

Oscillations in a Developing Discourse

History, Truth and Clichés Seven Decades after the Holocaust in Laurent

Binet's HHhH and Jáchym Topol's The Devil's Workshop

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Introduction

Two recently published novels, Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2010) and Jáchym Topol's *The Devil's Workshop*, (2009) deal with the aftermath of the Holocaust in Western culture. Today, the awareness of the importance of this event is deeply rooted in the collective memory. As a result, it has become ubiquitous in popular culture. Yet, the familiarity with the facts of the six million victims, the images of Auschwitz and the annual Remembrance Day have not necessarily enhanced the understanding of what has happened. Rather, a general tendency of unresponsiveness in regard to the Holocaust can be spotted. The current thesis will analyse how *HHhH* and *The Devil's Workshop* deal with the numbness and indifference to the Shoah and how these novels try to break with the conventions by concomitantly drawing on them and subverting them. In this way, they reflect the gradually revised way of thinking about the Holocaust as well as its changed position within postmodern culture.

The Holocaust, Postmodernism and Literature

The Holocaust is widely perceived as a radical break with the past. Raul Hilberg, arguably the most influential Holocaust historian of the first decades after the Holocaust, has even claimed that the destruction of the European Jews could only have happened after millennia of development of Western culture,¹ a view supported in Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's well-known *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. While not everyone subscribes unreservedly to the singularity attributed to the event,² the murder of almost six million people in a planned fashion marked a new era in the thinking about humanity. Notwithstanding the extremely violent character of the twentieth century, with events like the genocide in Rwanda and the Balkan Wars freshly ingrained in the collective memory, the Holocaust can be seen as the final nail in the coffin of the belief in many of the ideals central to the Enlightenment.³ In this sense, it has indeed proved to be "a watershed event in human history," as Christopher Browning has argued.⁴ The Holocaust still exerts its influence today. The current thesis will examine the ways in which two novels, Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2009, first published in France) and Jáchym Topol's *The Devil's Workshop* (2010, first published in The Czech Republic), address this ever evolving influence.

The industrial method of the murders is one of the reasons the Holocaust can be attributed a singular status.⁵ Before the twentieth century, killings of such an enormous scope were practically unimaginable. This is one of the aspects linking the Holocaust specifically to Western culture, for it was only with the Industrial Revolution that the means to do so became available. The belief in immanent progress achieved through technical innovation and the view of Western culture as superior to other was undermined because one its characteristics brought forth crimes of ineffable

¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (London: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 251.

² Apart from the so called *Historikerstreit* in the late 1980s, see, for two recent examples: Stéphane Courts (ed.), *The Black Book of Communism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage Books, 2011).

³ Mario Biagioli, "Science, Modernity, and the 'Final Solution,'" in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 185. Naturally, not everyone is sold to this vision. See, for example, Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution: 1819-1924* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996).

⁴ Christopher Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 32.

⁵ Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (New York: Vintage International, 2002), 83.

size. In the years immediately following the War, the first reaction consisted mainly of the preserving of “self-serving local illusions”⁶ resulting in the downplaying of a country’s own role in the execution of the “Final Solution,” and of practical nature, for example the founding of the State of Israel⁷ and the denazification of Germany.⁸ With the atrocities of the past looming over the heads of every single European, it was easier to forget than to remember. Except for a few witness accounts, the survivors and their experiences received scant attention until well into the nineteen-sixties.

Benchmark events such as the Nuremberg Trails, the Eichmann trail in Jerusalem and the publication of personal accounts of, for example, Anne Frank, contributed their fair share to the slowly growing consciousness about the Holocaust. Yet the attention given to the Holocaust and the survivors was relatively small compared to the size of the crimes and the number of the victims and the perpetrators. When the debate about the Holocaust testimonies finally became a talking point after years of textual silence,⁹ the discussion focussed mainly on how to represent the event.¹⁰ Although the facts were largely agreed upon, knowledge of these facts does not automatically facilitate the comprehension of what happened. On the contrary, the sheer amount of knowledge about the camps, killing fields, victims, perpetrators and bystanders was, and still is, downright baffling. The imperative to speak about their experiences was felt by many survivors, but now they finally had an audience, how was one supposed to tell of the horrors? Obviously, this problem of representation has to do with the incomprehensible character of the experiences, as far removed from any “normal” experience as anything. Yet the Holocaust also caused a break between language and reference, making a correct representation of what happened even more problematic.¹¹ As George Semprun put it: words have a different meaning for those “who have been there.”¹² Witness accounts of Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo, Elie

⁶ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London, Random House, 2007), 812.

⁷ As Paul Johnson put it: “The First World War made the Zionist state possible. The Second World War made it essential.” *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 517.

⁸ Judt, 52.

⁹ Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2010), 47.

¹⁰ See, for example: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹¹ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17.

¹² *Ibid*, 18.

Wiesel and the like became widely read and discussed. In its slipstream, an enormous amount of novels subjected to the Holocaust has been published.

It is important to be familiar with the concept of postmodernism if one is to come to a full understanding of the way in which literature developed in reaction to the Holocaust. In short, literary postmodernism can be defined as the consciousness of the break between language and referent (“reality”). One of the results of this consciousness is self-reflexivity in regard to its own artificiality, or the literariness of a text. Unreliable narrators, the blurring of the lines between genres and between reality and fiction as well as the parodying of other texts all attest to this artificiality and the impossibility to know the truth and to use language to make oneself understood. In this way, postmodernism deals with the previously mentioned crisis of language instigated by the Holocaust. This does not mean literature has been able to provide any definitive answers or solutions. Quite the contrary. In acknowledging its own shortcomings it finds its strength. It is exactly the awareness of the shortcomings of language that is highlighted in postmodern literature. The influence of postmodern thought on contemporary literature can hardly be overestimated. The idea has been developed that historical documentation rather seems to “obscure the truth” of the past instead of making it more visible, as Dorothee Wiese has written in her dissertation.¹³ In the 21st century, this claim is anything but revolutionary, to say the least. In a certain way, we are all postmodernists, as Susan Rubin Suleiman has argued: the idea that fiction can tell the truth “more effectively or profoundly than straightforward factual narrative (...) is not at all startling.”¹⁴

In 1985, Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” to describe “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.”¹⁵ The concept of historiographic metafiction incorporates several characteristics of postmodern literature, yet in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon stressed the importance of history and the role of parody and pastiche in regard to the process of coming to terms with the past. She sees postmodern literature as fundamentally

¹³ Dorothee Wiese, *The Powers of the False: Reading, Writing, Thinking beyond Truth and Fiction* (Phd. Diss., Utrecht University, 2011), 126.

¹⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 138.

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. (London: Routledge, 1988), 5.

contradictory because it parodies the old conventions and values, while at the same time it enshrines them. It is “resolutely historical, and inescapably political”¹⁶ because it challenges the cultural conventions of both the past and the present.¹⁷ Postmodern literature is not unique in this self-reflexivity, as Hutcheon does not fail to notice. However, what makes this literary movement stand out from its predecessors is the irony with which it recognises its own contradictions.¹⁸ An example of this, is that postmodern literature is greatly indebted to modernism, yet attempts to overthrow it at the same time: parody and homage go hand in hand. The role of irony and parody is essential in this process, for both enable a critical distancing of the past *and* the present as a tenet of their demystification.¹⁹ Similarly, what happens in postmodern novels according to Amy J. Elias is “the installation of irony and a search for an escape from irony into a genuine yet mature universe of belief.”²⁰ Elias sees, in accordance with Hutcheon, a similar connection between the historical novel and postmodern fiction. However, the distinction made by Elias between postmodern literature and earlier literature movements is less rigid and more evolutionary: Elias does not identify a clear break with the past, but sees the current stage as the result of a development as clearly stemming from modernism.²¹

Comparable to the influence of postmodern thought in the literary debate is the crisis in the field of history that was caused directly by the Shoah. The size as well as the implications of the event have been compared by Jean-François Lyotard to an earthquake which has destroyed “not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes.”²² The old methods of history and the old ways to look at the past bore upon the old situation before the War. The ethics of after are different, for the Holocaust has caused the “disruption of linear history and the destruction of the old notion of history as outside of language, time, and human agency.”²³ Under the influence of Hayden White, the concept of “narrativity” has become incredibly important to the field of history since the mid-1970s. The

¹⁶ Ibid, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 23.

¹⁸ Ibid, x.

¹⁹ Ibid, 41.

²⁰ Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 46.

²¹ Ibid, 89.

²² Carlo Ginzburg, “Just One Witness,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 96.

²³ Eaglestone, 9.

fundamental idea is that “historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways.”²⁴ History, then, is “a narrative discourse, the content of which is as imagined/invented as found.”²⁵ Traditional historiography would try to force the Holocaust into a story. Opposing, White argues that this is impossible because its scope and complexity defy any effort to put it into a story. This does not automatically install a dangerous form of relativism, nor does it make the discipline vulnerable to propaganda. Postmodern historians do not deny the existence of the past and its facts; they rather emphasise the impossibility of making sense of its events without any interpretation.²⁶ According to White, the awareness of the problematic and biased aspects of any form of history helps the historian to avoid these pitfalls.²⁷

Needless to say, a lot has changed since the ascent of postmodernism. In the last decades, the Holocaust has not so much taken a more prominent role in Western culture, as that is has become part of a wider variety of novels and films. Instead of suppressing the past, it has become widely discussed and the subject of many bestselling novels, such as Bernard Schlink’s *The Reader* (1997), Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* (2006) and W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001). While the Holocaust’s role and function in these novel are open to discussion, an adverse side effect of the increased attention is that it has led to a certain wariness concerning the Holocaust, no matter how horrific in character. In combination with the increased habituation to violence rendered by the modern mass media rife with (live) war content, this has fuelled the prior existing ineptitude to come to a better, if always incomplete, understanding of the event. Consequently, a few cliché images have become symbols of the Holocaust. The gateway of Auschwitz, the masses of dead bodies and the starved inmates behind the barbed wire are images everyone is more or less familiar with. As recently put forward, this current framework disregards the true character of the Holocaust, which was far less industrial and well organised in character than the stereotype of German *Effizienz* commonly taken for granted acknowledges. Well over ninety-percent of all the victims had already been killed by the time the gas chambers

²⁴ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artefact,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 1539.

²⁵ Keith Jenkins, *On ‘What is History?’ From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 134.

²⁶ Hutcheon, 20; Eaglestone, 139.

²⁷ White, 1552.

at Birkenau began their deadly work. Auschwitz is ‘only’ “the coda to the death fugue,” as Snyder has argued.²⁸

Recent debates in relation to history and literature are still predominantly concerned with the question of representation,²⁹ which is still as relevant as it is unresolvable. However, in the current academic field the tendency to analyse the performativity of a text in favour of the way it represents the events is gaining vogue. The pivotal question is no longer “how does this text represent the past?” but rather “what does this text do in the here and now?”³⁰ In line with this approach, the performativity of *HHhH* and *The Devil’s Workshop* will be central to their analysis and to their relevance within the current debate. Both novels grapple with the cliché image of the Holocaust arising out of its representation in literature and the media. This approach hinges on the changes taken place in the presently overgrown Holocaust *discours*. By using the familiar images of the Holocaust and by subverting the knowledge taken for granted, *HHhH* and *The Devil’s Workshop* refuse to play to the familiar narrative often proffered by other novels directly or indirectly concerned with the Holocaust. Fully bearing in mind the gravity of the event itself as well as the vastness of the debate concerned with it, conclusions will be drawn on the basis of the way these novels relate to the current debate and the position of the Holocaust in contemporary society.

²⁸ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London; Vintage, 2011), 383.

²⁹ Spargo, C.R. and Ehrenreich, R.M. (eds.), *After Representation? The Holocaust, Literature, and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2009), Introduction.

³⁰ Rigney, Ann, “All This Happened, More or Less: What A Novelist Made of the Bombing of Dresden,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 20.

Truth, Fiction and History in *HHhH*

The publication of Lauren Binet's *HHhH*, an acronym for "Himmler's Hirn heisst Heydrich," (2009) has drawn a lot of attention in the popular mass media, but remarkably the novel has been less well-covered in academic literature, especially outside of France. It has not been read as belonging to the genre of "Holocaust fiction." Its focus lays primarily elsewhere and its objectives are not directly connected to it. Yet the event does play an inescapably large role in comprehending the novel and the function tacitly ascribed to it. The novel is in many ways emblematic of a lot of contemporary fiction that attempts to bridge the gap existing between postmodern art which undercuts any fixed meaning and authority and the need for an authoritative voice. Weary of postmodernism's irony, its disbelief in sincerity and blasé attitude, the narrator in *HHhH* tries to honour the forgotten and remembered members of the resistance by attempting to write the "real" story of the assassination of Nazi top shot Heydrich. The novel is made up of 257 short chapters varying in style, switching between three different types of storyline. The first type narrates the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the highest official in Czechoslovakia, by two young men who, after fleeing from the occupied country, joined the resistance in London and were parachuted into Prague. The second type comments critically on the style of the first one. The narrator gives the reader an insight into the difficulties he faces in finding the right words and style for the first type of chapters when he immerses himself in the story of the assassination. If the narrator uses a rhetorical trick or invents a dialogue or only a minor detail, this is immediately criticised in the following chapter. The third type of chapters tells the historical background of the rise of the Third Reich and the development of the "Final Solution."

The first chapter starts with a description of a young man called Gabčík, who, the narrator insists, is not a fictitious character but really did exist. After describing Gabčík, the rhetorical question is asked whether inventing a character is not the most "vulgar" thing a novelist can do.³¹ But the common way of writing an historical novel will not do. The text will contain a minimal amount of fiction, yet the hope is that "however bright and blinding the veneer of fiction that covers this fabulous story, you

³¹ Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, tr. Sam Taylor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 3.

will still be able to see the historical reality that lies behind.”³² Verifiable facts are what the narrator desires. Throughout the novel, the reader is reminded time after time of the artificiality of the first storyline just written down by the narrator of the second one. Hence the novel gives an account of the actual murder and a macro view of the war.

The division of the novel between these storylines creates a paradox. Formally, the approach is typically postmodern. Metafiction and the concern with history have been mentioned by Linda Hutcheon as the two characteristics essential to postmodern literature. However, what Binet is after is not “typically” postmodern at all, as he implicitly tries to circumvent the postmodern convention that every form of history is a narrative³³ by aiming at telling the “real” story. The only possible objective to this seems to be of practical nature. The inability to be sure about the colour Heydrich’s car had troubles the narrator greatly. The second storyline, concerned with the flaws of the first, is merely focused on the troubles the narrator has with uncovering the facts of the assassination and the events leading up to it. Thus ‘historical’ means discovering all the facts relating to a certain event and being able to write them down objectively. The narrator seems to see the facts as the true nature of the event. The uncovering of these is the sole objective of history. Because the most important aim of the novel is to tell the *real* story, even a car that is described as being black instead of green is a problem. This approach comes forth from a view of history that goes straight against the grain of both the postmodern view of history and literature. Strikingly, this view is diametrically opposed to the postmodern belief that a work of fiction does not necessarily need to be factually accurate if it is to offer a better understanding of history. To put it more bluntly: postmodern fiction deconstructs the belief in facts “by showing that historical documentation obscures the truth.”³⁴ Binet seems to claim the opposite, as his approach stems from the idea that facts make up the true history and fiction is to literature what God is to the gaps of knowledge science has not been able to fill yet. This positivist opinion is founded on the idea of “truth as correspondence,” that is, on the idea that truth is basically verifiable through observation.³⁵ This notion of truth and history is essentially a

³² Ibid, 4

³³ Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artefact,” 1536-1553.

³⁴ Dorothee Wiese, 126.

³⁵ Eaglestone, 142.

conservative one, for it goes back to the old notion of history that has become outmoded under the influence of Hayden White. White embraces the view that history is more than facts, and that facts itself are inherently subject to interpretation. Paradoxically the text thus appears to be a postmodern novel that purports a conservative message through a postmodern text.

The paradox is that the story at large emphasises the fictional character of any historical novel, even though the second storyline is as constructed as any story (for example the first storyline). By stressing the importance of truthfulness and sincerity in writing an account of historical events, the narrator confronts the reader with a flagrant inconsistency. In its ambition to amalgamate literature with history, the novel struggles with the limits of the representation of historical events. The metafictional layer serves its typical purpose, the foregrounding of its own artificiality. Yet the combination of form and content contradicts this goal. By aspiring to give the reader the “real” story, the impossibility of such a mission becomes clear. What really happened, how it really was, will never be told as more than a story. The choice of writing a novel and not a purely historical book is that the extra layers serve to delay the climax of the actual murder of Heydrich. This is primarily a way to captivate the reader, yet it also reveals a lot about the role of history in the novel and in contemporary fiction. Precisely the contradiction between the novel’s goal and its postmodern form provokes the question of how tenable a text with a similar obvious metafictional character can be. Thus, it becomes clear that the novel has a strong urge for sincerity and truth. Yet, at the same time, by failing to mention the artificiality of the second storyline, the impossibility of ever realising this urge is revealed.

In addition to this, the reason for relying on verifiable facts as much as possible is important. But more information does not necessarily lead to more knowledge, nor to a better understanding of a certain event, as Hayden White has argued. Rather, the infinite amount of information, images and opinions about certain “Holocaustal events” only makes it less understandable. The facts are just too “unbelievable” and the reality “unspeakable.”³⁶ In *HHhH*, as much information about one of the best documented events as possible is gathered and deliberately made into the focus of his debut novel. Ultimately, however, what the novel tries to accomplish is more than giving the reader as many facts about the assassination as possible. The

³⁶ Hayden White, “Figural Realism in Witness Literature,” *Parralax 10* (2004): 114.

crucial role of the novel is not for the description of the killing of a Nazi commander, nor for the metafictional second layer. One should turn to the third layer to see the deeper meaning of the novel. Heydrich was one of the key figures in the designing of the 'Final Solution.' Throughout the novel, stress is explicitly laid on the importance of killing him in the halting of Hitler's plans. By interweaving the micro-level of the personal activities of both the historical persons and the twenty-first century narrator with the macro-level descriptions of the Holocaust, the importance of Heydrich's death is made clear. Precisely because these passages are written in simple, seemingly objective language, the normalization of the facts of the Holocaust is shown. The historical chapters describing these developments consist of dramatic statements such as the following:

*A freight train screeches to a halt. At the end of the tracks is a gate surmounted by a tower, with a brownstone wing on either side. Above, you hear the cawing of crows. The gate opens. You are now entering Auschwitz.*³⁷

This short chapter does exactly what many witnesses such as Primo Levi and George Semprun objected to: identify with the victims of the Holocaust.³⁸ One of the most urgent questions that comes to mind to probably anyone visiting one of the concentration camps is what it would have been like to be one of the internees. This question, as natural as it is, cannot be answered. Similarly, identification should not take place because it cannot happen in any meaningful way, as Robert Eaglestone argued: "Through the process of identification, this incomprehensible event seems to become comprehensible and so –to import a word from a parallel debate in historiography –normalized, part of experience."³⁹ The arrival at Auschwitz is described in *HHhH* in simple language, as if part of a film script. The reader's position is obvious: what one sees is the well-known picture of the Birkenau gateway, one of the most infamous and daunting symbols of the Holocaust.⁴⁰ The deliberate appeal made to this iconic image thus triggers identification of the reader with the

³⁷ Binet, 198.

³⁸ Eaglestone, 28.

³⁹ Ibid, 22.

⁴⁰ Judith Keilbach, 'Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust,' *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 73.

victim along cliché lines. Even more problematic, the “witnessing through the imagination,”⁴¹ is established in a dramatic, but completely non-committal way.

The emphasis laid on Heydrich’s organizational talent, the abominating depersonalization of the Holocaust he personally organised, and the importance of the task of historiography are all compliant to the plot about the assassination. By taking the notorious image of the gate, this one chapter becomes a *mise en abyme* for the entire novel. History, no matter how complicated and incomprehensible, is forced to march to the beat of the plot which goal, ironically, is to do justice to history.

However, the final chapters of the novel seem to undermine this reading at least partially. Upon finalizing the story, the narrator is sent new information about the consequences of the assassination. In Ravensbrück, by way of an experiment, the same injuries that caused the death of Heydrich were inflicted on 74 women. The narrator’s conclusion is that he will never be able to finish the story. There is just too much to it to ever understand. The attempt at giving an exhaustive account is bound to founder. In the next and last chapter, he imagines himself standing on a boat sailing on the Baltic Sea, witnessing the first encounter between Gabčík and Kubiš, the two unknown men who will be heroes in their country during the same occupation they are fleeing from. Yes, Binet seems to say, this novel is written to honour these men, who have *really* existed. Nonetheless, the final word is not for the facts, but for fiction. The lives of Gabčík and Kubiš need imagination if they are to live for the reader.

Why did *HHhH* become a novel and not a history book? Clearly this specific use of several storylines adds a lot to the many books that have already been written on the subject. The novel’s aim is strictly tied to empiricist methodologies, and the motives of the characters are as clear and unambiguous as in any thriller. The Nazis are inborn villains who try to realise their sickening worldview by applying their inborn efficiency in optima forma. The resistance fighters are the courageous, charming young men fighting for the fate of humanity. Simplifying history and linking this together with the plain action story of the assassination of Heydrich means trying to recreate exactly that which is destroyed by postmodernism: the possibility of making sense of history from a supra-historical position.⁴² The longing

⁴¹ Kremer, L.S., *Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish American Holocaust Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

⁴² Elias, 160.

required when subscribing to a similar “easy” explanation of coupling history and action together does not necessarily result in the lumping together two essentially incongruous interpretations of the same event. Indeed, doing so could be dismissed as an easy way of giving a greater sense of urgency to the plot of the assassination, yet it should be seen as the backwash of the uncertainty prevailing in postmodern literature in regard to the ability to make sense out of history.

By using as much facts as possible and by carefully adding his own imagination to the narrative, Binet tries to establish a connection between fiction and the “real” world. By repeating again and again the difficulty of finding out how things really went and by painstakingly recording the ethical dilemmas he has to face throughout the process of writing the book, the relevance for the here and now is made evident. Ultimately, the goal is impossible to reach. Even with all the facts at hand, imagination is still a prerequisite. What distinguishes *HHhH* from other postmodern texts is the clear imperative it feels to know *the* (i.e. the only existing version of the) past. *HHhH* brings home the message that the desire to know history has not disappeared. But the self-consciousness in regard to the ineptitude of fiction and history cannot be unlearned, so it is impossible to materialise this desire. Because of this contradiction, the same yearning for truth is evoked by reading the novel, too. Hence the effect of metafiction as well as its problematic aspects are addressed in equal measure.

Grotesque Detachment in *The Devil's Workshop*

If metafiction and the desire for sincerity and truth make up the most striking characteristics of *HHhH*, it is the ironic and calm voice of the narrator that is most obvious in Jáchym Topol's *The Devil's Workshop* (2009). The novel probes the accepted boundaries with regard to the past and the present and shows the problematic elements of the Holocaust's legacy as the story shifts from light and humorous to ever more sinister shades of black. Topol plays with the tension between fact and fiction, the past and the present, and collective history and one's personal past.

The nameless narrator, not too bright, with hardly any visible empathy and personal initiative, is born and raised in Terezín, a former garrison city and, during the Second World War, transition camp on the way from the west to the east. His blasé narration, devoid of any emotions, distances the reader from the horrors he encounters. He tells the story in an incongruous way, unsettling the narrative with incomplete sentences while jumping from one situation to the other. His father, a major in the Czech army, died when he suffered a heart attack and fell off the wall of Terezín during a quarrel he had with him. The narrator is consequently imprisoned for several years. His mother, a Jewish inhabitant of Terezín, became pregnant during the War and hanged herself. Thus a Jew himself, the narrator does not care much for history unless he is able to use it to fulfil his most basic needs: staying out of prison, having sex or a place to sleep. He does not even seem to be conscious of the effect of history on him, yet he also takes part in it himself. During his detainment, he was the helping hand of the hangman. He led the sentenced "traitors of the people"⁴³ to the electric chair and helped to clean up afterwards. This role reminds one of the kapo's in the death camps: Jewish squadrons who led the unknowing victims to the gas chambers and prepared them afterwards for the next group. After the narrator's return to Terezín, someone defends his actions: "He was a con, it was his job, what was he supposed to do? You'd have done the same."⁴⁴ The protagonist is an indirect victim of the war, but, as we are led to believe, he would have probably stood on the other side if he had been a young German at the time of Nazism. He has grown accustomed to the horrifying history of the town during his youth, which he spent in the old tunnels,

⁴³ Jáchym Topol, *The Devil's Workshop*, tr. Alex Zucker (London: Portobello Books, 2013), 12.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 69.

hiding places and bunkers, searching for old objects such as gasmasks, clothes, fragments of letters, and even fingernails left behind, all so the inhabitants can start a museum and preserve the town in its entirety. Unfortunately, this idea quickly gets out of hand. The young backpackers staying in town get drunk and high on drugs –the grass growing just outside of the protection walls turns out to give a very uplifting mood –during the parties they throw at night. Then the bulldozers come anyway and destroy the town completely. The narrator manages to escape to Khatyn, a former village near Minsk, Belarus. It is at the heart of what Timothy Snyder dubbed the “Blood Lands”: the area of Europe where between 1930 and 1950 a number of people have been murdered that dwarfs the figure of victims killed during these two decades in Western Europe.⁴⁵ The Belarusians think it is about time they get their fair share of the “Holocaust industry”:

*That’s the division of labour in the globalized world of today, dammit. Thailand: sex. Italy: paintings and seaside. Holland: clogs and cheese. Right? And Belarus? Horror trip, right?*⁴⁶

This horror trip will consist of the usual exhibition of the barracks and execution grounds, but also of something unimaginably more horrific. In line with the “eastern tradition,”⁴⁷ the deceased survivors and perpetrators of the genocide are embalmed, turned into stuffed puppets and programmed to repeat the witness accounts of the war recorded just before their death. The theme park will never be opened, as it is set on fire and the initiator of the project violently dies.

Two interconnected moments in this plot should be foregrounded in relation to the message the novel tries to convey. Both are connected because they seem to mirror *The Instant of My Death* from Maurice Blanchot. The first moment is the mother’s near death as a young girl. Days before the liberation she is sentenced to death. But instead of being executed, she is thrown in a mass grave because the Russians are closing in on Terezín. This moment distantly echoes Blanchot’s description of how he, as a young man, escaped execution in the last days of the

⁴⁵ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Random House, 2011), viii.

⁴⁶ Topol, 115-116.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 129.

German occupation of France when he was captured by soldiers serving in the army of the defected Russian general Vlassov. Like the young girl in *The Devil's Workshop*, he is saved because of the quickly advancing Allied forces. After his near-death, he experiences the feeling of being “a step beyond” death. It is as if he really did die in front of the execution peloton, yet is (undeservedly) still living in borrowed time. Time is not measurable anymore, now he has died without dying. His reaction is one of bliss, the absence of fear overwhelms him. The young girl in Terezín reacts differently. After the war, she does not want to go out anymore, preferring to stay inside a dark room with just enough room to breathe. She does not want her son to grow, but to stay as small as a thimble.⁴⁸ The young man in *The Instant of My Death* has outlived life because of the trauma of the War; the boy in *The Devil's Workshop* is not allowed to start living at all. The trauma of the War has stopped life for the “first generation,” but for the second generation, life will not even start because of what has happened.

The second mirroring point is the embalming and modifying of the witnesses into robots. In his accompanying analysis of Blanchot's text, “Demeure,” Jacques Derrida speaks of the importance of the instant of a testimony, which makes its singularity possible. No single testimony, even if the same experience is recounted over and over, is the same. It is this exclusivity that makes up the uniqueness of the witness and the experience that when “he testifies the martyr does not tell a story, he offers himself.”⁴⁹ This is literally what the witnesses have done in *The Devil's Workshop*. Some of the witnesses of the atrocities near Minsk have been euthanised and turned into stuffed puppets so that, even after their death, they can still attest to what they experienced. However, because of this sacrifice, their testimonies have lost the singularity that made them unique: the instant is lost and the testimony has become banal. These two pivotal passages in *The Devil's Workshop* show how the novel lingers on and struggles with the legacy of the postmodernism.

When the summons from the government to pay taxes and to restore order are ignored, the narrator wryly remarks that “accounting wasn't our organization's strong point,”⁵⁰ hereby entirely disregarding the ethical aspect of their organization. By using

⁴⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Demeure,” in Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant Of My Death/Demeure*, tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 38.

⁵⁰ Topol, 61.

irony throughout the story as the horrible past of Terezín looms over the lives of its inhabitants, the reader is challenged by the lack of empathy, historical consciousness and respect of the narrator. An example of this is the limitless exploitation of the town's past. On old town square, the “Amusement Tent” is placed, and, as mentioned earlier, the grass growing just outside of Terezín's walls proves to be very good for flavouring the ghetto pizza's and as a drug for filling joints smoked by the backpackers. The ironical, detached view of the world around the narrator detaches the reader from this world, too. No matter how far his biography differs from that of the average European, the narrator could be compared to them in some aspects. Due to his exposure to the town's decay, and the horrors of history from his childhood on, he is numbed by the history surrounding him. One can sense a similar numbness felt by many in relation to the Second World War in general and the Holocaust in particular. He is thus no ordinary witness; he is witness to the destructive past and to what it leaves behind. The extent to which the protagonist has grown accustomed to the horrific past of his home town and his dysfunctional family is juxtaposed with the acquaintance of the visiting tourists with the event of the Holocaust. Their visit is not even an attempt at transgressing this numbness; it is merely amusement, like watching a horror film. As the story progresses, the narrator has increasingly horrible experiences. The execution chamber in Terezín is nothing compared to the mass graves near Minsk or to the embalmed victims talking to him in the old firing cabin and the nights he is trapped during a snow storm on a hill made up entirely out of dead bodies. The narrator's experiences turn increasingly dreadful as the unrelenting past becomes inescapable. Terezín was just a percussive yet highly profitable backdrop in comparison to what he experiences in Khatyn.

As the level of acceptance of the narrator is stretched to a maximum, so is the reader's. The character of the narrator thus asks the reader on different levels the question of how far a novel can go before the reader feels anything, and thus, to what extent the reader is habituated to the crimes. The narrator's naïve voice is only a lure, a trap: the indifferent attitude cannot be kept up when the witnesses speak. Art balancing on the tightrope of this question is vulnerable for the accusation of inuring the public, as Susan Sontag argued in the essay “Fascinating Fascism.”⁵¹ However,

⁵¹ Susan Sontag, ‘Fascinating Fascism,’ in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 101.

this claim is only invalid if there is nothing more to the text but a desire for spectacle and a lack of historical awareness. This is most certainly not the case for Topol's novel. It is literary texts that are aware of what Suleiman called their own "performance" in regard to the problems of writing about trauma.⁵² The horrible circumstances in Belarus, a place where one is not quite able to "eat off the floor" like in Dachau,⁵³ and the unimaginably sinister act of stuffing the deceased witnesses for the sake of a museum are not meant as a simple horror show. It is exactly through the ironically detached narrator's perspective that the difficulty of the past and the problematic character of any representation is put forward.

Interestingly, the testimonies of the stuffed witnesses are real testimonies, taken from a collection documenting the *Generalplan Ost* massacres.⁵⁴ When the narrator is confronted with these testimonies, he cannot face the horrible past anymore. He kills his Belarussian principal indirectly by leaving him unconscious in the cabin which is set on fire. His life is saved from a snow storm by a German historian whose father was a Wehrmacht soldier who jauntily took part in the massacres in the East. On top of "Black Hill," consisting of what could be "fifty, a hundred, even two hundred thousand dead,"⁵⁵ maybe Jewish bodies, maybe Belarussian peasants, Soviet soldiers or Germans, the orphaned Jew and the guilt-stricken German are united by the forces of nature. The emotional disintegration of the unnamed narrator is linked to the forgotten "Blood Lands." The son of a traumatised victim, he is also complicit in the killing of sentenced criminals in the communist republic of Czechoslovakia. In the far corner of Europe, finally the link is established between the inhabitants of the crushed continent: the victims, the bystanders and the perpetrators; the profiteers and the survivors, the ones who want to forget and the ones who want to remember.

What ties these threads together? The novel does what Dorothee Wiese has called, in concordance with Gille Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *the unleashing the powers of the false*: "it creates something beyond knowledge by showing the inability of the novel to make sense out of the senseless (...) hereby constructing a reading position through which readers experience the need and desire to make space for what

⁵² Suleiman, 135.

⁵³ Topol, 116.

⁵⁴ Ibid, "Author's Acknowledgement," 161.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 157.

is missing from particular historical accounts.”⁵⁶ Wiese makes this claim based on Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “the powers of the false” and their concept of “minor literature.” Interestingly, Deleuze took Franz Kafka’s minority position as a German speaking Jew in Prague as an example. Topol seems to support and counter this argument at one and the same time. *The Devil’s Workshop* parodies Kafka’s international fame and canonical status within Western culture: in Terezín, t-shirts with his emblematic picture and the sentence “If Franz Kafka hadn’t died, they would have killed him here”⁵⁷ are sold. Still, his work has thoroughly influenced the novel. The plot is, to put it mildly, quite absurd, and the narrator matches Gregor Samsa or Josef K when it comes to his inability to influence his own fate.

The same happens in Belarus. Attention is drawn to the largely unknown fate of the poor Jews and peasants from the east of Europe by graphically describing the mass graves. Furthermore, the current political situation in the country is highlighted –Lukashenko’s regime is commonly dubbed “the last dictatorship of Europe”⁵⁸ – when the narrator accidentally witnesses a violent crack-down on a demonstration of the political opposition. One of the taboos in Belorussia is laid bare by writing about the mass graves, “the deepest” of Europe.⁵⁹ They are full with Jews and Slavs, Germans and Soviet peasants: the Jews were only victims, but the Slavs are guilty of a good deal of the killing, too. On the other side of the continent, the result of the debate held in the last decades weighed and found wanting. The novel thus both parodies and enshrines the past, as Linda Hutcheon has written in relation to other novels. However, Topol does not leave it at that. The hectic and detached narration tacitly entices the reader to adopt a comparable attitude. In this way, the novel places the reader vis-à-vis the problematic aspects of his own position towards history. The ongoing destructiveness of the past is laid bare and the influence of macro-events on individuals is revealed. What *The Devil’s Workshop* adds to this, is the mirror it holds up to the reader and the influences of modern society reflected in the characters. The interweaving of fiction and reality allows the focus on the forgotten parts of history as well as the re-evaluation of its legacy in the twenty-first century.

⁵⁶ Wiese, 257.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 36.

⁵⁸ Shaun Walker, ‘Bad Times in Belarus,’ *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2011, accessed June 15, 2013 (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/07/08/bad_times_in_belarus).

⁵⁹ Ibid, 107.

Conclusion

The two novels described above are very different in plot, style, and message. However, the cardinal issue each one deals with belong to two different sides of the same coin. *HHhH* is a poignant and serious attempt at resolving the uneasiness with the postmodern approach to history, the way history has been dealt with in other texts and the concern with truth and fiction fuelled by other –in the eyes of the narrator problematic –ones. This thread connects *HHhH* to *The Devil's Workshop* because a similar effect is established in Topol's novel as in the one most severely criticised by Binet. He writes scornfully of the *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell as “simply Houellebecq doing Nazism.”⁶⁰ At face value, it seems justified to dismiss this novel as violent pornography due to the worn-out and repetitive passages filling the almost thousand pages long novel with the *Zweierlei Untergang* of the Third Reich's collapse at the Eastern front and the protagonist's simultaneous physical and psychological disintegration. However, problematic about this critique is that it brushes aside what could be seen as one of the qualities of *The Kindly Ones* and, likewise, of *The Devil's Workshop*. Neither Littell's protagonist's experiences at Babi Yar, nor his visit to Auschwitz are the most graphically described and horrifying passages of *The Kindly Ones*. What is most appalling is the sexual disintegration the protagonist goes through while the Russian army utterly crushes the German opposition and closes in on Berlin. By juxtaposing the two, the reader is confronted with the question what is the most disturbing to read about: the passages about the executions or those about the incestuous fantasies and other sexual antics? Shockingly, the most disturbing and unnerving passages are those belonging to the latter category.

One of the blackest pages in humanity's history is anything but a taboo, as the many novels in every genre attest to. But although the silence of the first decades after the Holocaust did not do any good, comparably problematic is the all too readily acceptance within contemporary society of the subject. *The Devil's Workshop* is concerned with this accepting as *HHhH* is concerned with the degree to which fiction can be devoted to truth. The question is what it takes before the numbed, ironic narrator is affected by the horrors of the past. Thus both novels confront the reader

⁶⁰ Binet, 241.

with the problematic side of the major characteristics of postmodern literature and the contemporary status of the Holocaust.

The paradoxes of postmodern literature and its fundamental doubt about any form of knowledge is a fruitful answer to the crisis of language invoked by the Holocaust. Irony and metafiction are indeed potent devices to evaluate the past, the present and the act of writing fiction concerned with both, as Linda Hutcheon has argued. Yet, it is ultimately unsatisfactory. The silence about the Holocaust has given way to an increased exposure to the Holocaust. The changed position of the Holocaust in the twentieth century demands a revised way of writing about its aftermath. Binet and Topol have reacted to this change. In *HHhH*, the reluctance in relation to the self-consciousness about “facts” intrinsic to postmodern literature and the desire to break away from this uncertainty are scrutinised by wedding the postmodern condition to the iconic symbols of the Holocaust. Topol’s *The Devil’s Workshop* draws on the legacy of the Holocaust, yet it also attempts to transcend the prevailing attitude towards the violence of the Holocaust currently pervading Western culture. The two novels analysed in this thesis take this situation as their starting point and ponder over the widening rift between the attention paid to the event and the effect this has.

The publication of *HHhH* and *The Devil’s Workshop* will not prove to be the start of a contrary trend in the Holocaust debate. In popular culture as well as in the less easily digestible echelons of representations dealing with the event, the irresistible tendency for popularization and normalization of the Holocaust will perpetually arise. Yet not every uphill battle is inevitably a lost one. It is possible to raise awareness of the problematic aspects of history and its situation in our culture if one manages to eschew clichéd and convenient explanations and representations of the overwhelming terror that once seized the greater part of Europe and continues to cast its shadow over humanity. Literature, with its paradoxes and risks, can and should aspire to be the cloud leading the unending way through the bleak desert of the remnants of the past.

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