

Fact and Fable: Ethics and the Defamiliarisation of the Familiar in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*¹

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Abstract

In the face of a thought-defying catastrophe, nothing is more cathartic than the transformation of fact into fable. In the case of the Holocaust, this would amount to the fable of seeing the Nazis as devilish arch-villains or of reducing the Nazi genocide to a series of commonplaces. The aim of this paper is to show how Martin Amis plays with this impulse to reduce fact to fable precisely by having the narrator tell a fable that has to be decoded into fact by the reader. The focus on a perpetrator rather than a victim is dealt with as confronting the reader with the “banality of evil”, while the relationship between narrator and main character is approached in the view of Lifton’s concept of “psychological doubling”, and also in the light of Levinas’ notion of *excedance*. I argue here that *Time’s Arrow* should be regarded as the result of a conscious attempt to defamiliarise the familiar on the part of the author, giving voice to and requiring of the reader an ethical positioning that, far from being divorced from formal experimentation, turns it into an effective vehicle for revision, reflection and commitment.

Martin Amis has often referred to the Holocaust as *the* crucial event of the twentieth century.² In an interview with Jonathan Noakes (2003: 20), he refers to the Holocaust as a theme he has long been interested in, though he admits that writing a novel on it was an entirely

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² See, for instance, Bellante (1992: 16).

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different matter. He respects those who think that the Holocaust should not be written about, but he does not agree with those who automatically reject the use of “sophisticated or witty ironic means for writing about something serious” (20). In his view, one cannot become a different kind of writer because of the subject, and there is no subject literature is barred from. As he explains in another interview: “I felt I was in a forest of taboos throughout writing this book [*Time’s Arrow*]. This is the most difficult and sensitive subject ever, I think, but I do believe, as a writer, that there are no No Entry signs” (in Watchel, 1996: 17).

What seemed to be at issue in the decades after World War II was not only Holocaust literature but literature itself. Theodor W. Adorno’s famous assertion that it was “barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz” (1997: 34) pointed to silence as the only possible ethical response in the aftermath of the massacre. Adorno later modified his views, arguing that “[p]erennial suffering has as much a right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (1973: 362). Victims, their descendants, the Jewish people have a right to speak. Their testimonies have also shown their commitment to a duty: that of bearing witness. Survivors’ narratives have made for the rise a new genre and they have also created an “other”: fictionalised accounts of the Holocaust, which have been thoroughly questioned, or at least questioned in a way that survivors’ narratives have not. As Susan Vice points out, “critical preference for testimony over fiction has become such a truism that it is hard to find any voices dissenting from it” (2000: 3).

As if in response to this generalised feeling that Holocaust literature belongs to the victims (and their descendants), Amis remarks: “People say, legitimately in a way, what am I as an Aryan doing with this subject? But I’m writing about the perpetrators and they are my brothers, if you like. I feel a kind of responsibility in my Aryanness for what happened. This is my racial link with these events, not with the sufferers but with the perpetrators” (in Watchel, 1996: 47). The Holocaust happened to all. As Pilar Hidalgo explains, to “a generation of British novelists born after the Second World War, the Holocaust has come to epitomise not something alien in its enormity, perpetrated in faraway places, but something that is linked to what it is to be

human” (2005: 250). I agree with Hidalgo when she argues that Holocaust novels fulfil the function of imaginary witnesses,³ though I would emphasise Martin Amis’ point that bearing witness requires that we consider not only those to which the Holocaust happened, in the most strict sense of the term —Holocaust victims— but also those that made it happen —the perpetrators. If the Holocaust is, in Hidalgo’s words above, linked to what it is to be human, it is also because it makes us face the fact that the most ordinary human beings can be capable of the most inhuman acts. Thus, it is a key decision on Amis’ part to focus on a perpetrator rather than a victim. Odilo Unverdorben, a Nazi doctor who installed the pellets of Zyklon B to gas prisoners at Auschwitz, is also, as the narrator points out, “*absolutely unexceptional*, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once over the cover of numbers”.⁴ To quote Hannah Arendt’s well-known phrase, which she first used in her analysis of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, *Time’s Arrow* can be said to confront its reader with the “banality of evil”.

Narrated in reverse chronological order, *Time’s Arrow* ends in Odilo Unverdorben’s birthplace, Solingen, which was also the birthplace of Adolf Eichmann —the man responsible for overseeing the Final Solution. Hannah Arendt attended the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem as a reporter for the *New Yorker* and she was struck by the fact that he lacked all the demonic qualities that the prosecution had attributed to him. Against the traditional concept of evil seen as ultimate depravity, corruption or sinfulness, she argued that the shocking truth that the trial revealed had to do, rather, with “the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (1984: 287, emphasis in the original).

“Casual killing” is difficult to understand and so people tend to push it to the borders of the mind. Amis’ novel seeks to undo this impulse by taking on board the unaccommodatable fact that monsters

³ See also Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “postmemory” (1997, 2001) and Geoffrey Hartman’s concept of “witnesses by adoption” (1996). Hirsch’s postmemory points to an intersubjective space of remembrance, connected with a cultural or collective trauma that is not strictly based on identity or familial connections. Hartman’s coinage also suggests an enlargement of the familial framework to encompass broader spaces of empathy and identification.

⁴ *Time’s Arrow* 165, emphasis added. Hereafter the abbreviation *TA* will be used in parenthetical references.

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are not necessary for extreme evil. Nothing is more cathartic than the translation of fact into fable, the fable of seeing the Nazis as devilish arch-villains or of reducing the Holocaust to a series of commonplaces. Amis plays with this impulse to reduce fact to fable, precisely by having the narrator tell a fable that has to be decoded into fact by the reader. In addition to the focus on a perpetrator rather than a victim, the “doubled” narrator and the reverse narration are key choices on Amis’ part, formal choices that nonetheless bear upon the novel’s ethical import.

The issue of the ordinariness of the perpetrators also lies at the core of Robert Jay Lifton’s *The Nazi Doctors* (1986), a work explicitly referred to by Amis in the “Afterword” as one of the novel’s main intertexts. Like *Time’s Arrow*, Lifton’s study focuses on the perpetrators and, more specifically, on the role played by doctors in the Holocaust, which the author connects with the “biomedical vision” at the heart of Nazism. Thus, *The Nazi Doctors* is an exploration of the psychology of the doctors who helped to administer the Final Solution. As Lifton succinctly but clarifyingly explains in an interview (Kreisler, 1999), the inverted logic which turned healers into killers was made possible by a process of psychological doubling. Nazi doctors joined the party seeking the promise of revitalisation that Hitler offered. Each of them joined first the medical profession, which is a group of its own, and then the military, being sent to a camp. They were not killers to begin with, but ordinary men that were socialised to evil. In the camps, they made selections and ran the killing process. When they were in Auschwitz, they had an Auschwitz self which was responsible for all this as well as for the very vulgar life (sex, alcohol and obscene jokes) that they led there. But they would go home to their families, from Poland or Germany, for weekends or for leaves. There they would be ordinary fathers and husbands functioning in a relatively ordinary way, calling for a non-Auschwitz self or a prior, more humane, self. Although the two selves were obviously part of the same overall self, each of them functioned separately, and that is why Lifton speaks of doubling as a mechanism of socialisation to evil.

Much of the irony but also much of the tragic vision that emerges from *Time’s Arrow* is grounded on a similar doubling which keeps narrating and narrated subjects apart. In a sense, the narrator and the character whose life the novel tells are one and the same. Thus, the

narrator introduces himself as Tod Friendly, one of the names adopted by Odilo Unverdorben after the war.⁵ In another sense, the narrator cannot be described as autodiegetic since the connection between narrative instance and main character is but a measure of the rift between them. This narrator, neither homodiegetic nor heterodiegetic, is a “passenger or parasite” travelling with the main character towards “his secret”, a secret which will be “bad and non intelligible” (*TA* 73). The narrator lacks access to his host’s thoughts, but he is not barred from his emotions, or from his nightmares. Although he is “equipped with a fair amount of value-free information, or general knowledge” and a “superb vocabulary” (*TA* 16), he is unaware that his backward trajectory through time violates ordinary chronology. He is also utterly ignorant of history. And, most remarkably, he possesses a notable aversion to human suffering. In this sense, the narrator has much to do, then, with that prior, more humane, non-Auschwitz self silenced and erased by the Nazi doctors analysed by Lifton. By contrast, the protagonist stands for a Hippocrates-free Auschwitz self, unable to become whole again after the war. The two parts of his self have become so radically divided from one another that the main character does indeed appear soulless, empty, utterly alone: “*His* isolation is complete because he doesn’t know I’m here” (*TA* 22, italics in the original).

The protagonist excluding that part of himself that would have made him responsive to the Other, responsible in the face of the Other, can also be read in ethical terms. A key idea in Levinasian ethics, which already appears in the early philosophical essay *De l’évasion* (1935), is the concept of *excendance*. *De l’évasion* expresses the imperative of escape, but escape from what exactly? To Gibson, the notion of escape as posited by Levinas is an escape from the view of the self as closed to the Other, defined in opposition to, rather than in relationship with the Other. As

⁵ Both names include binaries in a significant way. Tod means death in German, thus bringing to mind the notion of “friendly death” connected with the eugenistic project of Nazism —the eradication of what the Nazis referred to as “life unworthy of life”— and with their resort to gassing as a more “humane” method of killing. Regarding the protagonist’s real name, Richard Menke, among other critics, points out that with “its implicit, structural antithesis (unverdorben means ‘not verdorben,’ ‘not polluted or corrupt’), the name encapsulates the dual structure of the narrative, which opposes the life history of Odilo (hideous and banal, lived forward) with that of his *doppelgänger* (striking and scrupulous, lived backwards)” (1998: 965).

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he puts it: “*excedance* is the spontaneous *and immediate* desire to escape the limits of the self [...]. Evasion is the ethical impulse towards or openness to the other that effects a release from the confines of the self” (Gibson, 1999: 37, italics in the original). Thus, if in the light of Lifton’s theory, the fission that accounts for the separation between the narrator and the protagonist of *Time’s Arrow* can be seen as grounded in a process of psychological doubling as a mechanism of socialisation to evil, in the light of Levinasian ethics the said fission is the consequence of Unverdorben’s successful resistance to *excedance*, a resistance that amounts to the annulment, the complete stifling of the self’s drive to escape his own limits in a movement of openness to the Other.

Any author’s choices to adopt one narrative strategy rather than another affect the reader’s ethical response to the text, but certain choices demand a more active kind of engagement on the reader’s part. In *Time’s Arrow*, the horror of the Holocaust disappears if the events are read backwards, but the reader knows that history cannot be undone, and so, it is the reader who has to supply the tragedy missing in the text:

The reader has to do all the morality, because these terrible events are described as benevolent, but also in such a way that, I hope, there is a sort of disgust and an unreality and self-delusion in the way it’s shown. He [the narrator] keeps wondering why it has to be so ugly, this essentially benevolent action, why it is so filthy and ugly. It was a coprocentric universe. They called Auschwitz “anus mundi”. So it’s there, but the narrator can’t spot it, the *reader* has to do all that. (Amis in Reynolds and Noakes, 2003: 21, emphasis in the original)

Just as the narrator’s enigmatic identity may disconcert the reader, so the attention he pays to coprocentric details accounts for a discomfort that announces the utter disgust he will feel at Auschwitz: “What tells me that this is right? What tells me that all the rest was wrong? Certainly not my aesthetic sense. I would never claim that Auschwitz-Birkenau-Monowitz was good to look at. Or to listen to, or to smell, or to taste, or to touch” (*TA* 128). The narrative focus on

coprocentricity that Amis refers to in the quotation above somehow turns the narrator's aesthetic unconscious, so to put it, into a vehicle for the ethical positioning of the reader. Thus, what may initially appear as a source of scatological humour soon acquires an allegorical resonance. In this Amis is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift, another satirist with whom he has more than once been compared. Thus, it would not be farfetched to apply to *Time's Arrow* what Philip Pinkus explains about the connotations of coprocentricity in Swiftian satire:

Since Swift's constant concern in his satires is man's corruption from original innocence, there is no more graphic illustration than the excremental. That is why his satires are obsessed with it. It is the traditional imagery of evil, of which Swift's contemporaries were well aware [...]. All Swift's references to the unclean flesh, the dung, the stench, the filth of man's body, are the symbols of man's sin. (1965: 18)

Dante pictured hell as a frozen cesspool into which all the rivers of the world dump their sewage. In the same line, the narrator reflects on the appropriateness of the term used by the camp officers to refer to Auschwitz: Anus Mundi. He can think "of no finer tribute than that" (*TA* 133) since there "this human stuff, at normal times (and in civilised locales) tastefully confined to the tubes and runnels, subterranean, unseen —this stuff has burst its banks, surging upward on to the floor, the walls, the ceiling of life" (*TA* 125). Thus, the narrator's journey towards the protagonist's dark secret is also a descent into hell. In a remarkably Swiftian way (think, for instance of *A Modest Proposal*), the description of this journey is deprived of horror precisely in order to increase the reader's horror, deprived of tragedy precisely in order that the reader will supply it. What the narrator's account is not deprived of is his feelings of disgust. The reader's tragic view of events is then but an answer to the narrator's unease at the ugliness of creation, at the crap surrounding an essentially praiseworthy task which strangely has "a patina of cruelty, intense cruelty, as if creation corrupts" (*TA* 130). To use Pinkus' words above, the narrator can be said to provide us with "the unclean flesh, the dung, the stench, the filth of man's body", which clash with what he sees as the Nazis'

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benevolent actions. It falls on the reader to see them as a measure of “man’s sin”.

It is significant that in the midst of this Anus Mundi which Auschwitz was, Nazi officers —the real ones and also those that appear in Amis’ novel (*TA* 128)— took pains to be “elegant”. The way in which the Nazi subject turned the Other into an object of abjection and kept it at bay while it went on a mad quest for order and tidiness —a quest for elegance— is but a measure, in Levinasian terms, of a mode of being predicated on the nihilistic destruction of the Other to assure the self. This human subject did not acknowledge its diacritic relation between itself and the Other, which constitutes the basis of Levinasian ethics. Rather, it tragically sought to define its humanity by depriving the Other of it, and in the attempt, it became inhuman itself. As Primo Levi puts it in his memoirs, the “personages of these pages are not men, their humanity is buried, or they have themselves buried it, under an offence received or inflicted on someone else” (1996: 121). Thus, it becomes clear that if the offence received annihilated the prisoners’ humanity, the offence inflicted also did away with that of the perpetrators. This is a central aspect of “the nature of the offence”, a phrase that Amis takes from Levi (as he explains in the “Afterword”) and that constitutes the novel’s subtitle. Amis incorporates into the novel what can be seen as the governing idea of Levi’s memoirs, namely, that the Holocaust obliterated the humanity of *both* the oppressed and the oppressors.

Halfway down the narrative, the narrator advances that he “*will know how bad the [protagonist’s] secret is*”, that he “will know the nature of the offence” (*TA* 73, italics in the original). But does the narrator understand it in the end? Such an awareness would depend on his realisation that he has been (re-)living Odilo’s life in the reverse, which is what the words “Oh no, but then...” cryptically suggest in the novel’s final paragraph:

Beyond, before the slope of pine, the lady archers are gathering with their targets and bows. Above, a failing vision kind of light, with the sky fighting down its nausea. Its many nuances of nausea. When Odilo closes his eyes I see an arrow fly —but wrongly. Point-first. Oh no, but then... We’re away

once more, over the field. Odilo Unverdorben and his eager heart. And I within, who came at the wrong time —either too soon, or after it was too late. (*TA* 173)

The fact that the protagonist and the narrator should be “away once more, over the field” may indeed suggest that the story begins again, in chronological order. In a figurative sense, this repetition may imply that the Holocaust should not and cannot be forgotten, only endlessly retold. In addition, though, the novel’s last lines can also suggest that the Holocaust may happen again. And yet, as the story is told, backwards in time, things must happen *only because they have already happened*, but such determinism disappears if time’s arrow is reversed again, and it *is* reversed at the end of the novel. Strictly speaking, the narrator has come soon if the story begins again and the Holocaust has not happened, or late, if it has indeed taken place. There is, though, a recurrent preoccupation in Amis’ fiction which I think is implicit in the novel’s ending: the nuclear holocaust. Thus, the narrator’s arrival is a late arrival if we think of the Nazi Holocaust, but it is an early one if we think of the other Holocaust, the nuclear one. And this, unlike the other, does not have to happen, precisely because it has not happened. The openness of the ending is also the openness of the future to which the last lines, like the arrow of time, point. In this light, and as is the case with the narrator and the novel’s time scheme, the reader’s ethical obligation becomes double: towards the past, which cannot be forgotten, and towards the future, which s/he must equally bear in mind.

In *Time’s Arrow*, then, Amis invites us to think the unthinkable, in the past as well as in the future. As Levinas puts it, the question of the meaning of being is not “why we are”, but “how to be”, that is, “how being justifies itself” (1989: 86). *Time’s Arrow* shows some of the most drastic ways in which being fails to do so. But will the future mirror the past? Will the Holocaust return with a vengeance? A look at Amis’ fiction and non-fiction is enough to ascertain that his prospects are far from bright in this respect. And yet, at least, *Time’s Arrow* bears witness to the writer’s ethical obligation to speak in the face of the unspeakable, to his struggle to find new forms to accommodate the mess. If there are themes which, because of their very nature, require of

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the novelist a different kind of imaginative and ethical involvement, Amis' response to this challenge in *Time's Arrow* consists of a conscious attempt to defamiliarise the familiar, giving voice to and requiring of the reader an ethical positioning that, far from being divorced from formal experimentation, turns it into an effective vehicle for revision, reflection and commitment.

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