Forgoing the Fictional Dream


On Memorial Day, I watched a parade pass beneath the third-floor balcony of my apartment building in Mishawaka, Indiana, population fifty thousand. This was not the minor event I’d expected, but an hour-and-a-half extravaganza of Americana. Families set up chairs and blankets and waved at the procession, which included police officers riding motorcycles in synchronized figure eights, the mayor and family waving from the back of a pickup truck, three high-school marching bands, an open convertible filled with teenaged Daughters of the American Revolution, Civil War reenactors who stopped every hundred yards to fire their muskets, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, and several tractors from the Antique Engine Society (“Where old engines never die, they just ‘chug’ away”). The parade was what so much fiction, including literary fiction, is: earnest, kitschy, and self-congratulatory.

In Milan Kundera’s _The Unbearable Lightness of Being_, kitsch is epitomized by communist May Day parades. “Kitsch,” the narrator says, “causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!”

I bought my copy of Laurent Binet’s 2009 novel, _HHhH_, in Prague at Shakespeare and Sons, one of the city’s few English-language bookstores. The price in Czech koruna (389,-) is written in pencil on the top right corner of the first page, and the store’s free pink bookmark with Shakespeare’s portrait has moved from page to page through my multiple readings of the book. Tucked away on a narrow cobblestone side street not far from the Charles Bridge, the store is where I go on a rainy afternoon, or when I need a break from students. It’s where I
find translations of Czech books I’ve never heard of or didn’t know had been translated.

_HHhH_ was written in Binet’s native French, but, inspired by his travels to the Czech Republic and his fascination with its history, it is very much a Czech book.

_HHhH_ is about Operation Anthropoid, the resistance plot to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich, Reichsprotektor of Prague and one of the masterminds behind the Holocaust.

_HHhH_ is about what a novel is and about how to tell a story, especially a major historical one: with competing accounts, transcripts, interpretations, implications, limitations, and representations.

On the book’s first page, the narrator invokes Kundera and the artifice of fiction, saying that Kundera “implies that he feels a bit ashamed at having to name his characters. . . . In my opinion, Kundera should have gone further: what could be more vulgar than an invented character?”

The narrator has just introduced one of the parachutists who will carry out Operation Anthropoid. Jozef Gabčík, he is pleased to report, was a real person with a real name. No vulgar invention necessary.

Throughout _HHhH_, the narrator interrupts the story of Heydrich’s rise to power in Prague and the progress of Gabčík and his partner Jan Kubiš to critique another book’s or film’s representation of events. Entire chapters are devoted to commentaries on these alternate portrayals, from debates about historical detail to an unexpected appreciation of traditional narrative devices.

Aspiring writers are weaned on John Gardner’s idea of the fictional dream, which requires the skillful application of devices such as dialogue and description: “The most important single notion in the theory of fiction I have outlined—essentially the traditional theory of our civilization’s literature—is that of the vivid and continuous fictional dream,” Gardner says in _The Art of Fiction_.

(One can almost hear the marching band playing in the background as Gardner holds up “our civilization’s literature.”)
“In bad or unsatisfying fiction,” Gardner cautions, “this fictional dream is interrupted from time to time by some mistake or conscious ploy on the part of the artist. We are abruptly snapped out of the dream, forced to think of the writer or the writing.”

But one of the pleasures of reading *HHhH* is coming upon lines like these: “This scene is not really useful, and on top of that I practically made it up. I don’t think I’m going to keep it.”

How, Gardner might ask, can we be moved, “together with all mankind,” if the author interrupts his scenes to tell us they are made up?

The authorial disruption cuts through the fascist fictional dream.

Kundera’s fiction is a response to totalitarianism in both politics and art. In *The Art of the Novel* he rejects the dominant form of psychological realism: “Understand me, I don’t mean to scorn the reader and his desire, as naïve as it is legitimate, to be carried away by the novel’s imaginary world and to confuse it occasionally with reality. But I don’t see that the technique of psychological realism is indispensable for that.”

The theme of the study-abroad program I co-lead in Prague and Berlin is “Dictatorship and Resistance.” We study various forms of resistance to totalitarianism in art, literature, and culture, from Berlin’s Dada artists who protested Weimar hypocrisy to the Czech Samizdat writers who circulated manuscripts underground.

David Shields’s *Reality Hunger* (Knopf, 2010) is a manifesto against realism and the sort of conventional narrative Gardner endorses. (I almost said *enforces.*) It’s composed as a collage of quotations from writers, critics, theorists, and artists. This quote is from Shields himself: “I find nearly all the moves the traditional novel makes unbelievably predictable, tired, contrived, and essentially purposeless. I can never remember characters’ names, plot developments, lines of dialogue, details of setting.”

Shields’s ideas aren’t new; literature has been exhausted for a while now. But our novels are still shaped by the publishing industry and
by creative writing instruction at the university, where the fictional dream reigns supreme.

In his book *Uncreative Writing* (Columbia University Press, 2011), Kenneth Goldsmith worries that “literature—infinitely in its potential of ranges and expressions—is in a rut, tending to hit the same note again and again.” He argues that writing classes should focus less on “clichéd notions of what it means to be ‘creative,’” and more on the manipulation of available materials through collage, appropriation, fragmentation, and adaptation.

In my own classes I find that students create much more interesting writing when they practice erasure, compose found poems, and make comics and collage—altering images and texts to create juxtapositions that surprise and resonate.

*HHhH* often reads like a pastiche. However, the book is not merely an intellectual exercise in fragmentation or the nature of narrative. The narrator feels strongly connected to his subjects and setting—to Gabčík and Kubiš, to Prague—and can’t resist a sentimental impulse to valorize his heroes. He admits that his feelings often interfere with telling his story, and he apologizes for any failures: “This story is personal. That’s why my visions sometimes get mixed up with the known facts.”

It’s where things get “mixed up” that the novel is most poignant. The known facts are plenty interesting—from the covert operation, to the gun that jammed during the assassination attempt, to the chance infection that ultimately killed Heydrich, to the dramatic shootout with Nazis—and this is why it has inspired numerous books and movies.

But a book’s power is in the author’s vision more than in the facts or plot.

This book is personal for me. I mentioned the bookstore, the bookmark, the city. Prague is a place that fuels my imagination and inspires my own writing and teaching.

I complain about falsely authentic representations; I rail against the sentimentality and forced closure of conventional narratives. But I feel the same kitschy devotion to Prague as the narrator whose story...
“is going to end in Prague, Prague, Prague! Prague, city of a hundred towers, heart of the world, eye of my imagination’s hurricane.”

How nice to be moved, together with the narrator, by the city of Prague!

Toward the novel’s end, as the Nazis close in on the parachutists, who are hiding in a church, the narrator can’t help but imagine an alternative future in which the heroes survive: “And now I am Gabčík. What do they say? I am inhabiting my character. I see myself arm in arm with Libena, walking through liberated Prague.”

“The truth,” the narrator concludes, “is that I don’t want to finish this story. I would like to suspend this moment for eternity.”

But he doesn’t. He persists in narrating the ending, detailing all that he knows and doesn’t about the parachutists’ final moments before they took their own lives rather than surrender to the Nazis.

In the penultimate chapter, the narrator ironically quotes Roland Barthes: “‘Above all, do not attempt to be exhaustive.’”

Was Binet foreshadowing his next book, The Seventh Function of Language, with his reference to Barthes? That 2015 novel, a semeiological whodunit, opens fifteen minutes before Barthes is struck by a laundry van while crossing the street.

The first few lines seem to pick up where HHhH leaves off: “Life is not a novel. Or at least you would like to believe so. Roland Barthes walks up Rue de Bièvre.”

I watched the Memorial Day parade with fellow English professors, well versed in the semeiology of spectacle. What moved me most about the parade was this note posted on Facebook a month earlier: “My Navy Son Adam died from his military injuries the day before last year’s parade and I have been to say the least reclusive. I have asked the parade committee to take over this page to keep it active. . . . I am no longer part of the parade committee.” The curtain of kitsch was cut through. The fictional façade of a parade to honor those who have died in military service was confronted with an actual death, an actual mourning parent.
“If a book has anything to say,” says the narrator of perhaps my favorite book, *Too Loud a Solitude* by the Czech Bohumil Hrabal, “it burns with a quiet laugh, because any book worth its salt points up and out of itself.’’ *HHhH* confronts an intense period in history and the ways we have told it, and points to the ways we might yet tell it—and tell any of our stories.