

"THAT IS WHY I AM FREE TO DREAM OF PRAGUE":
A CRITIQUE ON AUTHORIAL NATIONALITY DISCOURSE
AND HISTORICAL GRAND NARRATIVES
IN LAURENT BINET'S *HHhH*

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ABSTRACT: In Laurent Binet's alternative historical novel entitled *HHhH*, published in French in 2010 and translated into English in 2013, the writer takes his readers beyond the historical facts of a particular event in the past, Operation Anthropoid, to his own life as a French writer faced with the burden of his personal history and the perpetual struggle with the unattainability of historical truth. In this article, I propose that Binet's conscious "otherness" to Central Europe, particularly the Czech and Slovak languages, cultures, and histories, sets him "free to dream" of a different place/time and to imagine as well as introduce specters of the obscure and unknown "subaltern" in history, thereby adding critical dimensions to the critical rethinking and re(-)membering of the Czech and Slovak histories of violence and dissidence.

KEYWORDS: Laurent Binet; Operation Anthropoid; historical fiction; authorial nationality discourse; metanarrative; grand narrative; postmodernism; the subaltern; Czechoslovakia

From Fritz Lang's film *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943) to the recent Czech film *Lidice* (2011), from Jiří Weil's novel *Na střeše je Mendelssohn* (*Mendelssohn Is on the Roof*, 1960) to Gerald Brennan's *Resistance* (2012), Operation Anthropoid and the Nazis' merciless reprisals, one of the darkest chapters of the Czechoslovak history of oppression and resistance, have been portrayed and recounted in a number of films and literary works. Though cinematic and literary portrayals and adaptations of the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942), Reichsprotektor of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, carried out in Prague on 27 May 1942, tend to be regarded as indisputable classic resources and references in their own right, I argue in this article that the representation of the Czech and Slovak histories of violence and dissidence nevertheless remains and should remain problematic.

I propose that two main necessary problems of historical fiction writing have been identified and explored in Laurent Binet's novel entitled *HHhH*, published in French in 2010 and translated into English in 2013. The first problem lies in the notion that the representation of historical incidents entails rearranging as well as manipulating narrative elements to tell a (hi)story, an act which tends to be subjected to the totalitarianism of what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as the "grand narratives," or the "metanarratives." Angélique du Toit, in *The Lyotard Dictionary*, explains:

One of the fundamental attacks postmodernism subjects modernism to is on the latter's belief in a 'grand narrative'. It is a rejection of the idea that the ultimate truth associated with a grand narrative is possible and that the world as experienced is as a result of hidden structures. A grand narrative or metanarrative can also be understood as an ideology or paradigm; a system of thought and belief.¹

Binet's work reveals the difficulties with which writers of historical fiction struggle as they are faced with the task of recounting a (hi)story as a wholesome and coherent linear narrative. It also draws a parallel between the totalitarianism of metanarrative/grand narrative and that of what Donald E. Pease defines as a "national narrative":

The term *national narrative* itself refers to the process whereby the discourse of the Enlightenment produced particulars—nation states—out of universal norms: Reason, Equality, Social Justice, Liberty. Acting as agents of the state, these national narratives constructed imaginary relations to actual sociopolitical conditions to effect imagined communities called national peoples.²

Authorial nationality discourse, which categorizes literary works in terms of the writer's nationality or origin, can be regarded as part of the national narrative. This leads to the second necessary problem of historical fiction writing, which lies in the challenges brought about by the authors' specific subjectivity, particularly their temporality, or the time when they were born, and their nationality, or the place where they were born.

1. Angélique du Toit, "Grand Narrative, Metanarrative," in *The Lyotard Dictionary*, ed. Stuart Sim (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 86.

2. Donald E. Pease, "National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives," *boundary 2* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 3–4. Italics in the original.

I shall begin the analysis with Binet's preoccupation with the second problem of historical fiction, which is the problem of authorial nationality.

AUTHORIAL NATIONALITY DISCOURSE

The story of a Czech soldier and a Slovak soldier's attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler's prominent henchman, who was known as "the hangman" of Prague and architect of the Final Solution of the Jewish Question, which led to the Holocaust, seems simple enough to be retold and re(-)presented in its entirety. It is, for example, undeniable that Operation Anthropoid was part of the Czechoslovak resistance movement orchestrated by the Czechoslovak Government-in-Exile. However, the complex chain of historical events and intertwined lives which led to and formed part of the atrocities of Operation Anthropoid cannot be relayed in one coherent story. It is, for example, disputable whether the assassination of Heydrich yielded nothing more than horrifying consequences, as described on the dust jacket of Jan G. Wiener's *The Assassination of Heydrich*:

The repercussions of Heydrich's death shook the world. To Hitler, Heydrich was an "irreplaceable" SS chief. To the Czech people, he was a symbol of the terror and horror of the Nazi occupation. In reprisal, Hitler ordered a massive slaughter of the Czech "resistors" and totally demolished the small town of Lidice demanding that grass be planted where the town stood and that the name be erased from all maps.³

Some historians have also posited that the post-assassination retribution was far graver than the symbolic nationalist gesture of Heydrich's assassination. Prominent examples can be seen in the villages of Lidice and Ležáky, which was also razed to the ground as a result of false accusations. The residents of the two villages were terrorized and brutally murdered:

On the morning of 10 June 1942 the SS shot Lidice's entire male population and burned the village to the ground. Lidice's women and those of its children who failed to meet "racial" criteria were deported to concentration

3. Jan G. Wiener, *The Assassination of Heydrich* (New York: Grossman, 1969), dust jacket.

camps . . . Two weeks later, the SS murdered all twenty-four adults in the village of Ležáky and similarly divided its children.⁴

For the loss of Heydrich's life, the Czech people paid a high price with the currency of their lives: "In the wave of terror that followed Heydrich's assassination, the Germans arrested 3,188 Czechs, sentenced 1,357 to death, and executed 679, most for having 'approved the assassination.' Hitler had initially called for 10,000 Czechs to be summarily shot."⁵

As a "historical being," Binet does not make it a secret that he has had difficulty conjuring up the world of the past, let alone the world of the past in the context of a foreign country. Operation Anthropoid is clearly not a story which can be recounted through a single narrative; its simplicity is deceptive. While it is true that Operation Anthropoid was a success, as Heydrich died in a Prague hospital of his injuries caused by the Czech parachutist, Jan Kubiš, its success was at the expense of the subsequent tragic deaths of the parachutists, their colleagues, and the people who helped and sheltered them, as well as other innocent people who perished to quench Hitler's rage. This historical event involves many other characters, in fact, real people whose lives and the tiny details which make up their existence lie far beyond the knowledge of the writer:

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. I thought of all the other people as mere ghosts who would glide elegantly across the tapestry of history. Ghosts have to be looked after, and that requires great care—I knew that. On the other hand, what I didn't know (but should have guessed) is that a ghost desires only one thing: to live again. Personally, I'd like nothing better, but I am constrained by the needs of my story. I can't keep leaving space for this ever-growing army of shadows, these ghosts who—perhaps to avenge themselves for the meagre care I show them—are haunting me.⁶

4. Benjamin Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 19–20.

5. Frommer, *National Cleansing*, 20.

6. Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, trans. Sam Taylor (2009; London: Vintage, 2013), sec. 175.

From the extract it is clear that Binet dedicates his novel to the “ghosts” of “the subaltern” stranded in history. By “subaltern,” I refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s definition of the term in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she asks whether or not the marginalized people, who have been silenced by and confined within the oppressive language system of the elite for centuries, can truly express themselves.⁷ The language and history of the subaltern are made up of fragmented heterogeneous voices, which find no precise outlet in the very vocabulary and power system that put them at the margins of society. Therefore, Spivak’s answer is that the subaltern cannot speak. Binet’s novel is an attempt to resurrect, recreate, and pay tribute to the obscure, as well as to the nameless and faceless people who are ghosts of anonymity: “I tremble with guilt at the thought of all those hundreds, those thousands, whom I have allowed to die in anonymity. But I want to believe that people exist even if we don’t speak of them.”⁸ To uncover the obscurely known is a challenge. To uncover the unknown, however, is an impossible task:

I examine a map of Prague, marking the locations of the families who helped and sheltered the parachutists. Almost all of them paid with their lives—men, women, and children. The Svatoš family, a few feet from the Charles Bridge; the Ogoun family, near the castle; the Novak, Moravec, Zelenka, and Fafek families, all farther east. Each member of each of these families would deserve his or her own book—an account of their involvement with the Resistance until the tragic dénouement of Mauthausen. How many forgotten heroes sleep in history’s great cemetery? Thousands, millions of Fafeks and Moravecs, of Novaks and Zelenkas . . .

The dead are dead, and it makes no difference to them whether I pay homage to their deeds. But for us, the living, it does mean something. Memory is of no use to the remembered, only to those who remember. We build ourselves with memory and console ourselves with memory.⁹

Binet also expresses his frustration as a historical fiction writer who is forced by the genre’s rules and constraints to rearrange the elements of

7. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 37.

8. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 251.

9. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 150.

history and fit them into the mold of one coherent story, while seeking ways to do justice to history's subaltern:

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. And I look up and see, growing all over it—even higher and denser, like a creeping ivy—the unmappable pattern of causality.¹⁰

The “unmappable pattern of causality,” when it comes to the depiction of the nameless and faceless people involved in and affected by Operation Anthropoid, becomes even more unmappable for Binet, who is consciously aware that he is writing a historical novel set in Prague from the point of view of a French writer living in the twenty-first century. To further complicate matters, Binet refers to an interview with the Iranian-born film director Marjane Satrapi, in which she highlights the notion that a writer's own birthplace, as well as place of residence, justifies his/her authority and credibility to write about a certain place:

'I adore Kundera, but the novel of his I love the least is the one set in Paris. Because he's not truly in his element. As if he were wearing a very beautiful jacket that was just a little bit too big or a little bit too small for him [laughs]. But when Milos and Pavel are walking through Prague, I believe it totally.'

This is Marjane Satrapi, in an interview given to *Les Inrockuptibles* magazine to promote the release of her beautiful film, *Persepolis*. I feel a vague sense of anxiety as I read this. Flicking through the magazine in the apartment of a young woman, I confide my anxiety to her. 'Yes, but you've been to Prague,' she reassures me. 'You've lived there, you love that city.' But the same is true for Kundera and Paris . . . Will Marjane Satrapi sense that I didn't grow up in Prague? . . . does that mean she'll think my story is happening in Paris, where I was born, and not in Prague, the city my whole being yearns for? Will there be images of Paris in her mind when I drive the Mercedes to Holešovice, near the Troie Bridge?¹¹

According to Satrapi, Milan Kundera is “not truly in his element”¹² when it comes to his depiction of Paris because he was born and grew

10. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 150.

11. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 179.

12. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 179.

up in Prague, not Paris. If the legitimacy and verisimilitude of a story depend solely upon the writer's place of origin, then it can be said that Binet can never truly be in his element when it comes to his depiction of Prague because he was born and grew up in Paris, not Prague. Binet justifies his stance as a French writer recounting the story of a historical event set in Prague as follows:

Unlike Marjane Satrapi, Milan Kundera, Jan Kubiš, and Jozef Gabčík, I am not a political exile. But that is perhaps why I can talk of where I want to be without always being dragged back to my starting point. I don't owe my homeland anything, and I don't have a score to settle with it. For Paris, I feel neither the heartbreaking nostalgia nor the melancholy disenchantment of the great exiles. That is why I am free to dream of Prague.¹³

Here, Binet refutes Satrapi's theory by admitting that his visions of Prague are products of his dream, which is devoid of a political agenda and devoid of an exile's nostalgic longing for home. He also claims that he conjures up his visual and textual images of Prague from those presented in the media: "Prague in 1942 looks like a black-and-white photo. The passing men wear crumpled hats and dark suits, while the women wear those fitted skirts that make them all look like secretaries. I know this—I have the photos on my desk."¹⁴

Binet's conscious "otherness" to Czech and Slovak cultures and histories sets him "free to dream" of a different place/time and free to imagine, as well as introduce, specters of the obscure and unknown subaltern involved, thereby adding critical dimensions to the rethinking and re(-)membering of the world's history of violence and dissidence.

I propose that Binet's forceful justification of his stance towards national narrative and towards Satrapi's authorial nationality discourse nevertheless begs one particular question: can we be truly free to dream of any place at all? If Binet is indeed free from Paris and from authorial nationality discourse as he claims, why does he need to address the fact that he is a French writer writing about Czechoslovakia at all? Though he counters Satrapi's statement

13. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 179. Jozef Gabčík was another of the conspirators, the Slovak colleague of Kubiš.

14. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 193.

by admitting that his visions of Prague are solely products of his dream, Binet also reaffirms the authority of Satrapi's statement. By confessing that the verisimilitude in his historical fiction, which manifests itself in his imagination of Prague, is acquired at second hand, Binet acknowledges as well as challenges the legitimacy of authorial nationality discourse.

I shall now demonstrate the ways in which Binet's work reflects a moment of dissidence towards the totalitarian authority of not only historical metanarrative/grand narrative, but also national narrative, of which authorial nationality discourse is a crucial part.

TOTALITARIANISM OF GRAND NARRATIVE/METANARRATIVE AND NATIONAL NARRATIVE

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984; originally *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, 1979), where he revises the notion of knowledge and proposes the tenets of the postmodern aesthetic and intellectual movement, Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives."¹⁵ According to Lyotard, "postmodern" is a condition, a temporary movement inherent within the first stage of the modernist tradition: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant."¹⁶ The postmodern condition is, then, a condition forged by dissidence, honed by an urge to challenge the norms of the Enlightenment and break free from the human tendency to submit the complexity of history and society to a fixed totalitarian pattern which makes up the myth of a transcendental metanarrative/grand narrative. Lyotard maintains that the narrative structure of a story, the order and manner in which a story is presented to the reader, tends to reflect and uphold the authority of the "large-scale theories and philosophies of the world which . . . should be viewed with deep scepticism."¹⁷ It is this grand narrative of the Enlightenment which

15. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

16. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 79.

17. du Toit, "Grand Narrative, Metanarrative," 86.

Donald E. Pease, in his "National Narratives, Postnational Narration," perceives as a counterpart to the national narrative: "If what Jean-François Lyotard has called the postmodern condition entailed the dismantling of the Enlightenment's grand narratives, the nation, as the surface on which those master narratives were inscribed, also names the space in which that condition has become pervasive."¹⁸ In his criticism of Satrapi's statement, we can see that Binet exposes the "crisis of narratives,"¹⁹ which is deeply ingrained in the national narrative and authorial nationality discourse.

The fact that Binet was born in France, for example, does not automatically mean that he can only write about matters which lie within the bounds of the French national narrative. National narrative does not possess the power to delimit and constrain an individual with multiple subject positions. Another term which Lyotard emphasizes in his writing is the "crisis of narratives."²⁰ Fredric Jameson explicates and expands the definition of this term to include what he refers to as the "crisis of representation"²¹ in his foreword to Lyotard's seminal book. For Jameson, the crisis of representation stems from one's tendency to uphold the supremacy of universal truth without questioning and one's failure to see how belief in such "essentially realistic epistemology"²² leads to the notion that representation is a faithful reproduction of truth, which lies in its entire essence outside subjectivity.

In his endeavor to "re-present," or recount, the story of Operation Anthropoid in *HHhH*, Laurent Binet uncovers the crisis which ensues as he strives to find ways to "represent" or capture the truth or essence of such a historical event, as well as to assess its impact on the present. One of the most pressing crises is the fact that the story of Operation Anthropoid, as well as of its impact on human lives through time,

18. Donald E. Pease, "National Narratives, Postnational Narration," *Modern Fiction Studies* 43, no. 1 (1997): 1.

19. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii.

20. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii.

21. Fredric Jameson, foreword to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, by Jean-François Lyotard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), viii.

22. Jameson, foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, viii.

has no closure. Try as one may, one cannot bring closure to the so-called essence of nationhood by rendering it whole(some) and therefore definitely “representable.” Likewise, try as one may, one cannot bring closure to the (hi)story by rendering the (hi)story whole(some) and therefore definitely “representable.”

Apart from the inevitable “open-endedness” of (hi)story, Binet’s dismay is also caused by problems inherent within the historical fiction genre. Having witnessed how other writers of historical fiction struggle with their writing, Binet describes his preparatory work as a writer of historical fiction:

I also 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. I am struck all the same by the fact that, in every case, fiction wins out over history. It’s logical, I suppose, but I have trouble getting my head around it.

To better understand Binet’s plight, it might be useful to evoke Harry E. Shaw’s definitions of historical fiction in *The Forms of Historical Fiction* as a starting point:

The historical novel raises in an acute form a question common to all mimetic works of art—the relationship of the individual to the general, of particulars to universals. Such problems tend to remain submerged in most literary works. Several things bring them to the surface in the historical novel. Because historical novelists depict ages significantly different from their own and may aspire to represent the workings of historical process itself, they are faced with the task of creating characters that represent social groups and historical trends. But creating such characters involves certain inherent difficulties. This is a major reason for the problem with historical novels.²³

Binet’s writing testifies to the crises of narratives and representation, which are inherent within the genre of historical fiction. *HHhH*’s title might, at first glance, seem to suggest that the novel’s main focus is on the life story of Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi prototype *par excellence*: “(‘HHhH,’ they say in the SS: *Himmlers Hirn heisst*

23. Harry E. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 30.

Heydrich—Himmler’s brain is called Heydrich).²⁴ Instead, Binet intentionally puts the characters of Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, the two parachutists assigned to assassinate Heydrich, on center stage: “Whenever I talk about the book I’m writing, I say, ‘My book on Heydrich.’ But Heydrich is not supposed to be the main character.”²⁵ Such a conscious choice aggravates the problem as it is much easier to write a book about Heydrich, the cold-hearted villain whose life and death have been extensively documented. The novel, instead, begins with a scene in which readers are introduced to Jozef Gabčík, the Slovak parachutist whose Sten gun jammed at the moment of his close encounter with Heydrich:

Gabčík—that’s his name—really did exist. 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 Vyšehradská and Trojická. The number 18 tram (or the number 22) has stopped in front of the Botanical Gardens. We are, most important, in 1942.²⁶

Binet reveals in his novel that to imagine what it was like to be Gabčík, the less-known hero of the two parachutists, is not an easy feat. His affirmation that the character “really did exist,” along with his insertion of the images of Prague in the present day into his depiction of Gabčík’s Prague in 1942, puts the readers *in medias res* of the Operation Anthropoid story, as well as of historical fiction in the making. One of the significant effects of Binet’s “re-presenting” the past, which means here both recounting the past and situating the past in the present, is that the reader is not only made consciously aware of the historical fiction genre’s devices and limitations, but also invited to question their own concepts and conceptualization of history:

The problems historical novels have with history and we have with historical novels are potentially instructive. They can help to reveal limits in the esthetic forms we most prize—knowledge that matters for those who employ imaginative forms to make sense of the world. A clearer understanding of

24. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 108.

25. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 88.

26. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 1.

the workings of historical fiction can also clarify certain aspects of the nature of history itself, and of our situations as historical beings.²⁷

The deconstruction tendency in historical fiction culminates in Binet's coinage of the term "infranovel": "I think I'm beginning to understand. What I'm writing is an *infranovel*."²⁸ Though Binet does not provide the reader with a clear definition of what he means by that specific term, Binet leaves clues and hints from which the concept can be inferred. The Latin prefix "infra" means "below." From the novel's extracts which I have analyzed in this article, Binet offers the reader many subnarratives which lie beneath or below the surface both of his book and of historical fiction as a genre. Note that the bottom-to-top metaphor, which the prefix "infra" connotes, subverts the omniscient gaze from top to bottom that is often imposed on an object that is being analyzed. A historical infranovel calls into question the concept of language as a neutral medium in historiography. Also, like Hayden White in *Metahistory*, it blurs the boundaries between history and fiction:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying," or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations.²⁹

By outlining and acknowledging the processes and limitations of historical fiction writing, Binet exposes how historical fiction writers, historical film producers and even historians treat history as a narrative prose discourse that classifies and regulates past events in order to establish and re(-)present them as one coherent grand narrative.

By exposing the limitations of authorial nationality discourse, or the privileging of a writer's nationality over his rights to history and the interpretation of history, Laurent Binet challenges the totalitarianism

27. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction*, 9.

28. Binet, *HHhH*, sec. 205. Italics in the original.

29. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 6–7.

of a linear and unified metanarrative, which has oversimplified the complexity of our past and dictated our perception of history as one unquestionable historical truth. For Binet, history, or the interpretation of history, is intertwined with the present and with the complex subjectivities of the individual who perceives it from a particular context of time. Not only that, as we can see from my analysis of Laurent Binet's *HHhH*, history and the re-interpretation of history are a domain belonging to everyone, regardless of their nationality. The diversity of experiences brought about by the diversity of an individual's identities and subject positions, particularly (trans-)national ones, serves only to enrich the on-going historical narrative which we all take part in writing and rewriting.

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