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THE LIMITS OF IRONY

The Chronillogical World of Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*



As a work of Holocaust fiction, Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* is as moving and disturbing as it is ingenious; indeed, it is Amis' narrative ingenuity that is responsible for the work's moral and emotional impact. What moves and disturbs the reader is the multitude of ironies that result from the reversal of time—the "narrative conceit" (Diedrick 164) that structures and drives the novel.¹ In *Time's Arrow* the normal present-to-future progression becomes the movement from present to past and the normative convention of realistic fiction—the inability to foresee the future—becomes the inability to recall the past. A narrator in Amis' *Einstein's Monsters* describes the 20th-century as "the age when irony really came into its own" (37) and *Time's Arrow* is an ironic tour-de-force if ever there was one.

The minor and major ironies generated by the time-reversal all follow from the most important effect of the trope—the reversal of *all* normal cause-effect relations. (The minor become major as the reverse becomes increasingly *perverse*.) The irony is structural-formal when the reader recognizes that the novel is an inverted *Bildungsroman*—detailing the *devolution* of the protagonist—and an autobiography told by an amnesiac; but as might be expected, the trope results in an array of more locally comic, and then, grimly dark ironies. Indeed, the work's most disturbing effects are the epistemological and, ultimately, ontological uncertainties which are the cumulative impact of the narrative method.

Time's Arrow raises the same moral and aesthetic questions about the nature of mimesis and the literary representation of atrocity which have always troubled Holocaust fiction.² Also, even though Amis himself seems to suggest, in his Afterword to

the novel, that one motive for writing *Time's Arrow* was to contemplate "the nature of the offence" (176), any reader expecting profound revelations about the nature and origins of the evil committed by the Nazis will be disappointed.³ Amis is hardly original in his view that what was "unique" about the Nazi genocide was

not . . . its cruelty, nor . . . its cowardice, but . . . its style— . . . its combination of the atavistic and the modern. It was, at once, reptilian and "logistical". And although the offense was not definingly German, its style was. The National Socialists found the core of the reptile brain, and built an autobahn that went there. (176)

Nevertheless, there is no denying that Amis' novel re-sensitizes us to this particular history in a century of continuing mass violence; moreover, it is the way he tells the story that effects this sensitization. But the relation between Amis' understanding of "the nature of the offence" and his narrative method in *Time's Arrow* is more complex than this. The narrative method based upon time-reversal expresses more than Time set backwards by the moral enormity of the Holocaust.⁴ Amis' sense of the nature of that offense is that it was a *prelude* to an even more unthinkable death and destruction.

The narrator-protagonist of *Time's Arrow* is a Nazi who participated in the atrocities of Auschwitz and then escaped to the United States following the war, where he has lived out his life under a number of aliases—the most recent being Tod Friendly. (His original name was Odilo Unverdorben.) As time reverses at the moment of his death, he resumes consciousness but with no memory of his former life and it is only as this narrating consciousness (re)lives Tod's life, backwards from his death, that it—and we—come to know his "terrible secret" (12). However, one of the subtlest ironies in the book that follows from the time-reversal coupled with the narrator's amnesia is that Amis can sublimate a post-Holocaust into a *pre*-Holocaust perspective. In *Time's Arrow* the past becomes the future and the future disappears—and that is Amis' "terrible secret." For Amis' representation of the Nazi Holocaust in *Time's Arrow* needs to be

understood in relation to what was clearly his over-riding concern in the 1980s: the threat of nuclear holocaust. If *Time's Arrow* is read in the context of Amis' other writing contemporaneous with it—the essays and short stories in *Einstein's Monsters*, *The Moronic Inferno*, and *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov and Other Excursions*—then the way he depicts the Holocaust makes sense in relation to his larger vision of this century's monstrosity. (If a comparative can be used in relation to the Holocaust, I believe it is in relation to the possible destruction of *all* life.) The Holocaust that is inescapable for Tod Friendly is related to the one which Amis fears is a certainty in his and his children's future. The narration in *Time's Arrow* works back from Amis' own historical moment to the Holocaust of WWII as the *moral* origin of his generation's postmodern condition.

Because of the extremes of its own effects—most disturbingly, perhaps, when genocide is “replayed” as genesis during a chapter set in Auschwitz (128-29)—*Time's Arrow*, ironically, has the power to move the reader beyond pathos to feelings of utter hopelessness. An obvious effect of the disappearance of the future that comes with time-reversal is a rigid determinism. But *Time's Arrow* is not simply another whimper of the species in the face of the history it tries unsuccessfully to explain. To use the vernacular for a moment, the book chokes more than it whimpers; and what chokes it is Amis' rage at what has transpired since WWII *despite* our knowledge of the Holocaust. For our civilization's response to the Nazi genocide has been to perfect techniques of global destruction. It is this combination of deep rage and profound despair which ultimately sets the limits to the ironies in *Time's Arrow*; but the same emotions also impel Amis to take the artistic risks he does in this novel which ultimately reaffirms the capacity of narrative fiction not only to mirror a world of terrifying absurdity, but also to hold that world accountable.

According to Lawrence Langer, “No apparent rationality” is a major characteristic of literary representations of the Holocaust (22) and the time-reversal in *Time's Arrow* clearly falls into this tradition. For it produces a world that is irrationally chronological and illogically rational—a *chronillogical* world which not only captures “the atmosphere [and] the landscape of atrocity”

(Langer 22) but enthralls the reader with its continuous transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. In this respect, *Time's Arrow* is an excellent example of the Russian Formalist concept of "defamiliarization." In "Art as Technique," Shklovsky argues that literature does not imitate the world so much as make it strange; the purpose of art is to help us "recover the sensation of life" (20) lost because of the numbing effect of our daily routines. In *Time's Arrow*, what Amis' technique recovers is a *moral* sensation; his method defamiliarizes a specific moment in modern history for us—the Holocaust—and in the process re-sensitizes us to the magnitude of human evil manifested in it. The narrative proceeds toward this moral goal by steadily rendering life in general, as well as particular phenomena, uncannily familiar.⁵

The scale of ironies in *Time's Arrow* moves from the simple to the complex and begins with the comic. Tabloid newspapers are delivered to their readers by garbage trucks (20). A meal occurs when

you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skillful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon. (19)

Shopping involves taking the various items to the supermarket, where "I am promptly and generously reimbursed for my pains. Then you tool down the aisles with trolley or basket, returning each can or packet to its rightful place" (19). Tod bolsters his income by taking from children:

Tod'll come on up. The toy, the squeaky duck or whatever, will be offered to him by the smiling child. Tod takes it. And backs away, with what I believe is called a shiteating grin. . . . Then he heads for the store, to cash it in. For what? A couple of bucks. Can you believe this guy? He'll take candy from a baby, if there's fifty cents in it for him. (23)

As the comic ironies become darker, however, they become satiric. A "Crisis Centre" is where women go *looking for* trouble:

If you want a crisis, just check in. The welts, the abrasions and black eyes get starker, more livid, until it is time for the women to return, in an ecstasy of distress, to the men who will suddenly heal them. Some require more specialized treatment. They stagger off and go and lie in a park or a basement or wherever, until men come along and rape them, and then they're okay again. (39)

In this chronillogical world, pollution *is* progress:

People all have jobs now, at the steel mill and the auto plant. They wash the wind. Just as they clean up all the trash and litter, they also clean up the earth and sky, transmogrifying cars, turning tools, parts, weapons, bolts into carbon and iron. They've really got to grips with their environmental problems (57)

This kind of satiric irony becomes more pointedly thematic when such apparent progress leads Tod to conclude that, for industrial laborers, "Work liberates: Friday evenings, as they move off towards it, how they laugh and shout and roll their shoulders" (57). The echo of the motto on the gate to Auschwitz, "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" (131), is a chilling reminder of where the novel is heading. So, too, are what could be called the prescient echoes of Nazism in Tod's thinking that

when the world war comes— we'll be just right to fight it. We are, after all, a superb physical specimen. . . . We're not club-footed or marxist or nuts. We have no conscientious objections or anything of that kind. We're perfect. (59)

Amis does not avoid the obvious scatological ironies that would result from the reversal of normal cause-effect relations in

the physical world. In fact, he develops them along a scale which moves from the comic to the thematic and which ultimately expresses an “excremental vision” Swiftian in scope.⁶ At the outset of his journey, Tod intuitively feels that the “secret” he is moving toward has to do “with trash and shit” (73). He is struck by the “weird” fact that “All life . . . all sustenance, all meaning (and a good deal of money) issues from a single household appliance: the toilet handle” (18).⁷ Before he becomes Odilo, as Hamilton de Souza, Tod “dreams he is shitting human bones” (116). The motif reaches its apocalyptic nadir when Odilo arrives at the “Anus Mundi” (133), the “fiercely coprocentric” world of Auschwitz: “It was *made* of shit” (132).

In the Auschwitz chapters, the chronology produces ironies that are best described as obscene.⁸ Uncle Pepi, the Dr. Mengele character, like Shelley’s Frankenstein “can knock together a human being out of the unlikeliest odds and ends” (142). The guards supervising the *dressing* of the women have a habit of touching them, usually to *give* them jewelry, but “at other times quite gratuitously. Oh, I think they mean it well enough. . . . And it definitely has the effect of calming them down. One touch, there, and they go all numb . . .” (130). But it is the pathetic image of the young girls, surrounded by parents and grandparents, “Just made, and all raw from their genesis” (131) which ushers in the most obscene irony generated by Amis’ defamiliarization technique—the reversal of death and life.

At Auschwitz genocide becomes genesis: “Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire” (128). In an apotheosis of the reversed pollution metaphor from earlier in the novel, human bodies are sucked down into the ovens from the sky:

Thence . . . the bodies were stacked carefully and, in my view, counter-intuitively, with babies and children at the base of the pile, then the women and the elderly, and then the men. . . . I always felt a gorgeous relief at the moment of first stirring. Then it was ugly again. Well, we cry and twist and are naked at both ends of life. We cry at both ends of life, while the doctor watches. It was I, Odilo Unver-

dorben, who personally removed the pellets of Zyklon B and entrusted them to the pharmacist in his white coat. (129)

Amis' irony pays unthinkable dividends of pain here as the narrator explains the separation of the men from the women, children and elderly:

The men, of course, as is right, walk a different path to recovery. . . . There they go, to the day's work, with their heads bent back. I was puzzled at first but now I know why they do it, why they stretch their throats like that. They are looking for the souls of their mothers and their fathers, their women and their children, gathering in the heavens—awaiting human form, and union (131)

The Auschwitz scenes extend motifs that appear earlier in the novel, most obviously those of excrement and of Tod's dream of the doctor in the white coat and black boots. But the most important motif repeated here is that of "making sense." At Auschwitz the narrator expects all his questions to find their answers: "How many times have I asked myself: when is the world going to start making sense?" (123) From the beginning of the story he has been a (dis)embodied voice: "My condition is a torn condition" (103). He speaks both from within and outside the character he represents. The always user-friendly names he goes by—Tod Friendly, John Young, Hamilton de Souza, Odilo Unverdorben—construct the self as always *alias*:

He is travelling towards his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am travelling there with him. It will be bad. It will be bad, and not intelligible. But I will know one thing about it (and at least the certainty brings comfort): I *will* know *how* bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offence. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time. (72-73)

Chronillogy makes dreams into acts of memory; the narrator's sense of himself as dreamer is of himself as another. Amis, who has been described as "the latest of Anglo-America's dualistic artists" (Miller 410), creates a narrator who speaks from and to himself as an embodiment of an other whom he knows but does not recognize. It is this separation that makes Amis' use of the dream into a metaphor of *anamnesis*, knowledge as *re-cognition*.

In the *Meno*, Plato defines *anamnesis* as the recovery of latent or unconscious knowledge which the soul carries from life to life (81C-D). The gap between knowing and understanding is expressed in *Time's Arrow* through the metaphor of the narrator's amnesia. Tod Friendly (re)discovers his history, from which he is, in a sense, a kind of exile. His pathology is very much that described by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (qtd. in Langer 78)

Camus' sense of a lost home and of a lost future is at the heart of Amis' sense of the post-Holocaust generation to which he belongs. In Elie Wiesel's *The Fifth Son*, the protagonist, a son of Holocaust survivors, says: "Born after the War, I endure its effects. I suffer from an Event I did not even experience" (qtd. in Fine 41). Amis' narrative structure and method express this post-Holocaust perspective but in a way that complicates it even further by adding to its retrospective angst a sense that it is being robbed of the future as well. For Amis, his generation suffers from an event it did not experience, and will expire from one it seems powerless to prevent. Ellen Fine describes the post-Holocaust generation as "confronted with a difficult task: to imagine an event they have not lived through . . ." (41), but Amis' sense of his generation's situation and of his own task as a writer leads him to imagine the unthinkable of human extinction.

Following the episodes at Auschwitz and Treblinka, where the narrator and we come to know Tod/Odilo's role in the

Holocaust, “the ironic prophecies” (148) of Tod’s dreams are fulfilled. The narrator’s “premonition” that “Tod’s cruelty, his secret, had to do with a central mistake about human bodies” (48) is confirmed and the world of nightmare begins to make nightmarish sense to us. The parallel between the narrator’s movement from amnesia to Platonic anamnesis and the reader’s gradual recognition of the plot is cemented by the need for understanding which links them. The narrator’s question—“when is this world going to start making sense?”—is also the reader’s. For Amis’ narrative method of “making strange” forces us to share in the narrator’s process of making sense, forces us to imagine the unthinkable, and so implicates us in the (re)discovery of horrors we already know but must acknowledge yet again.

This important and powerful motif of “making sense” in Tod’s narrative derives its power, paradoxically, from the way Amis’ chronillogical method takes the world and makes it strange. However, the constant manufacturing of the uncanny in *Time’s Arrow* ironically tends to subvert the complicity which Langer (22) considers a moral-emotional effect of Holocaust fiction by undermining the credulity upon which the complicity depends. For, as Amis builds upon the possibilities of the chronillogical world, the effect is more than uncanny. When people attach nail clippings to their fingertips and a car accident is an intentional act; when an emergency ward doctor performs his duty by driving a nail into someone’s head; when earthquakes erect cities and childbirth is “the long goodbye to babies” (41); when letters emerge from the fireplace or garbage can, or arrive from Tod himself, whose pen moves across the page erasing the words while tears rise from it and are taken into his eyes, then the irony begins to generate ontological instability. This instability reaches critical mass as the epistemological doubt which has characterized the narrative voice from the beginning of the novel reaches its apotheosis in the Auschwitz sections, and the ironies produced by the reversal of time’s arrow generate a similar disorientation in the reader, who experiences a similar ontological uncertainty during these climactic episodes.⁹

There is a paradoxical moral logic behind Amis’ rendering our own history strange to us. While the chronillogy in *Time’s Arrow* produces a narrative world that constantly draws attention to itself as fictive, and as a consequence, generates a distance

between it and the reader; and while this distance militates against a sense of moral complicity, it does not need to be seen as a moral lack in Amis' novel. Rather the chronillogy in *Time's Arrow* can be seen as expressive of Amis' sense of the historical gap between his post-Holocaust generation and its predecessor, and of his sense not only of his generation's relation to the Holocaust—which is *not* one of complicity—but also of the Holocaust's relation to the postwar world. The chronillogy puts us in precisely the same relation to 20th-century-history as the narrator finds himself vis-à-vis Tod; it is simultaneously our history and an other's. The "terrible journey" back into WWII and the Nazi Holocaust taken by the narrator is a mirror inversion of the journey Amis sees his own generation taking *toward* nuclear holocaust. It is at this point that we can see Amis' narrative method in *Time's Arrow* as expressive of one of the earliest theorizations of the postmodern condition—Lyotard's sense of "the crisis of narratives" (xxiii) in postmodern culture. According to Lyotard, "The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (xxix). Amis' reversal of the alpha-omega linearity of Aristotelian plot reflects the cancellation of the future by the threat of nuclear destruction; as he puts it in *Einstein's Monsters*—"The A-bomb is a Z-bomb" (22). Hence, in *Time's Arrow* the once and future hero is a mass-murderer, the great danger is moral consciousness, the great voyage is escape, the great goal, death. As a postwar "baby boomer," Amis writes from *his* side of that historical divide. He is a *victim* of the world that produced the Holocaust and that the Holocaust produced; he sees that catastrophe as the beginning of his own postwar moral environment: the world of the Cold War and its aftermath. For Amis, the diabolical conundrum of the Nazi Holocaust is also the unthinkable but clearly imaginable horror of his own generation—the invention, use, development and proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Amis' narrative method in *Time's Arrow* is a high risk gamble because the chronillogy not only defamiliarizes the historical world it imitates, it destabilizes the fundamental conventions of mimesis upon which all narrative relies. That instability is the cause of powerful aesthetic effects, but it also jeopardizes the

project by subverting our faith in the capacity of narrative to encode meaning within representation. There is a danger in *Time's Arrow* that the reader ultimately could be rendered morally numb to the shocks the novel delivers by the despair or nihilism which its narrative method also produces. This would be post-modern irony with a vengeance. But, to follow out the illogic of Amis' system of ironies, perhaps the failure to make sense here is success. To *explain* the Holocaust would be a crime of art in which the nature of the offense would be, ultimately, mimesis itself. Moreover, explanation seems less Amis' concern than *warning*.

Irving Howe has remarked that

There is little likelihood of finding a rational structure of explanation for the Holocaust: it forms a sequence of events without historical or moral precedent. To think about ways in which the literary imagination might "use" the Holocaust is to entangle ourselves with a multitude of problems for which no aesthetic can prepare us. (175)

But while it would be misleading to say that, in *Time's Arrow*, Amis has "used" the Holocaust as narrative material in the sense of reducing it to a "subject" or "theme," his approach to that "sequence of events without historical or moral precedent" is to understand it as itself *becoming* a precedent for nuclear holocaust.

For Howe, as for Geoffrey Hartman, the problem facing the fiction writer who attempts to write about the Holocaust is one of conceptualization, not representation; it is the problem of "making sense":

the novelist . . . must—precisely in order to tell a story—"make sense" of his materials, either through explicit theory or, what is usually better, absorbed assumptions. Otherwise, no matter how vivid his style or sincere his feelings, he will finally be at a loss. (Howe 188-89)

As his remarks about the docu-fiction of Capote and Mailer suggest, Amis himself is clearly aware of this problem when writing about a historical subject:

What is missing [from their work] . . . is moral imagination, moral artistry. The facts cannot be arranged to give them moral point. When the reading experience is over, you are left, simply, with murder—and with the human messiness and futility that attends all death. (*The Moronic Inferno* 39)

The “nature of the offence” that Amis encounters in the Holocaust is that the Germans transformed “the human messiness and futility that attends all death” into a terrifying human order and purpose. Amis would seem to agree with Howe that, in art, what transforms the messiness and futility of death into the order and meaning of fiction is “a structuring set of ethical premises, to which are subordinately linked aesthetic biases, through which [the novelist] can form (that is, integrate) his materials” (Howe 188).

In Langer’s view, “the literature of atrocity, by design and by its very nature, frustrates any attempt to discover a moral reality behind the events it narrates; its questions compel not ‘answers,’ but a reliving of the nightmare that inspired them” (120). There is a “moral reality” in *Time’s Arrow*, however; it does not frame the narrative in the sense of providing the reader with a secure basis from which to understand and judge the events and actors; nor does it emerge from the narrative, created from the process of representing and re-imagining the events as story, and ultimately providing the fictive world with an ethos that renders it comprehensible. Rather, the moral reality in Amis’ novel is a spectral presence, a fragment of memory, a nagging sense of *déjà vu*, the dream that vanishes with the act of waking. It is a *terrified* moral reality: the same outraged and overwhelmed sensibility that speaks against the nuclear terror in his other writing of the period—and which seems to speak from a similar position of self-conscious weakness. The moral reality in *Time’s Arrow* is to be found in the *awe* that attends Amis’ sense of the “nature of the offence”; and what needs to be emphasized is that, for him, the same “combination of the atavistic and the modern” (176) which

characterize the Nazi genocide is present in the strategies of the Cold War nuclear powers. High-tech reptiles brought mankind low in the Nazi era, and their successors pose an even greater threat to-day. The Nazi industrialization / institutionalization of evil as a system of genocide has its counterpart, for Amis, in the planning of nuclear warfare by the super-powers. At the end of his 1987 essay, "Nuclear City: the Megadeath Intellectuals," Amis writes: "However far you go into nuclear weapons, there is no understanding to be had, only more knowledge" (*Visiting Mrs. Nabokov* 32); and the same can be said for the Holocaust.

The narrative method and structure in *Time's Arrow* follow the conventions of the detective or mystery novel—the movement forward that is a going back, the "reconstruction of the crime." To use a video metaphor, the narrative structure of the novel is the "reverse scan" implicit in the detective's quest: *Time's Arrow* is a "replay" of an action that has already happened. The I/him split in the narrator's consciousness perfectly expresses the gap between amnesia and anamnesis which the narrative closes when the narrator as amnesiac detective discovers that *he* is the criminal he has been seeking. In terms of the myth that underwrites the detective's quest, Theseus recognizes himself in the monster he discovers, and the monstrosity at the center of the maze is as much the mirror of narrative itself as it is the self reflected within it.¹⁰ His narrator's condition may be Amis' comment on contemporary historical sensibility, the woeful historical ignorance amongst contemporary youth, or the ignorance/indifference of their educators, but the narrator-detective's belatedness is also the necessary precondition for his ironic knowledge. The dissociation of sensibility from which he suffers is, chronologically, both cause and effect of his forgotten knowledge: ". . . Tod can't feel, won't connect, never opens up, always holds something back" (61) from himself, the narrator.

In *The Information* (1995), the novel Amis wrote after *Time's Arrow*, the narrator spends his days anxiously seeking information he knows exists but which he cannot access. He must wait for it to unfold in time. And this is precisely what Amis' narrative trope in *Time's Arrow* enacts: the unfolding or unpacking of time. Moreover, once we recognize how the template of the detective mystery underlies the narrative struc-

ture, it is also possible to see behind Amis' construction of the narrator the figure of the interrogator. The chronillogical method, however, inverts the paradigm and its conventions: the interrogator interrogates himself and undergoes his own torture. *Time's Arrow* moves from history to the end of history, but as the narrative development turns on the greatest of all possible reversals, the reversal of time, the end of history is its beginning. Paradoxically, the linearity of the narrative method reveals a terrifying circularity, terrifying because beginning and end coincide at a point of identity and repetition.

Repetition and identity are figures in another interrogative paradigm of our century: psychoanalysis, "the talking cure." The mystery genre is a major narrative form in the 20th-century in which epistemological issues are dominant, but so, too, is the psychoanalytic "case history," and the latter also seems to underwrite Amis' form in *Time's Arrow*. Although a character tells Tod that "he has no soul" (62), the narrator could be considered as just that, Tod's soul, or a level of consciousness that is as gradually informed by the preconscious as it is constantly tormented by the repressed unconscious. The psychoanalytic nature of the narrator's quest for understanding becomes explicit when he complains that "There's another language, a second language, here in Tod's head. We sometimes dream in that language too" (15); but, of course, he does not understand the language of the dream. Like the analysand, Tod must wait for the information to arrive, information which when it does come clear, is as much produced from within himself as it is received from the other who is also himself. But as with everything else, chronillogy makes *Time's Arrow* an ironic form of the "talking cure" because it produces narration that mimics as it undermines the therapeutic norm—moving as it does from the articulate to pre-articulate. The end is a terrible silence, the muted significance of smoke above a crematorium.

Amis' narrator-as-detective discovers that he is not only the criminal he seeks but the victim as well. The narrator, however, is not only the protagonist's double and the reader's secret sharer; as (almost) self-conscious storyteller, he is also the figure of the novelist-within-the-novel, and it is here that the metafictional consequences of Amis' ironic method begin to play havoc with his project. Amis' method ultimately critiques all the

narrative structures and methodologies which underwrite it— literature, myth, religion, psychoanalysis— and leads to the novel's self-defeat: the recognition that its subject remains beyond the power of narrative— is untellable. From a postmodernist point of view, this self-defeat is necessary. There are no credible master narratives any more, only usable— and so disposable— fictions. For Amis, to have attempted to render this history as narrative in any traditional sense would have been to repeat the original crime of the Final Solution, which was to emplot genocide, to make the unthinkable imaginable within the frame of a *grand récit*— the Third Reich. The narrative flight of *Time's Arrow* ultimately disappears into thin air because it knows the limits of emplotment, the limits of making sense. It should be emphasized, however, that the novel does not do this to mystify the history, for the effect is quite the contrary: through its many and complex ironies, *Time's Arrow* reaffirms the mystery of fiction (in the older sense of “mystery”) as a practice whose value to the species depends upon the recognition of fundamental limits. As Amis himself has asserted: literature represents “The best that humans can do. . . . The best moral thought” (McGrath 196). There are some things which, to tell *as story*, would put our very humanity at risk.

This helps explain, perhaps, the profoundly troubling ambiguity in the final sentences of the novel, an ambiguity which is only partly caused by the chronillogical trope itself. The narrator reports that

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 all too late. (173)

“Too soon” and “too late” are temporal markers impossible to stabilize by this point in the novel. What time zone do they refer to? There is no way that the narrator could have stopped Tod *in time* from becoming Odilo or Odilo from becoming Tod Friendly. On the metafictional level, this inevitability points to the impotence of strictly historical narrative to be anything more than

repetition. At one point in his ironic anamnesis, the narrator speculates about the nature of mimesis and so about the art form in which he is himself an unconscious figure:

Like writing, paintings seem to hint at a topsy-turvy world in which, so to speak, time's arrow moves the other way. The invisible speedlines suggest a different nexus of sequence and process. That thought again. It always strangely disquiets me. I wonder: is this the case with all the arts? (95)

The hermeneutic vertigo that this passage creates—in looking into the world of art, the narrator is looking outward to the world of the reader—is an instance of what McHale means when he describes how a postmodernist novel can push epistemological questions so far that they tip over into ontological questions. The passage raises exactly the kind of questions that McHale argues the postmodern novel asks:

What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10)

The “topsy-turvy” world of art that Amis’ narrator notices is in fact *our* world, and at this point, Amis’ irony blows a heuristic fuse. The narrator speculates that his world might not make sense until understood in the inverted image of art; that inverted image, however, would be the world of history that Amis has attempted to make intelligible through the “topsy-turvy” chronillogy of the narrative. But *neither* “nexus of sequence and process,” fiction or history, makes sense in the ways the narrator and we need them to. The arrow of time the narrator sees flying at him “wrongly. Point first” is arriving from *our* world. The ironic limit here is that if the narrator’s world of horror is reality, then our world, its strangely disquieting reflection, is the moral and metaphysical nightmare which makes sense of it. This, of course, is the beginning point of Amis’ metafictional

experiment, but as this passage shows, the novel cannot progress beyond its own circularity. Amis' narrative structure makes mimesis into a trap; there is no progress, only the regress of endless repetition. The metafictional horror in *Time's Arrow* is the narrative equivalent of the visual conundrum of an Escher drawing, in which foreground-background distinctions are impossible to fix: the past seems to emerge from the present, the present to move into the past. There is no escape from history because it is always about to happen.

In his collection of short stories dealing with the nuclear threat, *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), Amis asserts that "Our time is different" (17) because a different time sense was created with the atomic explosions that ended WWII; a new clock began ticking.¹¹ In the "Introduction: Thinkability," it's clear that, for Amis, this new time-sense is running backwards: the nuclear clock is counting down to the end of time. "The A-bomb is a Z-bomb." The future has been foreshortened; time and the universe are contracting, not expanding. *Time's Arrow* expresses this terror by literally reversing what Stephen Hawking calls the thermodynamic and psychological arrows of time (145, 147).¹²

The Holocaust of WWII and the fear of nuclear destruction seem to come together in Amis' imagination around the metaphor of time: both represent the disappearance of hope, of belief in a future. For Amis, the potential for nuclear holocaust emerged from the actual Holocaust of the Second World War. What he describes as "the evolutionary firebreak of 1945"—i.e., Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*Einstein's Monsters* 18)—was glimpsed already in the Dresden Fire Storm earlier in the war.¹³ (It was this traumatic event that Vonnegut made the center of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.¹⁴) The two holocausts, the one real and historical, the other potential but no less real, converge in Amis' mind in terms of their "thinkability."¹⁵

In *Einstein's Monsters* Amis asserts that "Art celebrates life and not the other thing, not the opposite of life" (19), and yet *Time's Arrow* looks steadfastly at mass death, its victims and the monsters who killed them. The protagonist, Odilo Unverdorben, is one of those monsters. But is he also one of *Einstein's* monsters? The question seems outrageous and yet, in as much as Odilo is one of the "doctors" who justified their barbarism under

the rubric of “Nazi science,” he derives from the same narrative archetype as does the figure Amis deploys in his book about the bomb. Einstein’s monsters are the bombs but also the bomb-makers. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is behind both Odilo Unverdorben and Amis’ representation of Einstein:

All peculiarly modern ills, all fresh distortions and distempers, Bujak attributed to one thing: einsteinian knowledge, knowledge of the strong force. It was his central paradox that the greatest—the purest, the most magical—genius of our time should have introduced the earth to such squalor, profanity and panic. (*Einstein’s Monsters* 37)

Amis connects the unthinkable—total destruction of life on earth—with what he describes in *Einstein’s Monsters* as “einsteinian knowledge,” but this “knowledge of the strong force” is not the new physics so much as a diabolic metaphysics: the “knowledge of the strong force” is the lesson of the Nazi Holocaust, the knowledge of the human capacity for evil. If a nuclear explosion, for Amis, is like the face of Jehovah—to look directly at it is to invite destruction, was the Nazi Holocaust another face of God? What kind of God? Looking into the face of God, into the face of total annihilation, these are the limits of the thinkable, but the unthinkable first confronted us, in this century perhaps, when we discovered the scope of human amorality in the death camps of the Final Solution. The nuclear age is a continuation of the “strong force” that mankind discovered there; in effect, nuclear holocaust will be the final end of that Nazi “project.” Thus, in *Time’s Arrow* and *Einstein’s Monsters*, Amis deals with the terrifying fact that our century has twice confronted us with the limits of the “thinkable”—the Holocaust of WWII and the potential holocaust of the end of the world.¹⁶

Amis published his short story, “Bujak and the Strong Force,” in 1985. It ends with a paragraph of time-reversal clearly influenced by the “famous” paragraph in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*.¹⁷ Two years before this, in 1983, Amis interviewed and wrote a piece on Vonnegut for the *Observer*. In it he describes *Slaughterhouse-Five* as “a cunning novella” and judges it “a dazzling minor classic” (*The Moronic Inferno* 135). What Amis admires

about Vonnegut is his daring “to attempt the impossible: to write a funny book about Nazism”; “to write about Dresden, about war, violence and waste, with maximum irony” (*The Moronic Inferno* 133-34). Presumably, Amis saw the potential for his own kind of “maximum irony” in Vonnegut’s time-reversal technique. At the close of his *Observer* article, however, Amis reports a devastating exchange:

“There was Dresden,” said Vonnegut, “a beautiful city full of museums and zoos—man at his greatest. And when we came up, the city was gone. . . . The raid didn’t shorten the war by half a second, didn’t weaken a German defence or attack anywhere, didn’t free a single person from a death camp. Only one person benefitted.”

“And who was that?”

“Me. I got several dollars for each person killed. Imagine.” (*The Moronic Inferno* 137)

In daring to go further than Vonnegut, Amis must have recognized he was not only upping the moral ante set by the earlier novel, but maximizing the moral ambiguity of his own project as well.

When genocide is seen to make sense as genesis, *Time’s Arrow* reaches an ironic limit that is the limit of the narrative project itself—the novel whose genesis has been the Nazi genocide. In Chapter 5, Tod begins his account of arriving at Auschwitz Central with the ironically hopeful expectation that now “The world is going to start making sense . . .” (124); following the detailed description of the activities in the camp in the chapter, he begins Chapter 6 with: “Well, how do you follow that?” (146) The rhetorical question is an ironic reprise of Adorno’s famous remark: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34); and the narrator’s answer: “you can’t. Of course you can’t,” urges the reader to consider the metafictional dimension of the novel.

Langer paraphrases Adorno’s concern to be that art which deals with the Holocaust risks making “moral chaos into aesthetic form” and so “misrepresent[ing] that chaos and creat[ing] a sense of meaning and purpose in the experience of

the Holocaust" (22). But Irving Howe has a more interesting response to Adorno's admonitory *caveat*:

Adorno, perhaps with only a partial awareness, was turning back to a "primitive" religious feeling—the feeling that there are some things in our experience, or some aspects of the universe, that are too terrible to be looked at or into directly. In ancient mythologies and religions there are things and beings that are not to be named. They may be the supremely good or supremely bad, but for mortals they are the unutterable, since there is felt to be a limit to what man may see or dare, certainly to what he may meet. Perseus would turn to stone if he were to look directly at the serpent-headed Medusa, though he would be safe if he looked at her only through a reflection in a mirror or a shield (this latter strategy . . . being the very one that the cannier writers have adopted in dealing with the Holocaust). (181)

Amis' chronillogical method in *Time's Arrow* shows that he is one of these "cannier writers": the reverse chronology of his fictive mirror-world allows us both to look at history obliquely and to think about the unthinkable. But although Howe's reading of the myth of Perseus and Medusa as an allegory of mimesis is profoundly suggestive, it is surprising that he does not consider a form of the unapproachable/inexpressible closer to the culture and myths of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust—namely, the Tetragrammaton, the four consonants of the name of God—"Yahweh"—which cannot be pronounced but must be said only through a substitute, "Adonai." When written, the four vowels of the latter are combined with the four consonants of the former to produce "Jehovah."¹⁸ The sign "Jehovah" covers its referent by simultaneously expressing and concealing it and this ironic signification is a precise analogue to the narrative form of *Time's Arrow*, which presents the Holocaust *through* a veil of irony. Of course, to connect the Holocaust and the name of God in this way—except in the darkest of theologies—is more absurd than blasphemous,¹⁹ but in a sense there is something heretical in a

line of thought which connects the Nazi genocide and the threat of nuclear holocaust and which regards the Holocaust as an event in the moral history of the human species more than as an exclusively Jewish catastrophe.

It should be pointed out as well that the connection in Amis' thinking between the Nazi Holocaust and the threat of nuclear holocaust also would have been strengthened by his reading of Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors*. Diedrick has pointed out how "virtually every aspect of *Time's Arrow*—historical setting, plot, characterization, even language—is informed by [Lifton's book]" (173); but what is not recognized is that Amis' reading of Lifton's study of the psychopathology of Nazi genocide would also have strengthened the connection in his mind between that history and an eventual nuclear apocalypse. Lifton suggests that the value of his study of the Nazi doctors is that it may lead to a more general psychology of genocide:

If there is any truth to the psychological and moral judgments we make about the specific and unique characteristics of Nazi mass murder, we are bound to derive from them *principles* that apply more widely—principles that speak *to the extraordinary threat and potential for self-annihilation that now haunt humankind*. (417 emphasis added)

Lifton too, it seems, sees a continuity between the Nazi Holocaust and the threat of nuclear holocaust; and the "megadeath intellectuals" Amis interviews and describes in his essay, "Nuclear City," in *The Moronic Inferno*, clearly exemplify Lifton's description of what occurs when professionals in the arms race undergo the "doubling" that produces a "nuclear-weapons self" (464-65).²⁰

Blasphemous, heretical, Swiftian, absurdist—however we label the irony in *Time's Arrow*, the effects Amis' chronillogy produces are fundamental to the novel's artistic success and significance. Some of the effects are comic and, to a certain extent, there is a comic element in *all* the inversions which result from the narrative method. In "Holocaust *Laughter?*" Terence Des Pres distinguishes between realistic and comic mimesis: the former is compelled, paradoxically, to reproduce the world it

seeks to displace; while the latter generates a laughter which “is hostile to the world it depicts and subverts the respect on which representation depends” (219). While Amis’ narrative method in *Time’s Arrow* subverts mimesis, it does not express a disrespect for the history it represents; moreover, within the limits it probes and discovers, the irony— even when obscene, *ironically*— is appropriate for the moral and aesthetic goals the novel seems to have set itself.

Des Pres argues that the tragic mode is mimetic and “elevates *what is*,” whereas “the comic spirit proceeds in an antimimetic mode that mocks *what is*”:

Tragic seriousness, with its endorsement of terror and pity, accepts the terrible weight of what happens. There is thus a connection between solemnity and reverent regard for the burden of the past, a sense of responsibility, perhaps also of guilt, that unites us with the scene of suffering and quiets us with awe. (220)

Amis’ ironic method in *Time’s Arrow* is simultaneously mimetic and anti-mimetic, and consequently, places the reader, uncomfortably, uncannily, *between* the tragic and comic poles of moral/aesthetic experience.²¹ The effect of this awkwardness is that the reader is *not* moved, in the tradition of tragic experience, to *accept* “the terrible weight of what happens.” The last thing Amis wants to do with *Time’s Arrow* is *quiet* the reader with awe in the face of this century’s terrible history; rather, he wants to awaken the reader to the terrible continuity between the Nazi Holocaust and the imminent holocaust of nuclear war. ☹

Notes

1. Langer remarks that “the Holocaust assaulted the very notion of temporal sequence. . . . [T]he kind of atrocity at issue here assaulted the very coherence of time and led to the breakdown of ‘chronology’ as a meaningful conception” (251). Along with the “famous” paragraph in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* which seems to be the primary literary inspiration for Amis’ narrative experiment (see *Time’s Arrow* 175), other

literary antecedents would include *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alejo Carpentier's *Viaje a la Semilla*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Benjamin Button," Carlos Fuentes' *Aura*, Brian Aldiss' *An Age*, Philip K. Dick's *Counter-Clock World*, and J.G. Ballard's "Mr F. is Mr. F."

2. Lawrence Langer discusses the characteristics and themes of Holocaust fiction in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1975); for extensive consideration of the moral and aesthetic issues raised by the literary representation of the Holocaust, see also *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (1988) and *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (1992).

3. Indeed, Amis simply seems to combine Hannah Arendt's famous "banality of evil" with the stereotype of the "good German." The narrator describes the protagonist as a product of his culture: "I've come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under the cover of numbers. He could never be the exception; he is dependent on the health of his society . . ." (164-65).

4. Lang makes the point that the "moral enormity" of the Holocaust "could not fail to affect the act of writing and the process of literary representation" (1) and Amis' use of a narrative method that alters the fundamental laws of the universe with regard to our perception and understanding of cause-effect relationships in the physical world would seem to derive as much from an empathic imagination as from literary wit.

5. Diedrick uses Freud's concept of the uncanny—"a return of the repressed"—to describe the structural relationship between "the two 'halves' of *Time's Arrow*—the Auschwitz and pre-Auschwitz sections" (168). Amis achieves the same effect in *Time's Arrow* that Adorno ascribes to Picasso's *Guernica*—which is "not the transfiguration of empirical reality . . . but its *disfiguration*, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader's sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an accompanying infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable, to such a degree that the possibility of aesthetic pleasure . . . is intrinsically eliminated"; see Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, 2-3.

6. See Norman O. Brown's discussion of Swift's 'excremental vision' in *Life Against Death*, 179-201.

7. Amis seems indebted to Brown for the connection between excrement and money, which is developed later in the novel when Tod has become the Nazi, Odilo Unverdorben. He and the other escaping war criminals take the gold they have plundered from the victims of the camps and bury it beneath a compost heap: "Of course, the act was

merely symbolic: the gold's temporary return to the earth. . . . When he swears, Odilo invokes human ordure, from which, as we now know, all human good eventually emanates" (123); see Brown, 191.

8. Diedrick comments that "Before long, this inverted world becomes comprehensible, because it follows predictable rules" and that eventually its "crazy logic" prepares the reader "to confront another inverted world: Auschwitz and its obscene logic" (164).

9. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale uses epistemological and ontological issues as defining markers to distinguish modernist from postmodernist fiction; he also points out how some narratives can straddle the divide: "push epistemological questions far enough and they 'tip over' into ontological questions" (11). Such is the case with *Time's Arrow*. Amis' narrative method "pushes" in just this way and the epistemological confusion it generates gives way, eventually, to the kinds of ontological questions McHale argues underlie postmodern narratives: "What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" (10) See, also, his more recent *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992).

10. Or, to use another myth relevant to the detective-mystery genre and more specifically to *Time's Arrow*, Odilo is like Oedipus, who also makes a journey back into his mother's womb to discover that he is the criminal he has been seeking. (I am indebted to my colleague, Peter Hyland, for this observation.) The mystery/mythic framework that underlies *Time's Arrow* also structures another postmodern British novel concerned with history and the *end* of history, Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983). Amis has worked in the detective/mystery genre with his most recent novel, *Night Train* (1997).

11. See also, McGrath, 194.

12. There is a chapter in Hawking's *A Brief History of the Universe* titled "The Arrow of Time" in which he contemplates a contracting rather than expanding universe, and what he describes is quite obviously the narrative world of Amis' novel: "People in the contracting phase would live their lives backward: they would die before they were born and get younger as the universe contracted" (150). Hawking's book appeared to much acclaim in 1988, the year before Amis began seriously "considering the idea of telling the story of a man's life backwards in time" (*Time's Arrow* 175). But Amis was thinking in terms of time-reversal before Hawking's book, presumably as a result of the "certain paragraph—a famous one" in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* that he acknowledges as an influence on the narrative method of the novel (*Time's Arrow* 175). Amis' short story, "Bujak and the Strong Force," appeared in the *London Review of Books* in June 1985 (and later in *Einstein's Monsters*) and in it the narrator recalls Bujak's Einstein-inspired

fantasy of a contracting universe in which time moves backwards (see *Einstein's Monsters* 47); the final paragraph describes time-reversal in a way that clearly presages the experiment in *Time's Arrow*.

13. Amis has described the nuclear age as "the one evolutionary thing I'm absolutely clear has happened in this century. Post-1945 life is completely different from everything that came before it" (McGrath 194).

14. In "Bujak and the Strong Force or God's Dice," Amis uses the holocaust metaphor to link the Nazi death camps, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the irrational violence that suddenly destroys the protagonist's family (see *Einstein's Monsters* 28, 30, 36); that is, the metaphor seems to represent the unthinkable coming to pass, either at the individual or the collective level.

15. Also in terms of imagery: the motif of the smoke-filled sky above the camp crematoria in *Time's Arrow* recalls the haunted post-apocalyptic sky of "The Time Disease" in *Einstein's Monsters*.

16. Diedrick writes that "A determination to think the unthinkable unites [*Time's Arrow*, *London Fields*, and *Einstein's Monsters*]" (132).

17. For the "famous" paragraph in question, see *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 74-75.

18. See Metzger and Coogan, 738.

19. Terence Des Pres makes an apposite allusion to a parallel tradition when he expresses the problem of mimesis and the Holocaust: "in the presence of this awful godlike thing, no graven image is permitted" (218).

20. Lifton's theory of "doubling"—the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self" (418)—is particularly relevant to an understanding of Amis' construction of the narrator Tod Friendly. And one only has to recall the career of Wernher von Braun, the Nazi rocket scientist who joined the American missile program after the war and rose to become a top administrator in NASA by 1970, to see how the metamorphosis of Odilo Unverdorben into Joe Young/Tod Friendly is a doubling that reflects historical reality as well as Lifton's psychoanalytical theory.

21. Amis has described himself as "basically a comic writer. The shape of my novels are [sic] all comic, or anti-comic, but certainly not anything else, not tragic or even satirical" (McGrath 191).

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