“HERE THERE IS NO WHY”:
CREATING LIFE FROM DEATH IN MARTIN AMIS’S
TIME’S ARROW, OR THE NATURE OF THE OFFENCE

Silvia Antosa
University of Palermo

During the 1990s, British writers paid increasing attention to the controversial subject of the Holocaust. They were interested in the possibilities of re-presenting the tragic experience of concentration camps in art and literature. On this point, Theodor Adorno asserted in 1965 that art can only have a marginal role, since it runs the risk of “aestheticizing”, de-historicising and even giving meaning to the devastating experience of an entire community of people. More recently, in a discussion of Adorno’s theory, Martin Amis pointed out that art has instead the power and the responsibility to keep memory alive and to make individuals ‘experience’ the past in order to refigure their present and their future.

In his seventh novel, entitled *Time’s Arrow, or The Nature of the Offence* (1991) Amis problematizes the artistic representation of the tragedy of the Holocaust. The novel is a postmodern narrative going backwards in time, and is about the life of the protagonist, Ted T. Friendly, from his death as a doctor living in the American province, to his peregrinations in disguise across different countries. As he becomes younger and stronger, he first goes to New York as John Young, then to Portugal as Hamilton De Souza, and then moves to Naples and the Vatican, where he changes his name again. From there, he wanders around Northern Italy and Central Europe to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Eventually, he is shown to be a German doctor who tortures and performs atrocious experiments on the deportees. Odilo Unverdorben – this is the

---

1 “I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature. The question asked by a character in Sartre’s play *Mort Sans Sepulture*, ‘Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until their bones break in their bodies?’ is also the question whether any art now has a right to exist; whether intellectual regression is not inherent in the concept of committed literature because of the regression of society [...]”, T. Adorno, *Commitment*, in *Aesthetic and Politics*, London and New York: Verso, 1980 (1965), p. 179, my emphasis.

protagonist’s real name – gradually becomes younger until he forgets the atrocities he committed and finally vanishes into his mother’s womb.

The narrative reversal of the linearity of time with its connected cause-effect relations is paralleled by the reversal of the traditional linearity of the story. This connection is evident in the very title of the novel: Time’s Arrow is an expression coined by A.S. Eddington in 1928 to define the unidirectionality of time as a consequence of the second law of thermodynamics. It thus anticipates the temporal inversion of the narrative. The subtitle, The Nature of the Offence, is an intertextual reference to the work of Primo Levi, to whom the author is much indebted, as he states in the afterword to the novel.

The unidirectionality of time is explained by the second law of thermodynamics, according to which, in a closed system, heat can move from a warmer to a colder area, and not vice versa. As a consequence, the quantity of energy that cannot be retrieved – named entropy – always tends to increase with the passing of time. Since the Victorian age, it was widely thought that this law predicted the end of the universe and was called Heat-Death. In other words, it was thought that in a not too distant future all energy would be transformed into entropy. The unidirectionality of time is therefore caused by the increase of entropy – or disorder – that separates the past from the future and prevents the reversibility of time itself. However, there is an exception to this law. In 1871 a Victorian physicist, James Clerk Maxwell, envisioned a microscopic being who could separate fast molecules from slow ones in a closed system. In this way, it could decrease the system’s entropy without doing work, thus virtually making possible the reversal of the arrow of time. According to Katherine Hayles, “Maxwell’s Demon is a fantasy about an animistic figure who can control dissipation through an exercise of will [...] [It] is a liminal figure who stands at a threshold that separates not just slow molecules from fast but an ordered world of will from the disordered world of chaos”.

From this perspective, it could be suggested that the temporal dimension that governs the inverted chronology of Time’s Arrow is the narrative representation of the exceptional “fantasy” discovered by Maxwell.

In addition, the thermodynamic arrow is not the only one connected with temporality. Stephen Hawking pointed out that:

5 Amis is not the first writer to experiment with the linearity of time in his fiction. There are many novels in which time is manipulated. Among them, for example, we can mention Silkie and Brown by Lewis Carroll, Le Testament D’Orphée by Jean Cocteau, An Age by Brian Aldiss, Counter-Clock World by Philip Dick, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Mr. F. is Mr. F written by J. G. Ballard. In the Afterword of Time’s Arrow, Amis briefly examine the intertextual references to his novel, and mentions the well-known paragraph in Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse Five, in which the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, watches a movie on the bombing of Dresden backwards.

6 Amis refers to Se questo è un uomo, La treuga, I sommerni e i salotti, e Ad ora incerta. The quotation I put in the title in this article, “Here there is no why” is a sentence that Amis quotes directly from Primo Levi’s Se questo è un uomo, which refers to the absence of logic in the inverted world of the concentration camp.

7 The word “entropy” was coined in 1865 by the German physicist Rudolf Clausius, and comes from the Greek ἐντρείψις, which means to transform, to change.

There are at least three different arrows of time. First, there is the thermodynamic arrow of time, the direction of time in which disorder or entropy increases. Then, there is the psychological arrow of time, the direction in which we feel time passes, the direction in which we remember the past but not the future. Finally, there is the cosmological arrow of time, the direction of time in which the universe is expanding rather than contracting.

Since the three arrows are pointed towards the same direction, there is a close connection between the passing of time and our inner perception of its duration. As a matter of fact, the narrative movement from the future to the past should move from a situation dominated by entropy and disorder to one of order, thus creating a sense of expectation in readers as the protagonist becomes younger. In the novel, however, the passing of time and its psychological perception cause a reversal of any logical and temporal dynamics. In Gavin Kurlik's words, "Time's Arrow [...] portray(s) the inevitability of repetitive or regressive time, which constantly threatens to trap the individual in a world of exhausted potential". As in some of his novels, Amis turns time into a circular, repetitive or predetermined pattern that traps his characters, preventing them from making their own choices and leading them to discover that the very idea of identity and reality are only illusory constructs. In other words, Amis self-consciousness leaves the dialectical relationship between time and identity-construction unresolved. Readers are thus left in a sort of narrative "black hole" in which time and order no longer have any meaning, and are compelled to find a new interpretation of a narrative world where the symbolism itself is deconstructed. As shall be seen, in trying to decode the text from a syntactic and linguistic perspective, readers are directly faced with the illogic world of the novel, whereby all transcendent values such as identity, time and faith are dismantled. This task prepares them to accomplish the more difficult, almost impossible task of decoding the logic of the inverted world of Auschwitz.

Together with the technique of the temporal reversal, Amis employs another strategy in his novel: the adoption of an unreliable narrative voice. In the moment of his death, that occurs at the outset of the novel, the protagonist gives birth to a sort of alter ego or doppelganger, that experiences the time backwards in time. It is the protagonist's double who tells the story. He is the guest in the body of the real protagonist, and can feel his emotions but cannot listen to his thoughts, which are hidden in his "past". The narrative "I" is therefore a sort of incorporeal consciousness that is not the protagonist's present consciousness, but rather his former self, which he resurrected and removed when he adhered to the Nazi project. Furthermore, in upholding the authority of a judging voice, the adoption of an unreliable narrator helps the author to undermine and problematize the complex issues of morality and reality, and to further complicate the ontological issues of being and identity.

This process of splitting one's own consciousness caused the creation of a double identity, which is inscribed in his real name: Odilo Unverdorben. "Odilo" echoes "St. Odilia", which is the patron saint of the blind. They ironically refer to the homoerotic activities and the moral blindness of Odilo, who denies any value to human life in the name of the Nazi "sacred" ideology. "Unverdorben", which means "uncorrupted", "pure", seems to refer to the other self that the protagonist rejected when he chose to become part of the Nazi organisation. But "unverdorben" may also refer to the Nazi project of creating a "pure", "uncorrupted" race. Odilo's two selves - the narrated and naming "I" - correspond to the dual nature of the narrative, which is at the same time dialogue and alienation.

The story later continues to question his own identity and to try to make sense of what surrounds him: "Wait a minute. Why am I walking backwards into the house? Wait! Is it dusk coming, or is it dawn? What is it - what is the sequence of events? What are the mechanisms? Why are the birds singing so strangely? Where am I heading?" Since he looks at the world by adopting a traditional temporal perspective, the narrator cannot understand the illogical sequence of events. In this way, he seems to give voice to the readers' perplexities, and allows them to have access to a world that is ostensibly difficult to understand.

Furthermore, the narrator is aware of experiencing a journey whose destination seems to be predetermined - a destination where he thinks he will finally find an answer to his doubts. In the course of the narration, he poses an increasing number of questions about the meaning and the direction of his journey, and overtly refers to a "secret" surrounding Tod's life that he does not know yet but is sure to get to know with the passing of time. The inverted temporality of the novel emphasises the protagonist's lack of control over his life, as well as his inability to understand the meaning and the direction of his journey. The inverted temporality of the novel also reflects the protagonist's confusion and lack of understanding about his own identity and the world around him.

10 The process of doubling of Nazi doctors' consciousness is alluded to by Robert Jay Lifton in his influential work, The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide. New York: Basic Books, 1986, that Amis choices as an important source for his novel, as he stated in the afterword to the novel: "I also owe a great debt to my friend Robert Jay Lifton. Two summers ago I found myself considering the idea of telling the story of a man's life backwards in time. Then, one afternoon, I... Lipton gave me a copy of his book The Nazi Doctors. My mind could not quite have been written without it, Time's Arrow, or The Nature of the Offense. London: Penguin, 1992 (1991), p. 175, emphasis in the text from now on TA followed by the page number.
11 TA, p. 14, emphasis in the text.
12 In the text, the narrator interrupts the narrative of the story several times in order to put some questions about the sense of his existential journey: "The real Tod. Of course, I'm curious too. The real Tod: show me it. But I am I... I really want to watch" (TA, p. 62). I've got to get over it. I keep expecting the world to make sense. It doesn't. It won't" (TA, p. 91).
of control over his experience: the inversion of the second law of thermodynamics turns events into inevitable incidents. The narrator soon realizes this sense of inevitability: "I speak without volition." In this way, he points out that he is aware of being a passive witness of what is doomed to happen.

The naïve interpretations given by the narrator to the inverted logics of the world he lives in create an ironic effect. His misleading comments on what happens around him and his mistaken interpretation of time reach their dramatic climax when events take place in Auschwitz. Like the narrator of A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift, he fails to acknowledge the atrocities that occur around him, thus arousing horror and incredulity in the reader. Indeed, the crucial task of reading the real nature of the "horror" and inferring a moral message from it falls to the reader. In Amis's words: "The reader has to do all the work, because the terrible events are described as benevolent, but in such a way that, I hope, there is a sort of disgust and an uneasiness and self-delusion in the way it's shown. [...] It was a coprocentric universe [...] So it's there, but the narrator can't spot it, the reader has to do all that".

At the beginning of the novel, Amis plays with the comic undertones of his narrative. Even dialogues are reversed, although the writer employs total speech reversal only once in the opening dialogue. Afterwards, the narrator learns how to translate words back into their conventional order. Once readers have learnt how to read the inverted sequence of events, they find themselves projected into an absurd world. The narrating voice describes in detail the activities that he and Tod accomplish, and in so doing reveals his "Swiftian" attention to the inverted dynamics of the body.

In describing everyday activities like eating, for example, the narrator adopts an extremely precise language, which may sound inappropriately scientific for this kind of descriptions. However, it effectively describes the steps of the process of inversion, thus preventing semantic ambiguity. Furthermore, the reversal of any single narrative action demands a rededication of language itself, which has to establish new connections with new, unknown and unexpected referents.

As a consequence, trash becomes the source from which everything originates: leftovers are returned to the supermarket, sustenance issues from the toilet, crumpled papers go back to the letter post, broken objects are mended, and then "sold" to the shop. In the narrator's words: "All life [...] all sustenance, all meaning (and a good deal of money) issues from a single household appliance: the toilet handle." The toilet handle thus becomes the instrument of daily creation that anticipates the essence of the creation of life in Auschwitz. At the outset, the narrator bitterly comments on "that humiliating toilet seat", referring to the act of defecating; it is the same smell he later finds in the camp of Auschwitz: "There was a new smell in the air. The sweet smell of... But here his comment acquires a different resonance, since he mistakenly associates this smell with the creation of new human beings and not with their death.

The inverted metaphor of trash and human excrement as sources of nurture, creation and regeneration raises suspicions about the "mystery" that the narrator is about to discover: "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 truth and shit, and that is wrong in time... And the secret is the nature of the offence itself, which comes from trash and excrement..."

In Auschwitz the narrator finally understands the sense of his preternatural mission: "Our preternatural purpose: To dream a race. To make people from the weather. From thunder and lightning. With gas, electricity, with shit, with fire..." In the inverted logics of the narrative world, Auschwitz becomes the place of the creation of life. The inversion of the Holocaust also becomes the central metaphor of thermodynamics: new forms of life are given birth out of nothing and their energy is then dispersed as entropy in space. The thermodynamic and psychological inverted order of the narrative world leads to Auschwitz, where readers do not find - as discussed above - the final "order" they expect, but only "orexite", garbage and excrements. Auschwitz is the literal metaphor of the Heat-Death of the universe, where law and order do no longer exist.

11 A Modest Proposal of John Swift.
12 Ibid, p. 21, emphasis in the text. In the interview, Amis also replies to those who criticized him for dealing with such an important historical subject only to show his superficiality and his topical approach: "Nothing was a biographical vision to excise the cancer of Jerry. To turn it into something that amuses Jerry is a respectable irony. People who say that you can't use sophistical means to speak about the Holocaust... You know, you can only go near the subject in a sensational way. [...] But those who automatically think that sophisticated and witty or ironic means for writing about something serious... that's something impermissible, that is, is just a harmlessness in another guise."
13 Ibid, p. 29, emphasis in the text.
14 "Dog, Dog", says the lady in the pharmacy. "Dog? I join in. "Oh, so?" "Ay, let's go, to the pub, shall we?"
15 Consider, for example, the following passage on the process of nutrition: "Eating is an uninteresting task. First I stack the clean plates in the dishwasher [...] then you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short while. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skilful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon [...] Next you face the laborious business of cooking, of resemblance, of storage, before the return of these food-stuffs to the Superette."
16 Ibid, p. 19.

On Amis's linguistic and stylistic strategies, see M. Slater. "Problems When Time Moves Backwards: Martin Amis's Time's Arrow", The Journal of the English Association, Leicester, England, 42, 173, Summer 1993, pp. 141-152. On Amis's choice of verbs, Slater points out that: "The most interesting of the reversed verbs is the test make one feel that "there is something sinister hidden in their meaning, while yet being a perfectly logical reversal of the normal process" (p. 148, my emphasis).
17 TA, p. 18.
18 Ibid, my emphasis.
19 TA, p. 127, my emphasis.
20 TA, p. 73, my emphasis.

In the novel, there are a number of clues that anticipate the nature of the secret the narrator fears to discover. For example, Tod has recurring nightmares in which there are black boots and white shirts. Sometimes, as the narrator voices admits, "he dreams he is shunting human bones" (TA, p. 110). The narrator does not know where the bones come from until the end of the novel. Another recurring nightmare of the protagonist is about a "baby bomb", a child who exercises his power over about thirty adults who cannot shut him up. Only in the end of the novel does the narrator find out that in one of his earliest missions, Tod (now God) had discovered some thirty young Jesus hidden behind a panel in the wall thanks to the voices of a child, who has become the haunting presence in his nightmares.
21 TA, p. 128.
This lack of order is reinforced by the lack of a conclusion to the story, which denies the possibility of finding a semantic order for the narrated events. In the final paragraphs of the novel, the narrating 'I' perceives the real temporal movement of events: the moment in which Odilo is un-fecundated and vanishes, the arrow of time inverts its movement and goes in the opposite direction. The narrator thus understands that the events he experienced will begin again, but this time in the "right" temporal direction. The transformation of the figure of Odilo from "angel of life" to "angel of death" utterly destabilises the narrator, as well as the readers, since it conveys a sense of a never-ending semantic circularity. Eventually, it seems to be impossible to find an underlying meaning to the novel, exactly as it is impossible to find a meaning to the illogical inverted world of Auschwitz.

References


