Hi(s)story Gone Wrong. Martin Amis on the Holocaust in *Time's Arrow*

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Abstract
A historical novel told backwards, Martin Amis's Time's Arrow *recycles the shared memories of the Holocaust, experiments with narrative representation and uses black irony throughout, in an attempt at healing the past and avenging the dead, while shedding a surgical light on the present and the living. The paper focuses on the aforementioned, analysing the way in which form supports content, and his story (that of a Nazi doctor) rewrites history (which emerges as a series of consecutive dystopias).*

Key words: *history, memory, representation, irony, intertext, rewriting*

Introductory lines

One of the darkest moments in human history, the Holocaust is constantly brought to light, and rightly so, via scientific writing and research, personal histories of survivors and witnesses, literary attempts at recycling the past and offering food for thought. The latter, although controversial, remains the most easily accessible to all, constructs and reconstructs notable representations, thus preserving the memory while formulating pertinent judgements for generations to come. A case in point is *Time's Arrow* (1991) by Martin Amis who overlaps history and fiction to tell a memorable story of an upside down world. The novel's intertext is made up of a series of writings, and is evocative of a number of writers, many of whom are acknowledged in the Afterword of the book.

> Two summers ago I found myself considering the idea of telling the story of a man's life backwards in time. Then, one afternoon, […] (Robert Jay) Lifton gave me a copy of his book *The Nazi Doctors*. My novel would not and could not have been written without it. Probably the same applies to the works of Primo Levi, in particular *If This Is a Man*, *The Truce*, *The Drowned and the Saved* and *Moments of Reprieve*. Other writers, whom I

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> found especially helpful, for various reasons, include Martin Gilbert, Gitta Sereny, Joachim Fest, Arno Mayer, Erich Fromm, Simon Wiesenthal, Henry Orenstein and Nora Waln. At the back of my mind I also had a certain short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer and a certain paragraph – a famous one – by Kurt Vonnegut. (I won't list the authors of the medical texts I unenthusiastically pored over; but I am glad to thank Lawrence Shainberg for his entertaining and terrifying book *Brain Surgeon*.) (Amis 1991: 176-177)

Accessing the inventory of shared memories of the Holocaust and adding his personal artistic touch to their novel representation, Amis builds a disturbing (and disturbed) universe, whose reversed time covers approximately seventy-five years, from 1991 to 1916, whose space stretches back from The United States to Portugal, Poland and Germany, and whose protagonist, Odilo Unverdorben[1] (alias Tod Friendly, alias John Young, alias Hamilton de Souza), comes to life in the first person narrative generated by his soul (Amis 2001: 289) – with the unnaturalness of technique supporting the insanity of the events covered.

Puzzling times and the literary puzzle

The novel opens with the protagonist's entry into life following his death, in 1991 apparently. A doctor surrounded by doctors, on a hospital bed, he is confronted with his double.

> Presiding over the darkness out of which I had loomed there was a figure, a male shape, with an entirely unmanageable aura, containing such things as beauty, terror, love, filth, and above all power. This male shape or essence seemed to be wearing a white coat (a medic's stark white smock). And black boots. (1991: 12)

The double (or soul) assumes the task of telling the story of an "I" to be clarified later on in the book, whose journey puzzles even the narrator-witness, and which inserts a welcome metafictional comment on the novel's chronotopic frame.

> Wait a minute. Why am I walking *backwards* into the house? Wait. Is it dusk coming, or is it dawn? What is the – what is the sequence of the journey I'm on? What are its rules? Why are the birds singing so strangely? Where am I heading? (14)

In Part I, the first chapter of the novel (*What goes around, comes around*) and of the life under focus features Tod Friendly, in America (Boston). The narrated "he" merges with the narrating "I" in a magic realist fashion, with the resulting "we" being allowed a voice also.

> Tod Friendly. I have no access to his thoughts – but I am awash with his emotions. […] and I sense the heat of fear and shame. Is that what I am heading towards? […] Watch. We're getting younger. We are. We're getting stronger. We're even getting *taller*. I don't recognise the world we're in. (15)

Another explanatory aside is woven into the narrative, with hints at the novel's dynamics through considerations of the date on a daily gazette that seventy-something old Tod keeps buying.

> After October 2, you get October 1. After October 1, you get September 30. How do you figure *that*? […] It just seems to me that the film is running backwards. (16)

The self-reflexivity of the novel discourse, its narrative technique and its underlying intertext are further reinforced by direct and indirect references to ancient myths (of Narcissus and of Faust) and to literary precursors (Joseph Conrad[2]).

> Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection – with his own soul. If you ever close a deal with the devil, and he wants to take something in return – don't let him take your mirror. Not your mirror, which is your reflection, which is your double, which is your secret sharer. (17)

To narrow down such broad meditations on the essence of things, the erudite narrator shifts the emphasis to Tod's inner core, a strategy with a powerful proleptic force, announcing the horrors of the Holocaust which haunt our common past, but which lie in the narrative's future.

> [Tod] went back to bed and resumed his nightmare. His sheets have the white smell of fear. I am obliged to smell what he smells, the baby powder, the smell of his nails before the fire spits them out – to be caught in the dish and then agonisingly reapplied to his thrilled fingertips. (18)

Every now and then, however, the narrative is anchored in strict chronology. The Reagan era (1981-1989) – with its belief in individual freedom, its economic prosperity, and its role in ending the Cold War – is the backdrop to the second chapter (*You have to be cruel to be kind*) and to another stage in Tod's life, embarking on a medical career with the Associated Medical Services (though Canadian in reality) in Wellport (probably Wellfleet, Massachusetts, since Route 6 is mentioned, and the proximity to New York has already been established through remarks about *The New York Times*). Striking here are the head-aching and abnormally reversed dialogues with his patients, training the reader for the double inversions (both at the level of form and at the level of content) which pervade the remainder of the novel.

> 'Uh, seventy-six. Eighty-six.'
> 'What's ninety-three minus seven?'
> '1914-1918.'
> 'What are the dates of the First World War?'
> 'Okay', says the patient, sitting up straight.
> 'I'm now going to ask you some questions.'
> 'No.'
> 'Sleeping okay? Any digestive problems?'
> 'I'll be eighty-one in January.'
> 'And you're… what?'
> 'I don't feel myself.'
> 'Well, what seems to be the problem?' (35)

Women (re)appear in the protagonist's life (his relationship with Irene is foregrounded) and babies start creeping into the conversations more and more frequently, as marriage and children are in store for the past (!) and as images of Auschwitz atrocities committed against infants are collated into a grotesque kaleidoscopic representation of the recognisable dystopia. Birth, for instance, narrated backwards, becomes a horrifying experience, which at once renders the futility of human existence and formulates harsh, though oblique, criticism addressed to Nazi practices in the concentration camps.

> Mothers bring Tod their babies in the night. […] The mothers pay him in antibiotics, which often seem to be the cause of the babies' pain. You have to be cruel to be kind. The babies are no better when they leave, patiently raising hell all the way to the door. And the moms crack up completely: they go out of here *wailing*. It's understandable. I understand. I know how people disappear. Where do they disappear to? Don't ask that question.

> Never ask it. It's none of your business. The little children [are] sad to be going. In the very last months they cry more than ever. And they no longer smile. The mothers then proceed to the hospital. Where else? Two people go into that room, that room with the forceps, the soiled bib. Two go in. But only one comes out. Oh, the poor mothers, you can see how they feel during the long goodbye, the long goodbye to babies. (40)

The sensitive subject of babies is actually the focal point of the memory recorded in *Time's Arrow*, a stratagem for stirring extreme compassion and counteracting dangerous complacency. Babies populate Tod's dreams, witnessed by the narrating "I" aware of horrible deeds in the protagonist's intentionally misdirected past.

> And then in darkness with a shout that gives a fierce twist to his jaw – we're in [the dream]. The enormous figure in the white coat, his black boots straddling many acres. Somewhere down there, between his legs, the queue of souls. I wish I had power, just power enough to avert my eyes, Please, don't show me the babies… Where does the dream come from? He hasn't done it yet. So the dream must be about what Tod will eventually do. (48)

Within the broader frame of world history (and the recollection of its dominant belligerent acts) and with time moving in the opposite direction (yet with chronological landmarks inserted for guidance), the dreams of dying babies start taking an increasingly material shape during and brought about the Vietnam War (1975-1955).

> There is another war coming. Oh, yes, we do know that. A big war, a world war, which will roll through villages. […] There's exactly twenty-five years to go before it starts. (58)

The year is 1964, therefore, and Tod is forty-eight years old, growing younger and more poignantly aware of something terribly wrong in his future, awareness triggered by the coming World War Two – setting the stage for the crime scenes somehow exiting fiction and entering reality.

> I've seen the dates. We're nowhere near young enough for the present war, but when the world war comes – we'll be just right to fight it. We are, after all, a superb physical specimen. Our feet aren't flat. Our vision is clear. We're not club-footed or Marxist or nuts. We have no conscientious objections or anything of that kind. We're perfect. (59)

The guilt, as well as the blame, looms larger in the context of Tod's preparing to engage in the war. His already Aryan remarks and the planned course of action eliminate all excuses and make his case one of murder rather than manslaughter, amplified ad infinitum to evidence the genocide. His only defence or attempt at inducing pity and soliciting clemency resides in his torture by dark dreams of the future that was.

> So maybe these are the things we're heading towards: the white coat and the black boots, the combustible baby, the soiled bib on its hook, the sleet of souls. The wooden room where something lethal will be lugubriously decided. Everybody dreams about being harmed. It's easy. Much tougher to recover from the dream of harming… (72)

Resumed in numerous such descriptions of "poor" Tod's affliction (of his suffering from sleep terror), the main character's victimisation produces the opposite effect by juxtaposition with the mirror image of the Nazi doctor emerging ever more forcefully.

Chapter three (*Because I'm a healer, everything I do heals*) takes the reader one step nearer to the latter, disclosing how the protagonist undergoes a further metamorphosis while embarking on a new journey and assuming another identity, that of John Young. Facilitated by Reverend Nicholas Kreditor for a large sum of money, this new identity allows for practicing medicine in a New York general hospital, in a way which reminds of the concentration camps doctors.

> You want to know what I do? All right. Some guy comes in with a bandage around his head. We don't mess about. We'll soon have that off. He's got a hole in his head. So what do we do. We stick a nail in it. Get the nail – a good rusty one – from the trash or wherever. And lead him out to the Waiting Room where he's allowed to linger and holler for a while before we ferry him back to the night. (85)

The babies, symbols of the ugliest inflicted death, reappear in these wards, and make John's medical fame:

> With the children, at the hospital, in Pediatrics where the light is never off, where the little victims whom we patiently deform lie drugged and lost and itching – with the children John is at his briskest. (89)

It is as if he had been trained thoroughly before… Otherwise, young Dr John Young is busy avoiding women with children, and having sex with Irene and with the nurses (Nurse Judge, Nurse Davis, Nurse Tremlett, Nurse Cobretti, Nurse Sammon, Nurse Booker, Nurse Elliott, Nurse Del Puablo), while the world is changing back to the early fifties.

> Time passes. Cars are fatter and fewer, and imitate animals with their fins and wings. Syringes are no longer disposable. […] We even use pipettes: *so* unhygienic. […] Last week they came and took away my colour TV. They gave me a black-and-white one. […] Clothes everywhere become more innocent. Everyone becomes more innocent, constantly forgetting. Central Park is cleaner but no safer. We are fewer. (98-99)

The return to innocence and forgetfulness translates with Amis into an apocalyptic end of life and memory, synonymous with a Yeatsean 'second coming'[3], which also offers glimpses into a fresh beginning and new choices on the same old path to self-destruction.

In Part II, the fourth chapter (*You do what you do best, not what's best to do*), opens with the year 1948, and covers the journey to Europe and the war, eastward across the Atlantic. Emerging from the crossing is Hamilton de Souza, the "aristocrat" surrounded by servants, living a quiet life in the countryside of Portugal, then travelling (back) to Spain and Italy, where new documents are presented to him once more, this time by an Irish priest, Father Duryea, who "baptises" him Odilo Unverdorben. Once Odilo again, the protagonist heads to Brenner and the Austrian border, "to the towns and cities of [desolate] middle Europe" (122) – which seemed to be awaiting "the colour of fire", "the hooves and treads of armies" (122), but whose people gave out gold –, eventually reaching "the final farm, within view of the River Vistula" (123) in Poland, where the gold received was buried.

With Chapter five (*Here there is no why* [4]), the illogical nature of the narrative is denounced by the ironical, perverse first line "THE WORLD is going to start making sense…" (124), introducing Odilo's arrival at Auschwitz. The uncertain "then" and "there" are replaced by the actuality of "now" and of the concentration camp, while the subject and the object become one, with the double an active participant in the déroulement of events.

> *Now*. I, Odilo Unverdorben, arrived at Auschwitz Central somewhat precipitately and by motorbike, with a wide twirl or frill of slush and mud, shortly after the Bolsheviks had entrained their ignoble withdrawal.
>
> *Now*. Was there a secret passenger on the back seat of the bike, or in some imaginary sidecar? No. I was one. I was also in full uniform. (124)

Moreover, at this stage in the metamorphosis of the self, a clear (though harsh), narrative voice is regained and the language of the other is assumed as one's own.

> I was astonished by the power with which my German crashed out of me, as if in millennial anger at having been silenced for so long. (125)

With this awakening, there comes the realistic, almost palpable, description of the Auschwitz situation and the crimes committed by the notorious Josef Mengele (alias Uncle Pepi, as he was called by the children lured with sweets into the experimentation laboratories / torture chambers, and appearing as such in the novel) – playing God with his fellow beings, aided by cohorts of other death doctors like the narrator himself. Added, however, is a magic/meta dimension, an artistic credo which explains the incoherent narrative frame adopted so far, with hints at the absurdity of the historical abomination justifying that of the netting of his story.

> What tells me this is right? What tells me that 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, or to smell, or to taste, or to touch. […] Creation is easy. Also ugly. *Hier ist kein warum*. Here there is no why. Here there is no when, no how, no where. Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, electricity, with shit, with fire. (128)

What is unjustifiable is history itself, the Zyklon B, the Sprinklerooms, the crematoria, the 10,000 deaths a day.

Chapter six (*Multiply zero by zero and you still get zero*) takes the twenty-five year old Odilo out of Auschwitz, which "covered 14,000 acres, [but] was invisible" (147), to Berlin and his pregnant wife, Herta. The year is 1942, and "the Jews were being deconcentrated, were being channelled back into society" (149). The personal story runs parallel to the public one, the similarities resulting from the fantastic image of the "German baby of startling dimensions" (147) growing inside Herta and the grotesque one of a weeping Jewish baby being born back into life and leading "a batch from the mass grave, in the woods" (149) to the town centre.

The corrected historical version of events (with naked people from the grave directed to mounds of clothes and temporary shelters) is further developed as the train stops at Treblinka on Odilo's journey from northern Poland to the Reich.

> Every station, every journey, needs a clock. When we passed it, on our way to inspect the gravel pits, the big hand was on twelve and the little hand was on four. Which was incorrect! An error, a mistake: it was exactly 13:27. But we passed again, later, and the hands hadn't moved to an earlier time. How could they move? They were painted, and would never move to an earlier time. Beneath the clock was an enormous arrow, on which was printed: Change Here for Eastern Trains. But time had no arrow, not here.
>
> Indeed, at the railway station in Treblinka, the four dimensions were intriguingly disposed. A place without depth. And a place without time. (151)

The title of the novel is thus suddenly explained, graphically illustrated and metaphorically charged. If time does have an arrow (direction /path, but also purpose / dream / hope), then it must also have a future (just as it has had a past). What happens when time is stripped of its arrow? It loses structure and coordinates. Its future becomes its past and vice versa. And people manage to escape today only by dreaming of yesterday and dreading tomorrow. This reversed physics and grammar of Amis's literary text formulates a modernist aesthetics in its own right, trapped between the conventions of realism and the exaggerations of high postmodernism – both incapable of creating convincing characters and meaningful tales, and having greatly contributed to the death of the novel in a moribund society – idea possibly suggested by the ending references to "Schloss Hartheim, near Linz, in the province of Austria[5]" (152), where they produced people who "weren't any good anymore." (154)

Chapter seven (*She loves me, she loves me not*) is, as a consequence, the section in which

> THE WORLD HAS stopped making sense again, and Odilo forgets everything again (which is probably just as well), and the war is over now (and it seems pretty clear to me that we have lost), and life goes on for a little while. Odilo is innocent. His dreams are innocent, purged of menace and sickness. […] Odilo is, it turns out, innocent, emotional, popular, and stupid. Also potent. (157)

Here, forgetfulness opposes memory, and the past is obliterated. Only publicly, however. Privately, it is preserved (or "pickled", to be "tasted" later, as Salman Rushdie[6] might say). Ironically, the philosophy of Carpe diem is what escapes us (the social "he" and the personal "I").

> He forgets. I remember. This tormented groping. […] And I know something he seems unable to face: it will never happen again. The future always comes true. Sadly we gather forget-me-nots. She loves me… (162)

The "I" detaches itself again from the "he", placing the latter under the lens and questioning his becoming. Odilo, the man without a past (or future?) is no longer a monster; he becomes human. He gets married, goes to med school, looks after his mother in hospital, experiences adolescent love. The world, on the other hand, is showing signs of madness. This, of course, is nothing new, nothing so extraordinary as to be turned into the stuff of fiction. The obsessive return to the situation of the Jews is, nonetheless, extraordinary. The only problem is that it almost feels unreal, therefore fictional. It needs real-isation instead. This is mainly achieved by endless repetition and foregrounding of historical detail already inscribed in the collective unconscious.

> Blind and deaf Jews can now wear armbands […]
> Jews allowed to keep pets […]
> Jews permitted to buy meat […]
> Jews empowered to have friendly relations with Aryans […]
> Curfew for Jews lifted […]
> On Krystallnacht […] we all romped and played and helped the Jews. (164-165)

The final section, Chapter eight (*Because ducks are fat*) covers the early years in Odilo's life: from 1929 to his birth thirteen years before. The three memorable moments recounted here are significant for the whole narrative content. The first, paradoxically anticipating the past, is a "sentimental journey" to Auschwitz, "the place where the numbered Jews, and all the others, who had no number, came down from the heavens; the place where, for a time, there was no why" (169). The second is a fleeting instant in three-year-old Odilo's life in native Solingen, also "the birthplace of Adolf Eichman" (170), portrayed in child language, along infantile lines, evocative of a worse version of Stephen Dedalus.[7]

> 'Mummy? […] You can't eat chicks. […] Because chicks are good. You can just stroke them and everything. But you *can* eat ducks. Because ducks are fat.'
>
> Wait. Mistake there. Mistake. Category… We brang. We putten. We brang, we putten, their own selves we token all away. Why so many children and babies? What got into us. Why so many? We were cruel: the children weren't even going to be here for very long. I choiced it, did I? Why? Because babies are fat?...

The third is the intimate, carnal, unnatural relation with the mother (as ultimate recipient welcoming him), forwarded, together with the worldview shaping itself on twisted premises, via sophisticated, Mephistopheles language.

> I must make one last effort to be lucid, to be clear. What finally concerns me are questions of time: certain durations. Even as things stood the Jews were made to wait too long in city squares […] for much too long… […] He pauses for a moment. […] Only a moment. There are no larger units of his time. He has to act while childhood is still here, while everything is still his playmate […] (172-173)

The inner "demon" serving and ultimately reaping the soul of the damned Odilo emerges as the actual protagonist, the puppeteer consciously handling Odilo and assigning him roles at the frontier between the real and the fictional (a la Conchis with his Nicholas, as staged by John Fowles[8]).

> 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)

Read in this key, the concluding paragraph of *Time's Arrow* reveals ironical reconsiderations of the self of fiction, as well as of the self in fiction – with the writer's intervention inside the writing, and with the inner, private dimension allowed a narrative voice while the public one is silenced.

Ending lines

Martin Amis's world – where babies die, old men are born, restaurants are vomitoriums, the trash is brought in each morning, people pay their employers, patients consult doctors – is an angry cry for logic and rationality in the future that gets written outside the covers of the book. His dystopia is not imagined, but lived. Conversely, though far from building hopes for utopian sequels to the story of mankind, the novel invites at readjusting our compass and at navigating in the right direction. *Time's Arrow* thus emerges as a cathartic account of the Holocaust, recycling our shared memories of history and reassembling the disparate pieces into a remarkable narrative experiment, a daunting and haunting project which Amis continued to pursue, and which resulted, twenty-three years later, in *The Zone of Interest* (2014).

Notes

1. The English equivalent of the protagonist's surname would be *unspoiled*, *untainted*, *undefiled, innocent,* and *pure* (https://en.langenscheidt.com/german-english/unverdorben). At the opposite end, his Christian (ironically!) name, Odilo, is resonant of Odilo Globocnik (Globus), the notorious Austrian Nazi and SS leader, an associate of Adolf Eichmann in Operation Reinhard.
2. See his allegorical short story, *The Secret Sharer* (first published in 1910).
3. See William Butler Yeats's high modernist poem, 'The Second Coming' (first published in 1920).
4. The phrase was borrowed from an anecdote in Primo Levi's memoir of Auschwitz, *Survival in Auschwitz*. Suffering from thirst and noticing an icicle, he reached out to get it. When a Nazi guard slaps it out of his hand, Levi asks *Why?* The answer he receives is the irrational *Here there is no why*.
5. Built in 1600 by Jakob von Aspen, Hartheim Castle is situated in Alkoven, near Linz, Austria. During the Second World War, it was used as a Nazi euthanasia killing centre.
6. Reference is made to the last chapter of *Midnight's Children* (1981): 'Abracadabra'.
7. See the opening pages of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (first published in book form in 1914).

8. Under focus is the interaction between the central characters in *The Magus* (first published in 1965).

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