61). In short, the Culture novels are anything but formulaic space opera – rather, one might say that they exploit, much in the same way as the typical protagonist of the formulaic space opera would, the utopian format of conventional space opera to show how the freedom of the consumer is threatened by the selfsame element that seems to guarantee it, namely capitalism. In this way the utopian vision that is peculiar to this kind of space opera shows itself to be no more than an indefinite rehearsal of the difference between what capitalism ideally should be (a system of free enterprise that guarantees autonomy) and what it too often is at any given time in lived experience (a system that stratifies

society and inhibits self-determination of the poor). The ironic treatment meted out by these novels results in the definitions of terms such as "space opera" or "utopia", or even dystopia, coming under scrutiny, reminding us that they are constructs. In this way, *ideas* of what space opera (or utopia/dystopia) is, infringe on the reality of these concepts, a transgression that paradoxically reduces the distance between the ideal and its actuality so that, in these novels, the subject matter, of such conventional space operas and their particular utopian referent, is transformed.

Such transformation is the case in *The Player of Games*, when it transgresses, from the outset, the laws of conventional space opera that have already been assigned to it by virtue of the definition "space opera":

> This is the story of a man who went far away for a long time, just to play a game. The man is a game-player called "Gurgeh". The story starts with a battle that is not a battle, and ends with a game that is not a game.
>
> Me? I'll tell you about me later.
>
> This is how the story begins.
>
> (Banks 1989: 3)

The use of the phrases "far away" and "a long time" plays on the familiar opening of that most iconic of space operas, *Star Wars*, which depicts the "story" of a struggle for liberation that happened "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away". Thus the first convention of traditional space opera, what Gary Westfahl describes as it being "a 'yarn' – an exciting adventure story" (2003: 197), is installed, together with the second principle of such space opera as "a literature of conflicts, usually with violent resolutions" (p. 198). The transgression occurs in the phrase "just to play a game", the bathos of which has the effect of ironically diminishing the grandiose scale of conventional space opera in general; at the same time, and because of it having already initiated the play of the signifier in the first part of the sentence, the phrase also draws attention to the character of this specific text and its story *as* play (perhaps, through the inexorable play of the signifier, precipitating all the associated meanings of amusement, participation, competition, foolery, acting, and so on). In other words, the text indicates from the very start that it is not space opera in the accepted sense, that it is constructing a story and is very much aware of the fact that it is engaged in some kind of play in doing so. The effect is that the text, in the words of Terry Eagleton when he considers the processes of deconstruction, "[knowing] its own fictions to be groundless and gratuitous, [attains] a kind of negative authenticity … by flaunting its ironic awareness of this fact, wryly pointing to its own status as a constructed artifice" (2006: 117).

The notion of artifice, variously signifying trickery and deceit, is developed as further evidence of transgression when the narrator explains that "[the] story starts with a battle that is not a battle, and ends with a game that is not a game" (Banks 1989: 3). The construction of this sentence, predicated as it is on a system of redundancy, together with the subsequent description of the mock battle between Gurgeh and Yay, leads (or even misleads) one to surmise that the story starts with a battle that is not a battle, *but* a game, and ends with a

game that is not a game, *but* a battle. From the outset, then, the context of this story is unsettled, an uncertain state of affairs that is intensified by the narrator's affectedly coy deferment of his identity in these opening lines. This narrator, who eventually turns out to be the disenfranchised drone Mawhrin-Skel (alias Sprant-Flere-Imsaho, undercover agent of the Culture's Contact apparatus), proves to be the principal instrument of irony in the text (and, incidentally, also the main deceiver), and it is by way of this irony that the deconstructive trajectory of this first transgression is sustained throughout the novel. In other words, the logic of irony that operates in the identity of the narrator as *both* dissident *and* adherent, as well as in the context of the story as *both* battle *and* game, effects a transgression insofar as it impinges on the facility of conventional binary options – in short, by setting up the binaries in the same gesture that denies them, the text proposes that the possibility of a simple choice, between battle and game, between dissident and adherent, is suspended because neither is what it seems to be. Such an ironic position is both suppression and liberation of choice, a double gesture which compromises the autonomy of the subject Gurgeh (whose limited choices lead to his becoming a tool in the hands of the Culture, as I will show) as well as that of the conventional space opera story. This same double gesture allows the subject matter of this "space opera", as either utopian or dystopian, to evade circumscription.

This evasive action consists of a series of transgressions that is fully deployed as the text progresses in four parts, and is achieved mainly through the periodic interjections of the ever guileful narrator. The four parts are entitled "Culture Plate", "Imperium", "Machina Ex Machina", and "The Passed Pawn", quite self-consciously so as closer study reveals: each title sets up a context or pre-existing order which is then altered and deferred, not only by the narrator's interjection, but also by the events subsequently described in each section. Moreover, each individual title is ironic in the broader context of the novel: "Culture Plate" undermines the hegemony of the Culture by comparing it with micro-organisms; "Imperium" raises the question of whether the Empire is Roman in ideological orientation; "Machina ex Machina" raises questions about machine as deity; "The Passed Pawn" raises questions about the centrality of the central character. The effect of this is that the content and context of each section contravene its title in an ironic gesture, which not only transgresses the bounds of predetermined definitions, but also exploits them.

"Culture Plate" introduces us to the utopian Culture-order, Gurgeh's apparently illustrious position within this order, and the circumstances under which he agrees to go to Azad to play their game. On the face of it, this title is simply a reference to Gurgeh's home, Gevant, a constructed habitat that forms a portion of the orbital of Chiark, one that could be said to represent an untroubled region in which the fantasy of this utopia can be allowed to play out. However, the meaning of freedom in such a utopia grows increasingly perplexing as we come to realise that the notion of "constructedness", of artificiality, is one that lies at the heart of the Culture-order. In the Culture, all aspects of lived experience, from the genetic properties and longevity of the

individual through "genofixing" to the enhancement of emotion through the "glanding" of artificial stimuli, can be regulated by the subject; still, such control disguises the fact that this is also an opportunity for the exploitation of the subject. In this way, we are reminded that this utopia, like any utopia, cannot be a reality, can only be a construct in which the choices of the subject, while seeming boundless, are in fact limited. Gurgeh articulates this realisation as follows:

> "Everything seems ... grey at the moment, Chamlis. Sometimes I start to think I'm repeating myself, that even new games are just old ones in disguise, and that nothing's worth playing for anyway .... With no money, no possessions, a large part of the enjoyment the people who invented this game experienced when they played it just ... disappears ... I ... exult when I win ... it's the only instant when I feel ..." – he shook his head, his mouth tightened "... real," he said. "Me. The rest of the time ... I feel ... as though I've had some sort of ... birthright taken away from me ....This is not a heroic age," he told the drone, staring at the fire. "The individual is obsolete. That's why life is so comfortable for us all. We don't matter, so we're safe. No one person can have any real effect any more."
>
> (Banks 1989: 20-22)

Gurgeh's feeling that he is "repeating" himself, that every "new" game is just an "old [one] in disguise" points to the fact, illustrated earlier, that the Culture's utopia of "no "money, no possessions" is a facade, a "comfortable" illusion whose artificiality strips the subject of what Gurgeh sees to be the individuality that is its birthright (which is, perhaps, another utopian ideal). His dissatisfaction is the effect, and paradoxically also the cause, of what Fredric Jameson, when discussing irony and the moment of truth, sees as "attempts to retain two negative or privative [features], along with their mutual negation of each other" (2005: 180). As such, and even if Gurgeh is only being selfindulgent, the utopia of "no money, no possessions" negates its opposite dystopia of cupidity, but retains that lack of "enjoyment" and selfdetermination that supposedly characterises dystopia; dystopia, as Gurgeh later learns from his conversation with the Contact drone Worthil, is typified by privation but takes on (if only in Gurgeh's mind, as will be demonstrated further on) the utopian characteristics of some "heroic age" in which the individual can have a "real effect". This uneasy mix poses, as Jameson goes on to point out, "a scandal for the mind, but it is a scandal that remains vivid and alive, and that cannot be thought away, either by resolving it or eliminating it [through some simplistic utopian ideal]" (p. 180). What occurs then is a necessary but impossible distinction between the functions, as well as the effects, of both utopia and dystopia, rooted in the recognition of some lost ideal (insofar as each, in partaking of the characteristics of the other, is not what it is ideally supposed to be); definition becomes, in the words of Claire Colebrook when she describes the Derridean view of language, "a process of mourning" (2004: 98). When Gurgeh succumbs to the temptation to cheat, therefore, he is motivated (probably unwittingly) by this feeling of something lacking; when subsequently

(even consequently) he accepts the Culture's offer to go to Azad it is as a result of the sense of loss, however much his desire to escape the ramifications of his indiscretion seems paramount.

Gurgeh's choice, such as it is, seems to suggest a measure of freedom, an autonomy that springs from his identity as game-player. Thus he asks defiantly, when contemplating the repercussions of his transgression: "[W]as he not different from other people? Was he not the great game-player and so allowed his eccentricities, granted the freedom to make his own rules?" (Banks 1989: 66). Almost immediately he realises that the answer to these questions is "yes, and no" – if his indiscretion is made public "he would be treated with compassion" because he is the great game-player, but for this selfsame reason would also "never be forgiven"; an uneasy compromise that "would destroy his reputation, destroy him" (p. 67). In light of this he has no choice, as the start of the second part of the text seems to confirm when the narrator asks, with obvious amusement:

> Does Gurgeh really understand what he's done, and what might happen to him? Has it even begun to occur to him that he might have been tricked? And does he really know what he's let himself in for?
>
> Of course not!
>
> That's part of the fun!
>
> (Banks 1989: 100)

This ironic interposition clearly indicates that Gurgeh, as much as he seems to have let himself in for what is happening to him, has been "tricked" and does not "really know" everything at stake here, confirming the reader's growing suspicion that Gurgeh is a tool in the hands of the Culture. This is accompanied by the dawning realisation that the autonomy offered by such a utopian scheme as offered by the Culture is an illusion – Gurgeh imagines that he is in control of events, exercising his authority by abandoning it, while in actuality he is being controlled by means of this very authority he thinks he has. The ambivalence of such a situation is confirmed in the second part of the story, "Imperium", which means "empire, absolute power or authority" and refers, on the surface, to the Empire of Azad and its hierarchy of government. This section describes Gurgeh's journey to Azad during which he attempts to master the intricacies of the Game, and the appalling excesses of Azadian society that were articulated in the first section by the Contact drone Worthil who is sent to "recruit" Gurgeh:

> Empires are synonymous with centralised – if occasionally schismatised – hierarchical power structures in which influence is restricted to an economically privileged class retaining its advantages through – usually – a judicious use of oppression and skilled manipulation of both the society's information dissemination systems and its lesser – as a rule nominally independent – power systems. In short it's all about dominance.
>
> (Banks 1989: 74)

What Worthil is describing is a dystopian system of inequality and injustice that is based on the familiar hierarchy of dominance and power, a system which the ship Limiting Factor later describes as "guilty" (p. 210). This is apparently the reason why the Culture finds it necessary to intervene, through Gurgeh, in Azadian society; as Culture-man, Gurgeh is compelled to side with the Culture in condemning such a system, if only on moral grounds. Worthil's censure of the dystopian Azad is ratified by the Culture having been set up as the antithesis of the Empire, described as a utopian society in which "nobody starves and nobody dies of disease or natural disasters and nobody and nothing's exploited" (p. 52), in which power is "a net, a grid of forces and relationships, without any obvious hierarchy or entrenched leadership" (p. 269). The moral choice thus seems inescapable: on these grounds Gurgeh must choose for the utopian Culture and against the dystopian Empire. However, the more he learns, en route to Azad, about the Empire and the Game, the more intrigued he becomes, seeing the Empire as "an unbearably vivid tangle of contradictions; at the same time pathologically violent and lugubriously sentimental, startlingly barbaric and surprisingly sophisticated, fabulously rich and grindingly poor (but also, undeniably, unequivocally fascinating)" (p. 106). In this sense, and in light of Gurgeh's idealistic yearning for something "heroic" – during the function hosted by the Azadians to welcome him, Gurgeh admits that "the whole adventure had seemed romantic: a great and brave commitment; the noble thing to do" (p. 136) – the Empire, the "guilty" system, takes on the feel of some utopia for Gurgeh. This feeling is endorsed by the fact that Azad (the game as well as the site) is seen by Gurgeh to offer an avenue of escape, not only from the consequences of his rash actions, but also from what he perceives to be the tedium of life in the Culture. In this way the text illustrates how "escape" and "guilt" become contiguous yet contradictory features in the same way that "game" and "battle" do at the start of the narrative.

In once again demonstrating the difficulty of distinguishing between the functions, as well as the effects, of both utopia and dystopia, the text shows Gurgeh's choice (whatever it is) by its very nature to be a transgression, inasmuch as a vote in favour of one that unavoidably co-opts characteristics of the other (more calculatedly so, admittedly, on a textual level than in lived experience). This is a paradox that ironically undercuts the way in which utopia is habitually promoted at the expense of dystopia, leading the utopian ideal of freedom to betray itself as being a "method" that, in Derridean terms, can be described as "a pre-determined path towards the 'discovery' of truth" (Benjamin 2006: 84). This "discovery" is necessarily artificial because it is an ideal that fails to take into account the way in which the functions and effects of utopia are, paradoxically, complicit in those of dystopia, and vice versa, rather than merely a rehearsal of binary oppositions; indeed, it is artificial in failing to take into account the limited choice between tyranny and democracy that comprises lived experience. Such a failure is brought about by "method", which, in Derrida's view, is a strategy of ends whereby the definition of "truth" is already decided, and which bypasses the interplay of the political and the ethical:

> Where I make use of a determined rule, I know what it is necessary to do, and from then on such a knowledge makes the law, the action follows the knowledge as a calculable consequence .... The decision no longer decides, it is taken in advance, and consequently the advance is annulled, it is already deployed without delay, presently, with the automatisation that is attributed to machines. There is no longer the place for any justice or any responsibility (juridical, political, ethical, etc.).
>
> (Derrida in Benjamin 2006: 84-85)

The idea of machine-like automatisation crops up in the text every so often, but is particularly significant in the reference, during the course of the final series of matches against the Emperor, to Gurgeh's thinking

> of mirrors, and of reverser fields, which gave the more technically artificial but perceivably more real impression; mirror-writing was what it said; reversed writing was ordinary writing .... Click. Switch off/switch on. As though he was a machine .... He gradually remodelled his whole game-plan to reflect the ethos of the Culture militant ... saturated with one encompassing idea, like a fever; win, dominate, control.
>
> (Banks 1989: 271-272)

Gurgeh reverts to what could be called a default position, "playing for the Culture" as Flere-Imsaho later confirms (p. 295), thus confirming the suspicion that he had been a tool in the hands of the Culture all along, while emphasising that the freedom he supposedly could lay claim to was an illusion. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Culture that seems to claim innocence by setting itself up as a utopian society in which "nobody starves and nobody dies of disease or natural disasters and nobody and nothing's exploited" (p. 52), is not really that "innocent", is guilty, by the decision (to destroy the Azadian system through Gurgeh's winning the Game) that has already been decided, of "method"; specifically this exchange between Gurgeh and Flere-Imsaho after the death of the Emperor and the destruction of the Empire:

> "You've been used, Jernau Gurgeh," the drone said matter-of-factly. "The truth is, you were playing for the Culture, and Nicosar [the Emperor] was playing for the Empire."
>
> ...
>
> Gurgeh shook his head, brushed a little soot off one jacket sleeve, smudging it. "You really thought I'd win?" he asked the drone. "Against Nicosar? You thought that, even before I got here?"
>
> "Before you left Chiark, Gurgeh. As soon as you showed any interest in leaving ...."
>
> (Banks 1989: 295-296)

All of this has the effect, textually, of bypassing the interplay of the political and the ethical, of suspending the burden of choice, between the functions and effects of both utopia and dystopia, particularly insofar as Azad – Gurgeh's "utopia" – is as much a construction as is the utopia of the Culture (a fact

confirmed in that the name "Azad" means "machine"). The question of who is actually "guilty" is thus subjected to the both-and logic of irony, bypassing the political issue of whether one would rather live under a brutal ruling-class oligarchy than under a system like the Culture, and "calling into question any necessity that gets attributed to the question, [to work] against the hold of predetermined definitions" (Benjamin 2006: 88). The effect is to make nonsense of the notion of "escape" – as Gurgeh's colleague, the Culture secret agent Shohobohaum Za, drunkenly proclaims at one point, the Azadians use alcohol as a means to "escape their place in the glorious imperial machine [but] you got to pay; escape is a commodity like anything else ..." (Banks 1989: 188). Escape comes at a price in the Empire, and, while the means to do so are freely available in the Culture, through glanding, the irony is that here also it has a price; in Gurgeh's case, that price is the loss of autonomy whichever way he turns.

Thus the subject is placed in a discomfiting position that reflects, in the words of Fredric Jameson, "the fundamental Utopian dispute about subjectivity, namely whether the Utopia in question proposes the kind of radical transformation of subjectivity presupposed by most revolutions, a mutation in human nature and the emergence of whole new beings; or whether the impulse to Utopia is not already grounded in human nature ... this is a tension which is not merely inescapable; its resolution in either direction would be fatal for the existence of Utopia itself" (2005: 168). The Culture is deliberately depicted as an imperfect society to emphasise that, in the metaphysical context raised by Jameson, Utopia is not a reality, even if the dispute is. Gurgeh unwittingly articulates such a dispute when he observes that

> [it] was not so difficult to understand the warped view the Azadians had of what they called "human nature" – the phrase they used whenever they had to justify something inhuman and unnatural – when they were surrounded and subsumed by the self-created monster that was the Empire of Azad, and which displayed such a fierce instinct (Gurgeh could think of no other word) for self-preservation.
>
> (Banks 1989: 226)

Therefore, when Azadian Star Marshal Yomonul asks, "Do you seek the victory or the challenge?" (p. 253), the answer is of course both-and, the irony of which is that, in the context of the story (and probably also in lived experience), such an outcome is impossible.

In this way the both-and of irony continually works to suspend choice. Gurgeh goes on to win each successive stage of the tournament, on own merit, though not without some difficulty (and apparently against the expectations of his Culture masters), not realising that his initial fascination with the Empire and the Game was carefully fostered in order for him to master the Game, while his incipient disillusionment with the cruelty of the Azadian system, though certainly not feigned, is deliberately precipitated to compel him to win (even if, or perhaps precisely because, he does not expect to). The end of this section sees Gurgeh travelling to Echronedal, the Fire Planet, "a symbol of the

everlasting nature of the Empire and the Game" (Banks 1989: 175) – a highly ironic description in view of the Empire's eventual demise – where he will play in the final rounds of the competition. Before his departure, he is assured by the Azadian high command that, win or lose, his defeat will be announced: "[the] truth has already been decided" (p. 223). On a textual level, this statement, while seeming to guarantee the Empire's success, is an indication of "method" that ironically prefigures the destruction of Azad in that "[the] decision no longer decides, it is taken in advance, and consequently the advance is annulled" (Derrida in Benjamin 2006: 84). Even the lie upon which the Empire is founded, that the Game rather than ruling-class connections determines success, subscribes to method inasmuch as it will always already have been decided who will rule. In view of this, "imperium" is shown to refer to the absolute power of "method" – in method lies the Empire's doom; so too does the destruction of the Culture's ideal of utopia because it is method that compromises the promise of plenitude that utopia implies, effecting its termination.

Such termination is subsequently executed in part three of the novel, entitled "Machina ex Machina". As before, the section starts with the narrator presenting his view in typical tongue-in-cheek fashion, this time on the nature of identity and free will:

> Does identity matter anyway? I have my doubts. 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). And what is free will anyway? Chance .... The random element that is chance and that is called choice .... But will our hero prevail? Can he possibly prevail? And what would constitute winning, anyway?
>
> (Banks 1989: 231-232)

As with "game" and "battle", and "guilty" and "escape", "chance" and "choice" here become contiguous in an uneasy mix of contradictions. The notion of free will, of autonomy, therefore seems prone to the same tension that has been shown to characterise subjectivity and self-preservation, the "resolution" of which tension is fatal to the utopian ideal. Any attempt to *define* free will, or any decision on "what would constitute winning", while ostensibly clear, is condemned, perhaps through that very appearance of clarity, by the absolute power of method, by "the automatisation that is attributed to machines" – autonomy, in this scheme, becomes automatisation. The title "Machina ex Machina", which is a distortion of the phrase "deus ex machina" that is used in a play to indicate a providential interposition (literally "god from the machine"), is thus in the first instance a reference to Gurgeh's opportune rescue by the ship Limiting Factor (assisted by the drone Flere-Imsaho) when Echronedal erupts into inferno; however, it also draws attention to the artifice (in the sense of its being artificial, an artful imposition) of such a manoeuvre. Extraneous intervention, as a means of salvation, is shown to be a contrivance (particularly in view of the fact that the Latin term "machina" can be translated to mean "contrivance").

By drawing attention to the artificiality of such extraneous intervention, the text performs the reader's realisation that, in attempting to choose between utopia and dystopia, what it (and the reader) looks to for salvation from method (namely the utopian ideal) is itself a method, some overruling system which the text proposes lies outside the closed context of its "self-created" prison. In other words, the text acts out its awareness that the utopian ideal, in being blind to the reality of lived experience, chimerically exonerates us from all personal and political responsibility. In such a closed context free will is, as has been implied by the narrator's ironic interposition, literally a joke, one where the subject has no choice; thus Gurgeh, during the course of the final match against the Emperor, has no option but to become the Culture, and the true nature of the "Culture militant" is revealed: "a god with the power to destroy and create at will … saturated with the one-encompassing idea, like a fever; win, dominate, control; a set of angles defining one desire, the single absolute determination" (p. 272). The Culture, in its will to dominate and control, and its ruthless exploitation of the individual, is exposed as a system that is in its own way no less tyrannical than the Azadian system, so that the idea of choosing between utopia and dystopia becomes "something dictated finally by the game itself" (p. 272), by the play of the signifier at the circular limit of the interior. In this play, the distance between the object to be contested (dystopia) and the position of contestation (utopia) is refused, a proximity which leads to the realisation that "salvation" lies in the "recognition that there is no [definitive] outside" (Benjamin 2006: 83); ironically, this opens up the context with the acknowledgement "that the conditions that make context meaningful [i.e. definitions] … are not themselves meaningful or capable of being decided from *within* a context" (Colebrook 2004: 104). In declining the distance between object and subject *différance* manages to detach us from the absolutism of method; in this way, choosing becomes an action that indefinitely defers the choice between the functions and effects of utopia and dystopia, "[loosening] the hold of traditional conceptions [of these terms] to open the space in which it becomes possible to take up responsibility" (Benjamin 2006: 85), both politically and ethically, so that what is at issue is the lived experience of those suffering under brutal tyranny, rather than the (for now) unattainable ideal.

This suspension of choice is demonstrated in that halfway through the final match Gurgeh sees his victory to be inevitable, in Derrida's words a "calculable consequence" (Derrida in Benjamin 2006: 84). This is a fact of which the Emperor also becomes convinced and he chooses to destroy the board, and with it the high command of Azadian government, rather than allow Gurgeh to win. This decision, having already been made in advance, results in the outcome of the Game being suspended – even if the Emperor is killed, and even if Gurgeh knows that he has won (or would have won), the final moves that would have sealed his victory are postponed indefinitely, and the Empire eventually self-destructs. This means that Gurgeh does not lose the Game, but nor does he, in the conventional sense, win; the Culture's plan to destroy Azad succeeds and they emerge triumphant, but this confirms that Gurgeh, the hero, is a dupe. It is the very uncertainty of this situation, of having won without

having been granted the victory, that makes it possible for the subject to take up responsibility, as will be seen in the final scene of the story, in the "game" being played here. This then is the nature of the freedom available to the subject, and which also allows the subject matter to evade circumscription, that it accepts the responsibility of examining the possibilities of its own existence.

The text takes up this responsibility, in part, when this third section ends with Flere-Imsaho revealing all of the Culture's machinations, all of the ways in which Gurgeh, and the Empire, had been manipulated from the very outset (Banks 1989: 295-296). This seems to confirm the subject Gurgeh's lack of autonomy evident in the decision made before he had even left Chiark that he would beat the Emperor (p. 296). In light of this the utopian vision of the Culture remains intact, but only because it is blind to the fact that its "whole identity is ... caught up and put at risk in the very gesture by which [it] seeks to assert [its] unique, autonomous existence" (Eagleton 2006: 115). The utopian Culture, as subject, is thus shown to be equally deficient in autonomy; its destruction of the dystopian Empire, which is accomplished by exploiting the weaknesses within the system itself, inaugurates its own de(con)struction because it transgresses the laws of utopia that it had appeared to set up for itself – in other words, the weaknesses within the Culture-system are exposed. By its very (methodical) disposition the definition of utopia therefore has no autonomy, thus no choice; in other words, the *description* of utopia, as an ideal system that guarantees freedom, in itself does not offer any real freedom, or escape. Ironically, this very lack is what seems to set the subject/matter (of space opera, utopia, autonomy, and so on) free – by virtue of this lack declining the distance between object and subject (or showing how *ideas* of what these objects are infringe on their reality), a definition is able to detach itself from the tyranny of method and become "the site of engagement and invention" (Benjamin 2006: 83). In this way, the opposition between utopia and dystopia is not merely annulled or displaced; it is wholly resituated *as a subject*. The content of the definition is therefore no longer concerned with what constitutes each term, but with what constitutes the *opposition* between them, which allows the novel to offer "radical commentary on some of the inherent assumptions" of the capitalist ideal (Clute 2003: 75), to be "revisionist [and] political" in its social commentary (Mendlesohn 2005: 556-557), to explore the "limitations and contradictions" of lived experience (Brown 1996: 61).

The resituation of the subject/matter becomes fully realised in the last part of the text which is entitled "The Passed Pawn". This title refers to the endgame of chess, the termination of play, when a pawn with no opposing pawns to prevent it is promoted to the eighth rank. This suggests that Gurgeh's story has come to an end, terminated at a point where he attains a victory of sorts, but remains a pawn nonetheless (albeit in sovereign guise). Gurgeh returns to Gevant with the feeling that "[nothing] much seemed to have changed" (Banks 1989: 306), and, while the phrase refers to a room in the house which Gurgeh had left behind five years before, it goes some way toward explaining his feeling of despondency. It is only in light of the final lines of the story, when Gurgeh looks upwards to where Azad is, that his repositioning becomes clear:

> Gurgeh looked up and saw, amongst the clouds, the Clouds [the planetary system containing Azad], their ancient light hardly wavering in the cold, calm air ... and shoved his chilled hands into the jacket pockets for warmth. One touched something softer than the snow, and he brought it out; a little dust [that was all that was left of the Imperial palace on Echronedal].
> He looked up from it at the stars again, and the view was warped and distorted by something in his eyes, which he at first thought was rain.
> (Banks 1989: 307)

This oblique description of Gurgeh's tears takes us back to the first part of the text, to a depiction of his sense of utter helplessness when Mawhrin-Skel, with a view to blackmailing Gurgeh, ambushes and holds him by force. What he experienced then is portrayed as "paralysis. He could do nothing .... Rain struck Gurgeh's helpless, relaxed face. His jaw was slack and his mouth open, and he wondered if perhaps he would drown eventually; drowned by the falling rain .... He waited for real fear. The rain filled his eyes but he could not cry" (pp. 56-58). Later, in part three, we find another reference to Gurgeh's inability to cry when, at his realisation that he was set to beat the Emperor, "[a] prickling sensation began behind his nose and he sat back, overcome by the sadness of the game's ending, and waiting for tears ... none came .... No tears for him" (p. 276). These reversions seem to confirm Gurgeh's feeling that "nothing much seemed to have changed" – he is perhaps as powerless now as he had been then, if not more so. In the first scenario he had ended up being powerless to counter Mawhrin-Skel's threat, while in the second he could not prevent what he thought was going to be the game's ending, but what turned out to be the destruction of the Empire. The irony is, of course, that Gurgeh had always already been powerless in both instances – the decision as to the outcome of both scenarios had already been decided by the Culture. What happens then at the end of the story is that Gurgeh is able to acknowledge his loss of authority and give some mute expression to it, something that he was incapable of before. Interestingly, the text itself evades a determinate expression of Gurgeh's tears, referring to them only obliquely in terms of what they are not. This means that the reasons for Gurgeh's sorrow remain inexpressible – they are both the cause and the effect of *différance*, a by-product of the tension that marks subjectivity. Such is Gurgeh's victory: that he is resituated in a position that makes it possible for him to recognise his powerlessness, so to take up responsibility for his subjectivity in ever imagining himself to have any authority, which is what affords him the freedom to mourn. For the moment, the text demonstrates that, despite all its ironic effects, it "can never speak or write from a position of pure play; some position of sense or decision will always be produced in any engagement" (Colebrook 2004: 107). This is why, for once, at the start of this section there is no trace of the ironic narrator, not even as the hole in the centre of the old drone Flere-Imsaho. This is also why the story has to end here, where freedom is temporarily afforded, and escape is ephemerally defined as "a process of mourning".

Although Gurgeh does not emerge victorious he does manage to survive, and the utopian fixation with ends is preserved inasmuch as the Culture did achieve

the victory. However, in a coincidental gesture, this closure is denied when the text continues with a final word from the wily narrator:

> ... No, not quite the end.
> There's still me. I know I've been naughty, not revealing my identity, but then, maybe you've guessed; and who am I to deprive you of the satisfaction of working it out for yourself? Who am I indeed?
> ...
> Let me recapitulate.
> This is a true story. I was there. When I wasn't, and when I didn't know exactly what was going on – inside Gurgeh's mind, for example – I admit that I have not hesitated to make it up.
> But it's still a true story.
> Would I lie to you?
> As ever,
> Sprant Flere-Imsaho Wu-Handrahen Xato Trabiti
> ("Mawhrin-Skel")
>
> (Banks 1989: 309)

The ironic close of the narrative, which starts with the phrase "No, not quite the end" contravenes the ending of the story, and then proceeds to forever suspend choice. The identity of the narrator, which in all likelihood has been already divined, is revealed but will remain undecided because of the question "Who am I, indeed?", which reminds us that the narrator Mawhrin-Skel, dissident, is also Sprant Flere-Imsaho, Contact agent and adherent of the Culture. The resolution of the story is thwarted by the infinite play of difference between "true" and "story", a play made possible *only* because both of these terms rely on a utopian fixation with ends. This fixation is, ironically, what allows the text to evade structural closure in an endless spiral of *différance*, so that the reader will always hesitate to answer the question "Would I lie to you?". The answer to this question is again subjected to the both-and of irony, in which the text is self-consciously deferring responsibility to other questions such as "what is truth?", "what is utopia?", "what is dystopia?", moving ever onward to the question "what is SF?", and beyond. This proliferation of questions denies escape in the same gesture through which it offers freedom – there can be no final answer to any question, which is why I am free to question, in turn affording me the opportunity to consider possible answers to any question in the same gesture through which I elude it – opening up a space in which the position of SF in discourse can be persistently renegotiated.

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