II.iv: 'I think I'm beginning to understand. What I'm writing is an *infranovel*'[1]: Laurent Binet, *HHhH* and the Problem of 'Writing History'

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Literary and cultural representations of the Holocaust have changed considerably over the past decades. Whereas in the early post-war decades the emphasis was mainly on survivor accounts and the attempts to compile factually accurate history books on the events of the Shoah, there has, since then, been more engagement by the second and third generation, but also attempts to approach the Holocaust in fictional writing, a trend initially opposed by many Holocaust scholars. This article will, first of all, engage with the debates for and against Holocaust fiction and then offer a critical close reading of a recent example of Holocaust 'faction': Laurent Binet's 2012 (English translation) novel *HHhH*, a historical novel trying to come to terms with the responsibility it has towards 'real' historical events, and the relative freedoms it enjoys as a novel. It attempts to piece together the little known stories of the Czech and Slovak resistance fighters Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík who assassinated the Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, Reinhard Heydrich, in Prague in 1942. In addition to this historical account, Binet provides a frame narrative that emphasises his, at times, obsessive research on the project but steers clear of it being a purely factual account by applying postmodern literary techniques to query not only his own story but the process of both fiction writing and history making. As such, he offers a running commentary on and self-reflective assessment of the problems facing the historical researcher, especially when that historical writer is also concerned with writing a 'story'.

The Historians' Debate: *Facts* vs *Narrative*
Emily Miller Budick starts her timely and important book *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction* with the remarkable claim that 'it has been many years since Holocaust fiction has had to establish its legitimacy against the charge that a fictional text is either inadequate, inappropriate, or even endangering to the task of representing the Nazi genocide of the Second World War'.[2] While this is, undoubtedly, a welcome comment for anyone working on Holocaust *fiction*, it also shows that any book dealing with the Holocaust, and in particular a work of fiction, will always be under

particular scrutiny from readers and critics alike, querying whether the text is well researched, faithful to historical events, and respectful and ethical in their representation. As Bernard Harrison puts it: 'We feel ourselves under a duty to those who suffered, to confront as best we can the unvarnished facts of their suffering, and to refrain, above all things, from embroidering them, falsifying them, with any admixture of our own concerns.'[3] Critics fear that Holocaust fiction might be seen to open the door to Holocaust deniers, to those who might then equate writing fiction about the Holocaust with the actual Holocaust being a fabrication. In her seminal work *Holocaust Fiction* of 2000, Sue Vice explains that 'to judge by what many critics have to say, to write Holocaust fiction is tantamount to making a fiction of the Holocaust'.[4] Holocaust fiction, more than any other historical fiction, is thus trying to negotiate a very thin ethical demarcation line between inventing a narrative and creating fictional characters while, simultaneously, being true to the historical facts and the 'real' people involved in the Shoah, in particular the victims. The reason for this creative balancing act might be, on the one hand, the relative temporal 'closeness' of the Holocaust – a mere 70 years on from the liberation of the camps and the end of the war, the Holocaust is still within living memory. Creating fictions that might upset or offend the survivors and their immediate families could therefore be seen as ethically and morally objectionable. On the other hand, though, the Holocaust has also been given the special status of having been a 'unique' event, unparalleled by anything that has come before or since – and, consequently, one that ought not to be dealt with lightly. Berel Lang, one of the most outspoken critics of Holocaust fiction, pleads 'the Holocaust's special representational status' that allows for no representation other than historical realist ones to depict the events of the Shoah.[5] For Lang, this expressly *excludes* Holocaust fiction for a variety of reasons: firstly, imaginative fiction allows for a diversity of individual consciousnesses – the very thing the persecution of the Jews through the Nazis denied them. Furthermore, as Lang sees it, a fiction writer has *choices* in what to represent and how to do so – again, choices that the victims of the Shoah did not have. And, finally, the very chronology and construction of narrative with the benefit of historical hindsight seems to undermine the actual historical events of the Holocaust where, once again, the victims had no opportunity to 'construct' or even influence their own fate.[6] For Lang it should thus only be the unembellished *facts* of the Holocaust speaking for themselves.

These strong opinions against Holocaust fiction also put Lang at odds with fellow historians who have been championing different approaches to history writing and here, in particular, different approaches to Holocaust history writing. Historians such as, for instance, Robert Braun, have discussed the problematic limitations of traditional historical representation that seemingly promises 'a direct and close link to past "reality" on the basis of "facts"' and that offers 'evidence and proof … to establish the "truth" of historical representation'.[7] What this approach, however, does not consider is, according to Braun, that 'in conveying "historical reality" historical representation employs narrative forms as a mode of emplotment, thereby weakening the direct connection between factual statements and the means of representation'.[8] The importance for Braun lies in the term 'narrative form', the conscious construction of historical dates and facts into a narrative and, in this, his approach to history writing echoes that of Hayden White who has, from the 1970s onwards, been championing the links between history writing and narrative, arguing in favour of acknowledging literary theories and approaches to the writing of history.[9] For White, the narrative 'in historical discourse … serves to transform into a story a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle. In order to effect this transformation, the events, agents, and agencies represented in the chronicle must be encoded as story elements'.[10] According to this, a historian, just like a writer of fiction, makes conscious choices about *what* to include in his narrative, and *how* to present it, and different narratives of the same historical events can differ drastically depending on their authors' focus, background or agenda.[11] But this approach to history writing, so seemingly common-sensible, becomes once again complicated in the case of Holocaust writing – where any writer, be it a writer of history, or a writer of fiction, fears to be misunderstood, to unintentionally offend, or, in the words of James E. Young, 'to violate certain forms of decorum'.[12]

One alternative mode of historical representation that White advocates is the ironic mode which 'represents a stage of consciousness in which the problematic nature of language has been recognized.'[13] It seems almost too obvious to point out that White, of course, does *not* suggest to alter or deny historical facts. What he *does* suggest is a form of history writing that is self-conscious of its very writing process in order to attain a greater understanding of the actual history that is presented, and it is here that there is considerable overlap between White's metahistorical approach to the writing of history and that of theorists and writers of postmodern metafiction, writing

that is self-conscious about its constructedness, and that reflects on the actual writing process.

Summarising these distinct historiographical approaches to Holocaust writing – the one that wants to let facts speak for themselves without any form of mediation as advocated by Lang, the other that shows the self-reflective engagement with the subject matter and writing process of the historian as advocated by White – Young asks: 'which might be regarded the more "normal form"? That which assumes its ability to let facts speak for themselves…? Or that which makes the facts as clear as possible while still acknowledging the role of historian and narrator in bringing us these facts?'[14] The answer to these questions might, ultimately, come down to personal preference. But, in a further blurring of the boundaries between 'factual' and 'fictional' writing, contemporary postmodern novelists assume a self-consciously historicist position in their production of neo-historical narratives. Since the early unabashed appearance of a character called 'John Fowles' in John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* of 1969 addressing both characters and readers, postmodern novelists have toyed with their readers' expectations by writing themselves into their narratives and by openly discoursing on the writing and research process in their novels, by elaborating on the different options they have as writers, and explaining, if not justifying, the choices they have made. Laurent Binet's *HHhH* is a recent but particularly pertinent example: it uses undisputed historical facts – the assassination of Heydrich, the existence and background stories of both him and his assassins – as starting and focal point for a narrative that, however, dedicates similar page space to and ultimately foregrounds its author's navel gazing, personal obsession with his research topic, and the difficulties he has encountered in the course of writing a text that he himself refers to as a 'true story' on one page, as a 'novel'[15] on the next, thus once again both highlighting and blurring the fine line that separates historical narrative writing from the writing of fictional ones.

Postmodern, Historiographical *Faction* Writing

HHhH was first published in France in 2009 – to much critical and public acclaim. The novel won the prestigious Prix Goncourt du premier roman and the Prix des Lecteurs du Livre de Poche. The English translation by Sam Taylor first appeared in 2012 and immediately attracted a lot of attention. The critics' responses are telling,

though, as opinions about the book are divided and, in some cases, the real intentions of the novel do not seem to have been recognised.

HHhH, I want to argue, offers an innovative approach to the genre of Holocaust fiction for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is a rather unconventional Holocaust novel in that it does not actually deal with the Holocaust per se but, instead, focuses on no other but the criminal mastermind behind the Final Solution, the figure of Heydrich, despite its opening claims – and I will come back to this point – of being a book about his heroic assassins. *HHhH* can thus be seen to contribute to the relatively new genre of Holocaust perpetrator writing – a taboo subject for a long time but now gaining in prominence. The most hotly debated contribution to this genre is, undoubtedly, Jonathan Littell's 900-plus-page *The Kindly Ones* of 2006 that assesses the events leading up to the Shoah – the *Sonderaktionen* in the Ukraine, for instance, the mass shootings of civilians during the entire Eastern Campaign, the development from the initial Saurer 'extermination lorries' to designated killing centres such as Majdanek, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Treblinka – from the perspective of the fictionalised SS-Officer Maximilian Aue. Littell's book is often quasi-pornographic in its merciless depiction of violence – one of the reasons it has been condemned by critics (despite simultaneously garnering praise and literary awards). But at the core of the novel is Littell's evident, meticulous historical research that shows clearly that *The Kindly Ones* is not simply a novel, but one steeped in historical facts, simultaneously challenging its readers with graphic detail while being faithful to historical research. More recently, Hubert Mingarelli's slim but powerful *A Meal in Winter* (2012; English translation 2014) and Audrey Magee's *The Undertaking* (2014) have also contributed to the genre, offering novel perspectives on both perpetration and being a 'mere' bystander that are characterised by their attention to historical detail. Miller Budick has rightly pointed out that novels such as *The Kindly Ones*, but, by extension, also works by Mingarelli and Magee and other contemporary authors dealing with the perpetrator perspective, '[hold] up a dark, distorted, and yet frightening revealing mirror to the field of Holocaust studies itself, which has everything to do with our sometimes prurient interest in other people's suffering and with how we do and do not see ourselves reflected in narratives of the Holocaust'.[16] These novels, clearly fiction steeped in facts, are valuable in that they offer new perspectives to the field of Holocaust studies, and challenge their readers to examine their own motivations in reading these works. If we link this back to the previously

discussed historical debate it is clear to see that these texts move away from attempting to tell a grand metanarrative but, instead, offer a plethora of previously largely undiscussed microhistories that present different angles, diverse approaches and, ultimately, new insights.

Secondly, *HHhH* adds to the genre through its stylistic experimentation that blends fact and fiction, makes use of authentic documents and invented dialogues, employs various narrative registers, and includes at length its author's philosophical musings about his private life, the writing of fiction and the compiling of historical 'facts'. It also plays with conventions of the spatial arrangements of a novel: there are no page numbers; instead, the text of the 'novel' is broken up into 257 chapters or sections, some just a sentence long, others spanning several pages. This spatial experimentation instantaneously appears to refute Berel Lang's critique of Holocaust fiction as being too chronological, too well-ordered as Binet constantly interrupts his attempted chronological account of the actual assassination with his introspective musings; new findings in the course of his obsessive research make him question earlier ones; the lack of page numbers suggests a lack of formal structure to his project and reflects, potentially, both the piece-meal acquisition of information during the course of his research, and the chaotic, unordered flow of his own thoughts as he is trying to assemble his research findings into a 'coherent' and meaningful narrative. Binet himself comments repeatedly and obsessively about the enormity of his task: he explains that 'the vastness of the information I amass ends up frightening me. I write two pages for every thousand I read. …'. [17] He realises that doing the research is one thing; but trying to structure it, to make tough choices on what to include and what not to use, is an altogether different one – and also, importantly, that this is a dilemma and process he wants to share with the reader as it is a conundrum that faces *any* author of *any* narrative.

This experimental style both in terms of content and structure has led some reviewers, among them James Lasdun writing in *The Guardian*, to accuse Binet of using 'grabby po-mo flourishes' that 'diminish [a] true story'.[18] Similarly, Leyla Sanai, writing in *The Independent*, complained that 'his interjections [obstruct] the flow of a mesmerizing true story'.[19] Just like Berel Lang, these two critics juxtapose postmodern literary techniques with the 'flow' of a 'true story' as intrinsically incompatible, rather than seeing them as potentially successfully complementing each other. By contrast, James Wood praises Binet in *The New Yorker* for having produced

'unconventionally conventional historical fiction'.[20] Although Wood recognizes Binet's novel for departing from the convention of historical novel writing, he, alongside most other critics, seems too keen to narrowly classify or pigeon-hole *HHhH* – although such classifications can be notoriously difficult and ultimately unnecessarily restrictive, as the case of W.G. Sebald genre-defying writing has illustrated. *HHhH* is neither pure fiction – that assumption is belied by its factual content, the undeniable historical facts of the assassination of Heydrich, of the personages of his assassins, of the atrocities committed by the Third Reich – nor a straightforward historical novel with a linear chronology dictated by historical dates and events. Instead, Binet again and again problematises the very process of writing a narrative, of assessing and sorting the material he has so diligently researched. His own development as a writer, his anxieties of doing justice to a complex event, his agonies over this word choice, or that omission of a fact that might prove to be pivotal, often take precedence over the actual *historical* narrative. In Chapter 92, for instance, Binet interrupts his narrative, that had just been gathering momentum, to admit to factual errors. He states 'Rereading one of the books that make up the foundation of my research – a collection of witness accounts Assembled by a Czech historian, Miroslav Ivanov, under the title *The Attack on Heydrich* – I become aware, to my horror, of the mistakes I've made concerning Gabčík'.[21] Despite painstaking research and determination to stick to 'facts' and 'truth', Binet realises that mistakes – or simply personal interpretations – creep into his work; that, maybe, the dividing line between assiduous historian and writer of historical narrative is much thinner than he anticipated. Nevertheless, he resents and tries to resist simply taking recourse to pure fiction in a narrative of historical facts – while simultaneously admitting on several occasions that writers occasionally have no option other than making things up after all.[22]

Rather than following set rules and allowing easy pigeon-holing, Binet thus *plays* both with different genres *and* with his readers' assumption and, as such, *HHhH* is not, as Wood claims, a 'historical novel at war with itself'[23] but rather a clever example of postmodern historiographical metafiction – even though that might just be another attempt at classification. Linda Hutcheon explains that postmodern historiographic metafiction is characterized by a 'paradoxical confrontation of self-consciously fictive and resolutely historical representation' displaying an 'intense self-consciousness … about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past'

while Bran Nicol points out that historiographical metafiction is 'still committed to telling a long and involving story, full of believable characters, which can be enjoyed by the reader in the manner of nineteenth-century realism' but that it is, at the same time, self-consciously aware of the 'assumptions behind literary realism and "lays bare" its own processes of construction to remind us that reality is similarly constructed or mediated'.[24] Both critics are thus at pains to point out historiographic metafiction's commitment to fact – but facts potentially narrated in different ways, their authors elaborating on their very choices and narrative processes. As such, *HHhH* could be labelled historiographical meta*faction*, to coin a new phrase to extend Hutcheon's meta*fiction*: a f*actual* narrative f*ictionally* elaborated but aware of its own processes in constructing the narrative and establishing and verifying the very 'facts' it is based on. In the process, Binet does not, as Michael Newton has claimed in the *London Review of Books*, 'reject "poetic truth" for documented fact', nor does he 'surrender the novelist's licence'.[25] In fact, he regularly resorts to both poetic truth and novelistic licence. In Chapter 44, for instance, when pondering his research efforts, he admits that 'sometimes in the course of my research I come upon a story that I decide not to relate, whether because it seems too anecdotal, or because there are details missing and I'm unable to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, or because I find the story questionable'.[26] What might be construed as a fiction writer's confession to being selective or making things up is a pertinent example of the *metafactional* writer's dilemma: his efforts to stick to painstaking research but the admission that, occasionally, even the most assiduous historian has to admit defeat. Throughout the novel, Binet constantly highlights problems such as these and self-reflectively explains his reasons for acting in a certain way. In section 20, for instance, he says 'I could give details' of Heydrich's early career in the *Freikorps* – but that this 'seems unnecessary'. As historical researcher, Binet knows the importance of research, of facts, of 'giving an impression of realism'.[27] But he also knows that not all details can be included, that not everything is truly relevant for *his* story. In the process, he cleverly highlights the restrictiveness of rigid and artificial boundaries between 'historical facts' on the one hand, and 'narrative' on the other, and advocates, instead, to embrace the overlap between them while simultaneously interrogating, problematizing and challenging them. Effectively, he also deconstructs the very processes of 'history' as an alleged science, showing, instead, that history is infinitely enhanced by the narrative process. He concludes section 20 with the

anecdote that one of the *Freikorps* had the swastika as insignia and 'Swastika on a Steel Helmet' as its battle song. This narrative inclusion, Binet asserts, 'sets the scene better than the longest description in the world'.[28] At no point in his narrative does Binet cast doubt on the veracity and factuality of history; instead he problematizes the fact that both writers and historians alike make their own choices when it comes to narrating historical events in their respective disciplines. *HHhH* is thus a complexly multi-layered work that not only recounts an important historical event of the recent past but that also, and more importantly, challenges preconceptions about individual disciplines and the artificial division into different subjects and areas of expertise.

Reconciling Facts and Narrative in *HHhH*

HHhH's opening line stakes a claim for factuality: 'Gabčík – that's his name – really did exist'.[29] This initial statement is then immediately juxtaposed by a narrative paragraph that is worth quoting in full:

> Lying alone on a little iron bed, did he hear, from outside, beyond the shutters of a darkened apartment, the unmistakable creaking of the Prague tramways? I want to believe so. I know Prague well, so I can imagine the tram's number (but perhaps it's changed?), its route, and the place where Gabčík waits, thinking and listening. We are at the corner of Vysehradska and Trojická. The number 18 tram (or the number 22) has stopped in front of the Botanical Gardens. We are, most important, in 1942.[30]

Binet concludes this opening paragraph with the question 'what could be more vulgar than an invented character?', a question he enforces with the statement 'in my opinion'.[31] This serves as Binet's mission statement: his immediate assertion that his characters are real and not invented; the fact that he specifies a precise location and time; the assurance that he knows the location well, placing himself into the spatial reality that is contemporary Prague to prove his credentials. Interspersed, however, are an intruding narrator (he mentions himself four times in the first few lines) who provides self-conscious asides: perhaps the tram's number has changed; maybe it's a different tram altogether; how can we know for sure? And does it actually matter for the narrative? And then there are the clearly fictional additions: Binet imagining Gabčík 'lying alone on a little iron bed', waiting, 'thinking and listening' to the noises of the tram. In these first few lines, we immediately have a co-mingling of fact and fiction, as well as the suggestion of the narrator's historical uncertainties in the

comment 'I *want* to believe so' (emphasis mine): no matter how much research has been done, there will always remain some gaps and a lot of uncertainties and wishful thinking.

For Binet, writing this book was a very personal experience. He first heard the story of Heydrich's assassination from his father who, as he explains, 'in a few awkward phrases, knew how to tell it. The story, I mean. History'.[32] The wordplay on story and history here shows on the one hand that, for Binet, the events in Prague will always be linked to his father, will always he 'his story'. But his final words again conflate 'story' with 'history' (and it should be pointed out here that, in the French original, the word 'histoire' covers both the words 'story' and 'history'). This theme of history as a constructed narrative runs through the entire novel. With this conflation Binet engages with one of the main preoccupations of postmodernism: the turn away from the over-arching metanarrative towards, instead, a sheer endless series of micro-narratives assessing and recounting different sides to different stories. In his essay 'The Discourse of History' of 1981, Roland Barthes had asked provocatively 'Does the narration of past events … really differ … from imaginary narration…?'[33] and the answer to that question has to be a resoundinig 'no'. In her study of postmodernism, Hutcheon elaborates on the 'postmodern desire to denaturalize history'– ie the attempts to show that history is not 'discovered' or 'natural' but that it is and has always been constructed – which results in, as she sees it, 'a new self-consciousness about the distinction between the brute *events* of the past and the historical *facts* we construct out of them'.[34] Facts, as Hutcheon points out, 'are events to which we have given meaning. Different historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events'.[35] In *HHhH*, Binet worries about historical accuracy – was Heydrich's Mercedes Benz black, or was it green? – but is also painfully aware that 'Sometimes … there are several contradictory versions of the same story' and that, often, 'Historians disagree'.[36] Historians 'disagreeing' does not point at 'alternative facts'. It rather highlights the existence of different interpretations for individual facts. For Binet, it then is a case of 'allowing myself to decide which version is true'[37], a comment that shows the very *subjective* processes involved in history writing. His novel thus demonstrates that, as Hutcheon has put it in a different context, 'the representation of history becomes the history of representation'.[38] Leyla Sanai, one of the reviewers who is particularly critical of Binet's 'fussing about the nature of historical fiction', queries why Binet did 'not let the facts speak for

themselves?'[39], a comment that once again echoes Lang's plea for a purely fact-based 'historical realism' in Holocaust representation.[40] Postmodern thought, however, tries to show up the fallacy of 'one' universal truth, of the 'one' grand narrative. And the idea that facts can speak for themselves is held to be a contradiction in terms: facts cannot speak for themselves; to each 'fact' there is a multitude of interpretations; and, additionally, each fact is always and inevitably given a meaning by the very person who selects or presents it. Thus, throughout *HHhH*, and as we have seen already, Binet justifies including certain facts but *ex*cluding others; and he also reserves the right to exclude certain events or stories. When first introducing Lina, Heydrich's wife, for example, Binet dismisses the story of their first meeting he has read in a biography based on Lina's memoirs as 'too kitsch' concluding that 'It's not a bad story. I just don't feel like doing the ballroom scene, and even less the romantic walk in the park. So it's better for me not to know more of the details; that way, I won't be tempted to share them'.[41] Nevertheless, he effectively *has* shared the kitschy story simply by dismissing it. He concludes his chapter with the knowing words 'the "woman behind the famous man" version is always more appealing'[42]: he knows what readers want to read – so he presents the stories but immediately interlaces them with his own critique. This *metafictional* technique allows him to provide some facts – the kitschy account of the Heydrichs first meeting – but to immediately couple this with a critical commentary.

Additionally, there is a striking differentiation in linguistic register throughout *HHhH*, starkly juxtaposing expressions of certainty – such as, for instance, 'I know' – with those of uncertainty and hypotheses: 'perhaps', 'I suppose', 'I don't know'.[43] Chapter 146, for example, stands out through its exaggerated use of the expression 'I know' that is repeated ten times in the course of just half a page:

> *I know* everything it's possible to know about this flight. *I know* what Gabčík and Kubiš had in their backpacks: … *I know* they were wearing civilian clothes… *I know* that … they didn't say anything to their fellow parachutists … *I know* that their fellow parachutists suspected they were being sent to kill Heydrich. *I know* that it was Gabčík who most impressed the air dispatcher … *I know* that they quickly had to make their wills … *I know* the names of each member of the two other teams … And *I also know* each man's fake identity… *I know* pretty much everything that can be known about this flight…[44]

These snippets of information about Gabčík and Kubiš' flight are historical facts that Binet has been able to verify in museums, libraries and military archives; they are evidence of his diligent research; and they are, consequently, the 'facts' he wants to present as just that: almost a chronicle, a list of evidence, unembellished and unelaborated through narrative, speaking, as Lang has demanded, for themselves and, in the process, underlining the author-narrator's historical research credentials. But, in contrast to that, throughout the novel he again and again admits that he has not 'been able to find out'; that 'we can't really be sure', that he simply '[doesn't] know' or that he is, alternatively, looking for a '*plausible*' solution to these problems.[45] Chapter 50 is a particularly pertinent example that illustrates Binet's use of hypothesis and creative imagining to fill the historical gaps. He starts the chapter (which deals with the journey of the Head of the Czechoslovak secret service through Nazi Germany in 1938) by pointing out that 'I *try to imagine* the journey.' The rest of the chapter is peppered with expressions such as 'he *doubtless* chooses the friendliest-looking clerk', 'I sup*p*ose', 'lets put him next to the door', 'he must *surely'*, 'I *presume'*, 'I *don't know'*, 'I *believe'* and '*perhaps'*.[46] Binet's choice of words thus alerts his readers to what is historically accurate, and what is embellished, fictionalised, or simply assumed. His many assertions of 'I know' are, ultimately, outweighed by those stating that he does *not* know, and, more importantly, that he has no means to actually find out. It is only fiction that allows him to imaginatively fill these historical voids with something that, while maybe not fully accurate, is certainly plausible.

Fact and fiction always merge in his assessment of the past, and it is part of Binet's overall meta*f*actional strategy to constantly signpost and openly discuss the interweaving of fact and fiction. In Chapter 11, he acknowledges that he has 'read lots of historical novels, to see how others deal with the genre's constraints. Some are keen to demonstrate their extreme accuracy, others don't bother, and a few manage skilfully to skirt around the historical truth without inventing too much.'[47] He self-consciously explains early on in the novel that 'There is nothing more artificial in a historical narrative' than the kind of dialogue that has just closed his preceding chapter, promising his reader that 'if my dialogues can't be based on precise, faithful, word-perfect sources, they will be invented' and that they will then function 'not as a hypothesis but as a parable'. He refers to this as 'a stylistic drop in an ocean of reality'[48], again asserting that he is, really, just trying to write a 'factual' narrative and not a work of fiction. Signpost and apology in place, he then goes on, throughout the

text, to invent dialogues between his characters and creatively imagine scenes – in particular with regards to his alleged main characters, the heroic assassins of Heydrich, Gabčík and Kubiš, where there are simply not sufficient historical sources to verify all the facts and fill in all the gaps. Having set out to commemorate the story of the Czechoslovakian resistance heroes, he is, in an additional twist, dismayed to realise that Heydrich has started to command far more space, so much so that he admits 'Whenever I talk about the book I'm writing, I say, "My book on Heydrich"'.[49] Material on Heydrich is easier to come by, and the many contradictory readings and interpretations of the man he finds intrigue and fascinate him. He admits that 'in literary terms, Heydrich is a wonderful character', a combination of 'the greatest monsters in literature to create a new and terrifying creature'.[50] It is only from Chapter 88 onwards that he starts a more detailed introduction of Gabčík and Kubiš – and Binet precedes this with a quasi-apology for his heroes' late entrance to the narrative: 'I'm all too aware that my two heroes are late making their entrance. But perhaps it's no bad thing they have to wait. Perhaps it will give them more substance'.[51] Here, once again, Binet deconstructs reader expectations and realist literary conventions, where stories are expected to have a beginning, a main part, and a conclusion, a plot working towards a climax, with main characters clearly introduced and depicted from the beginning. But his aside that their late introduction might give his heroes more 'substance' also shows his ironic awareness that there simply are not as many known facts about them as there are about their target, Heydrich. Chapters 89 and 90 are given over to a flowery depiction of Gabčík's return, after a brief absence, to his hometown Košice, his meeting with old friends from the 14th Infantry regiment, the conversations he has with them – and his spontaneous decision to leave the country to join the Czechoslovakian resistance abroad. But just as the reader becomes involved in the story, Binet himself once again intrudes: 'that scene, like the one before, is perfectly believable and totally made up. How impudent of me to turn a man into a puppet…'.[52] With this self-reflective insertion, Binet warns of the urge to provide what Hutcheon refers to as 'totalizing representations' in narrative, the urge to provide continuity, order, and meaning.[53] Effectively, though, this simply continues the inherent contradiction in Binet's text: on the one hand, he *does* provide his readers with a coherent, ordered narrative; on the other, though, he undermines it. There are many instances where *HHhH* does, indeed, seems to be a conventional historical novel. This is particularly true for those sections

that chart, and reasonably chronologically so, the rise of Heydrich; those are historical facts that are well-chronicled and easily ascertained. But, again and again, Binet's voice intrudes into the narrative to exclaim that 'I refuse to write a sentence like…', thus openly resisting the very conventions of the genre he seems to be writing in.[54] Hutcheon refers to this technique as a typically postmodern 'paradoxical mixing of seeming opposites' and Nicol usefully elaborates that the aim of '[postmodern] metafiction is principally to draw attention to the *frames* involved in fiction' and that some 'metafictional texts actively indulge in … "frame-breaking"'.[55] By alerting his readers to the processes of constructing a narrative, to his own awareness of conventions and expectations, and not only protesting but demonstrating his willingness to deconstruct them as soon as he seems to have addressed them, Binet produces the 'ironic mode' that has been advocated by Hayden White for historical narratives: a palimpsestic narrative of interlinking frames, levels and self-awareness that both build upon *and* contradict each other.

Historical narratives / fictional freedoms

In an interview with Killian Fox, Binet said that 'to write a novel with just one level, without a metafictional dimension, wouldn't interest me very much'.[56] And it is these very levels, the metafictional, metaf*act*ional and metahistorical elements, that make *HHhH* such an intriguing contribution to Holocaust writing. His statement that 'I just hope that, however bright and blinding the veneer of fiction that covers this fabulous story, you will still be able to see through it to the historical reality that lies behind'[57] which comes at the very beginning of the novel still juxtaposes 'fact' with 'fiction' and shows his determination to put 'historical reality' at the forefront of his project. Yet as his narrative progresses he increasingly problematizes this statement as his research takes him down more and more intricate alleyways, and his previously cited claim that 'I think I'm beginning to understand. What I'm writing is an *infranovel*'[58], a novel ironically questioning its own claim to truth, is gaining increasing importance. At the forefront of *HHhH* is thus not necessarily the uncovering of *historical* truth but rather that of *narrative* truth: an open and honest assessment of the various and complex processes involved in the construction of narratives. Binet shows his own authorial frustration when he exclaims that 'to begin with, this seemed a simple-enough story to tell. Two men have to kill a third man. They succeed, or not, and that's the end, or nearly.'[59] But narrative is not simple or straightforward. It requires

tough choices – such as the ones Binet faces about which material he should include in his story. Some details, such as, for instance, the inclusion of the resistance fighter Valcik's friendship with a stray dog, might be irrelevant – but he would still 'rather jot down a useless detail than risk missing a crucial one'.[60] Certain characters seem too marginal to merit inclusion – but it 'would have been disrespectful not even to mention their names'.[61] He admits that

> I'm fighting a losing battle. I can't tell this story the way it should be told. This whole hotchpotch of characters, events, dates, and the infinite branching of cause and effect – and these people, these real people who actually existed. I'm barely able to mention a tiny fragment of their lives, their actions, their thoughts. I keep banging my head against the wall of history.[62]

And with this statement Binet comes to the heart of his project. *HHhH* is a piece of work that transcends restrictive classifications: not a novel, not a historical handbook. There simply is no such thing as just 'one' way to tell a story. Instead, *HHhH* pushes the boundaries of both historical and fictional writing by querying the validity of either. It shows us that what we know from history books is selective, subject to individual choices, part of a wider political agenda, and that for every narrative that has been created out of historical events there are countless others that have not yet been told, and maybe never will be, as his lament 'How many forgotten heroes sleep in history's great cemetery?'[63] evidences. By showing us that the very 'flow' we are accustomed to in especially historical writing is an artificial construct, an attempt to make sense of things with historical hindsight and, for all its claims for detached objectivity, from a rather *subjective* viewpoint. Binet's postmodern, historiographical metaf*a*ctional account of Heydrich's rise to power, of his assassination, of the creatively invested lives of his heroic assassins, and his own struggles to create a narrative, provocatively highlights what Robert Eaglestone has referred to as 'a concern with edges and limits of disciplines and discourse, where one discourse shades into another, where philosophy becomes autobiography … or where fiction challenges how it is to be understood'.[64] Writing carefully researched historical fiction thus allow Binet to question and, ultimately, challenge the artificially constructed boundaries between disciplines. In the process, he advocates a representational model free of genrefication and representational limitations that

allows for an active, ongoing engagement by both writer *and* reader with the past as well as the research and writing process.

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[1] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 205.

[2] Budick, *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction*, 1.

[3] Harrison, 'Aharon Appelfeld', 79.

[4] Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*, 1.

[5] Lang, 'Is it possible to misrepresent the Holocaust', 85.

[6] See Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, 80-1.

[7] Braun, 'The Holocaust and Problems of Historical Representation', 172.

[8] Braun, 'The Holocaust and Problems of Historical Representation', 172.

[9] Incidentally, Mark Currie, in the recent second edition of his *Metafiction* (2014) lists articles by both Hutcheon and White in the section on 'Historiographic Metafiction'. which further blurs the boundaries between fictional and historical 'narrative'. See Currie, *Metafiction.*

[10] White, *The Content of the Form*, 43.

[11] See White, *The Content of the Form*, 76.

[12] Young, 'Toward a Received History of the Holocaust', p. 26.

[13] White, *Metahistory*, 38.

[14] Young, 'Toward a Received History of the Holocaust', p. 34.

[15] See for example, Binet, *HHhH*, Chapters 5, 112.

[16] Budick, *The Subject of Holocaust Fiction*, 17.

[17] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 11..

[18] Lasdun, '*HHhH* by Laurent Binet – review', n.p.

[19] Sanai, '*HHhH*, By Laurent Binet (trs Sam Taylor)', n.p.

[20] Wood, 'Broken Record', n.p.

[21] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp. 94.

[22] See, for instance, Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 44, 84, 91.

[23] Wood, 'Broken Record', n.p.

[24] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 63; 68; Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, 99.

[25] Newton, 'What a Ghost Wants', 23.

[26] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 44.

[27] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 20.

[28] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 20.

[29] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 1.

[30] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 1.

[31] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 1.

[32] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 2.

[33] Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', 7.

[34] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 54.

[35] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 54.

[36] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 44; see also Chp 112.

[37] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 44.

[38] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 55.

[39] Sanai, '*HHhH*, By Laurent Binet (trs Sam Taylor)', n.p.

[40] Lang, 'Is it possible to misrepresent the Holocaust?', 86.

[41] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 25.

[42] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 25.

[43] See, for instance, Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 33.

[44] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 146; emphases mine.

[45] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 23; 26; 34; 10.

[46] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 50; emphases mine.

[47] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 11.

[48] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 15.

[49] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 88.

[50] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 88.

[51] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 88.

[52] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 91.

[53] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 59.

[54] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 146.

[55] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1; 6; Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, 35; 37.

[56] Fox, 'Laurent Binet: "Most French Writers are Lazy"', n.p.

[57] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 1.

[58] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 205.

[59] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 175.

[60] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 180.

[61] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 118.

[62] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 150.

[63] Binet, *HHhH*, Chp 150.

[64] Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, 4.