

## Tracing Time's Arrow

From Chapter Four of Understanding Martin Amis, by James Diedrick

© 2002 by James Diedrick

Schindler's List (1993), Steven Spielberg's film about the Holocaust, contains a much-discussed sequence that might have been taken from the pages of Time's Arrow (1991). Three hundred women on a train bound for Oskar Schindler's new factory in Czechoslovakia end up instead at the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. They are stripped, shaved, and herded into the showers, and the viewer follows them, horribly aware of what happened to hundreds of thousands like them. The women look up at the shower heads, the lights go out, and a collective scream erupts. Then, in defiance of viewer expectation, the sound of water is heard: this is not the moment of death but a decontamination process. Momentarily relieved, the viewer braces for the next horror, but it does not come. Schindler learns that his train was misrouted, rushes to the camp, bribes the commandant, and takes the women to his factory--back to jobs they held before they were first sent to the camps. It is almost as if the film were suddenly running backwards: the women enter the gas chamber, the lights go out--then life-giving water showers down on them, and they return to the trains, to their jobs, to their husbands and loved ones. The viewer knows this exception is just that, knows from the film itself that systematic terror and extermination were the norm. But in the midst of this knowledge, Spielberg creates a brief sequence that is the filmic equivalent of poetic justice, imagining what it might look like if history were reversed, if the genocidal horror were undone.

Time's Arrow is also about the Holocaust. In the midst of imagining both the bureaucracy and psychology of genocidal evil, it too offers poetic justice--on a grand historical scale. It does so by means of an audacious variation on the folk wisdom that just before death individuals see their entire lives flash before them. At the moment of his death in an American hospital, one-time Nazi doctor Odilo Unverdorben "gives birth" to a doppelganger (literally, "double-goer"), a child-like innocent who re-lives Unverdorben's life--in reverse. He inhabits Unverdorben, who is unaware of his presence, like a "passenger or parasite" (8). Though he lacks access to his host's thoughts, he is "awash with his emotions" (7). He also possesses a rudimentary conscience--most notably an aversion to human suffering. Fortunately for the narrative, this narrator is "equipped with a fair amount of value-free information, or general knowledge," and a "superb vocabulary" (8,9). But he is unaware that his backward trajectory through time violates ordinary chronology. He is also utterly ignorant of history.

During his time in America, where Unverdorben works as a surgeon, the narrator witnesses Unverdorben inflict terrible wounds on his patients and send them home in agony. He concludes that doctors "demolish the human body" (74). When he finally arrives at Auschwitz-Birkenau, however, "the world...has a new habit. It makes sense" (129). Here he and Odilo create life, heal wounds, send inmates to freedom. "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" (120). In his descriptions of breathing life back into the victims of Nazi genocide the narrator effects a

poetic undoing of the Holocaust, all the more poignant for the reader's knowledge that it never can be undone. "You present it as a miracle, but the reader is supplying all the tragedy," Amis has said of the narrative perspective he employs in Time's Arrow. "It was that kind of double-edged effect that I wanted."<sup>[1]</sup> As in Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," the narrator never registers horror at the systematic human cruelty occurring around him--which increases the reader's horror. The result is a short novel with what M. John Harrison has called "a long ironic reach."<sup>[2]</sup>

Time's Arrow is a remarkable imaginative achievement, and it places special demands on the reader. Disorientation is one's initial response to a world in which time moves in reverse and effect always precedes cause. A simple process like gardening becomes a bizarre ritual of uglification when it takes place in reverse: "all the tulips and roses he patiently drained and crushed, then sealed their exhumed corpses and took them in the paper bag to the store for money. All the weeds and nettles he screwed into the soil--and the earth took this ugliness, snatched at it with a sudden grip" (18-19). Everything in Time's Arrow is narrated backwards: old people become younger and more vigorous, children grow smaller and eventually enter hospitals from which they never return. Eating, drinking, love-making, even an abortion are all described in reverse. Early on, Amis even reverses words and sentences, so that "how are you today?" becomes "Aid ut oo y'rrah?" (7)--though after this initial demonstration the narrator helpfully translates.

Faced with this confusion, the reader develops coping mechanisms. Conversations in Time's Arrow always run in reverse sequence, for instance, and the reader soon learns to read them from finish to start. Before long, this inverted world becomes comprehensible, because it follows predictable rules. In adapting to its crazy logic, the reader is also preparing to confront another inverted world: Auschwitz and its obscene logic. Although other fiction can be cited in which time is reversed--the Dresden fire-bombing sequence in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five is perhaps the best-known example<sup>[3]</sup>--the narrative conceit of Time's Arrow is placed wholly in the service of a grim moral reckoning. Even passages which may smack of verbal showmanship when quoted in isolation are part of this larger purpose, like the narrator's bewildered response to the world he inhabits: "it's all strange to me. I know I live on a fierce and magical planet, which sheds or surrenders rain or even flings it off in whipstroke after whipstroke, which fires out bolts of electric gold into the firmament at 186,000 miles per second, which with a single shrug of its tectonic plates can erect a city in half an hour" (15). In the actual world, of course, it is destruction that is easy, creation that is difficult--a fact which this ironic reversal forces us to confront. In so doing, it prepares the reader to confront Auschwitz.<sup>[4]</sup>

Writing about Spielberg's use of "close research" in making Schindler's List, Amis revealed his own concern with historical authenticity in Time's Arrow: "nearing the Holocaust, a trespasser finds that his imagination is decently absenting itself, and reaches for documentation and technique. The last thing he wants to do, once there, is make anything up."<sup>[5]</sup> In his brief "Afterword" to Time's Arrow, Amis acknowledges several documentary sources, including the writings of Primo Levi (himself a survivor of the death camps). But he singles out one book in particular: The Nazi Doctors, by his friend

Robert Jay Lifton. Lifton, a psychologist, interviewed survivors of the Nazi death camps as well as surviving Nazi doctors. The Nazi Doctors is simultaneously a history of "medicalized killing"[6] during the Nazi regime, which began with eugenics and ended in the Final Solution; a series of portraits of individual Nazi doctors, including the notorious Joseph Mengele; and a theory of psychological "doubling" that attempts to explain how men sworn to uphold the Hippocratic oath could dedicate themselves to mass murder. In his "Afterword" Amis says of The Nazi Doctors "my novel would not and could not have been written without it" (167), and it is easy to see why.[7]

When the novel's trajectory is reversed and Odilo Unverdorben's life and career is summarized using ordinary chronology, for instance, it becomes apparent that he is typical of the Nazi doctors Lifton studied. Unverdorben is born in 1916 in Solingen, the birthplace of Adolf Eichmann. When he comes of age he enters medical school, marries, and joins the Reserve Medical Corps. He is posted to Schloss Hartheim, the notorious medical facility where "impaired" children and adults were put to death ("above its archways and gables the evening sky is full of our unmentionable mistakes," the narrators says, "hydrocephalic clouds and the wrongly curved palate of the west, and the cinders of our fires" (146)). It was here that Hitler experimented with various means of medical killing, rehearsing the systematic eugenics he would soon pursue against entire populations. "National Socialism is nothing more than applied biology" (151), the narrator notes--a claim originally made by National Socialist Deputy Party Leader Rudolf Hess in 1934 (Lifton 31).

After Schloss Hartheim, Unverdorben works with the SS forcing the Jews into ghettos. His wife Herta becomes pregnant. Soon after he is transferred to Auschwitz. He kills inmates with injections of phenol and assists Mengele (fictionalized here as "Uncle Pepi") with his gruesome experiments (The Nazi Doctors contains a long chapter on Mengele, whom the Gypsy children in the camps called "Uncle Mengele"). Herta gives birth but the baby dies soon after. She writes her husband letters questioning his actions; they grow more and more estranged. He defends his work by noting "I am famed for my quiet dedication" (133). Soon he is assisting the mass exterminations by inserting pellets of Zyklon B into the gas chambers. Lifton writes that "no individual self is inherently evil, murderous, genocidal. Yet under certain conditions virtually any self is capable of becoming all of these" (497). The narrator echoes this when he concludes 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" (157).

At war's end Unverdorben flees to escape prosecution: first to the Vatican, then to Portugal (where he takes on the first of his aliases--"Hamilton de Souza"), and finally to America. Once in America, Unverdorben takes the name "John Young" and goes to work as a surgeon, first in a New York hospital, then for American Medical Services on a commercial strip somewhere in New England. He follows the path of many of the doctors Lifton interviewed, reconnecting with the Hippocratic sphere and attempting to reclaim his pre-Nazi self (Lifton 456-7). But of course he can never be whole again; as the narrator observes, he "can't feel, won't connect, never opens up, always holds something back" (52). In the late 1950s, Unverdorben is in danger of being discovered once again,

and he changes his name one last time. He becomes "Tod T. Friendly" ("Tod" means "death" in German) and loses himself in "affable, melting-pot, primary-color, You're-okay-I'm-okay America" (6). As presented in Time's Arrow, America is a good hiding place for a war criminal--a Lotus-like land of attenuated memory, where no one inquires about Unverdorben's past and few care about history. Here Unverdorben ages and dies in obscurity--but not in peace. "His dreams are full of figures who scatter in the wind like leaves," the narrator observes, "full of souls who form constellations like the stars I hate to see" (29).

When viewed in relation to Lifton's theory of psychological "doubling," the narrator of Time's Arrow can be seen as that part of Unverdorben that Unverdorben disavowed at the moment he began performing euthanasia at Schloss Hartheim. Unverdorben's name is significant in this regard: the definitions of "verdorben" in German include "tainted," "rotten," "depraved," and "corrupt," while "unverdorben" signifies the opposite of these, and also "innocent" and "unsophisticated." His surname contains both himself and his double, in other words.[8] In Lifton's theory, "doubling" involves the creation of a "second self" that exists alongside the original self. In extreme situations, he argues, this second self "can become the usurper from within and replace the original self until it `speaks' for the entire person" (420). The Nazi doctor, Lifton continues, struck a Faustian bargain with Auschwitz and the regime: "to do the killing, he offered an opposing self (the evolving Auschwitz self)--a self that, in violating his own prior moral standards, met with no effective resistance and in fact made use of his original skills (in this case, medical-scientific)" (420-1).

This description applies precisely to Unverdorben, who struck his bargain before Auschwitz, at Schloss Hartheim. Significantly, when the narrator returns to the period in Unverdorben's history before his host embraced the ideology of "medical killing," he emerges from his dungeon of suppression to hover in the higher regions, like a soul or conscience. "I who have no name and no body--I have slipped out from under him and am now scattered above like flakes of ash-blond human hair" (147). A terrible irony is embedded in this image, which associates the ghostly narrator with the Jews whose ashes will soon float through the skies of Auschwitz.

Like the relationship between Unverdorben and his double, the relationship between the two "halves" of Time's Arrow--the Auschwitz and pre-Auschwitz sections--is an uncanny one. Freud explained the uncanny as a return of the repressed, a moment when something in the individual's psychic past emerges unbidden and the familiar suddenly turns strange.[9] The narrator's reverse-time observations of post-war American hospitals, doctors and doctoring in the first half of Time's Arrow function in this way, eerily anticipating his eventual immersion in Auschwitz and intimating the terrible secret of his host's past. For the narrator, they constitute moments of precognition (which replaces memory in his time-reversed world), anticipating the appalling future his narrative will reveal.

From the narrator's reverse-time perspective, Unverdorben's medical work in America involves an endless fight "against health, against life and love" (93). Borrowing

a phrase Lifton uses to describe the Auschwitz environment (426), the narrator calls the hospital "an atrocity-producing situation" (92). It is easy to see why: "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" (76). Well before Auschwitz, then, the narrator has looked directly into the face of human suffering. "Its face is fierce and distant and ancient" (93).

As for the doctors themselves, "it is abruptly open to question, this idea the doctors hold in secret, that they must wield the special power; because if the power remains unused, then it will become unmoored, and turn back against their own lives" (80-81). Although he is describing surgeons in a New York hospital here, there is something eerie about this passage, which becomes fully apparent when we come to the end of the novel: it could stand as a description of the Auschwitz doctors themselves. Similarly, the narrator's description of hospital patients surrendering autonomy and control intimates the radical victimization the Auschwitz inmates suffered at the hands of Unverdorben: "all the intelligent pain of the victims, all the dreams of the unlistened to, all the entreating eyes: all this is swept up in the fierce rhythm of the hospital" (88). By the time the reader reaches Auschwitz with the narrator and enters the medical experimentation rooms with "Uncle Pepi" (Dr. Mengele), his earlier perceptions echo through the years with new and shattering relevance: "Meanwhile, on their beds and trolleys, the victims look on with anxious faces" (90).

There is more to Amis's method here than rendering the ways in which Unverdorben's past continues to haunt his present. M. John Harrison has written that the narrator's description of the doctors' exercise of power "approaches one of the deep political underpinnings of every society: the assumption of authority over other people's bodies, other people's most internal processes."<sup>[10]</sup>

This assumed monstrous proportions under the Nazi regime, but it persists in "free" societies as well. Nor is it confined to those invested with institutional authority--as the continuing scourge of sexual violence attests. Early in the novel, the narrator describes the fate of women in crisis centers. It is a haunting reversal, all the more so because only the reader recognizes the source of the women's pain--the assumption of authority over their bodies by individual men: "the women at the crisis centres and the refuges are all hiding from their redeemers. . . . The welts, the abrasions and the 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 requires more specialised 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" (31).

Yet in the midst of these assaults on the body, which begin with individual acts of violence and proceed through Unverdorben's regress to the extermination camps, Amis's benighted narrator maintains his child-like, life-affirming innocence. "Skin is soft. Touch it. It gives. It gives to the touch" (36). He also possesses an unconditional love for others

that is the only antidote for the horrors the novel unsparingly records. Near the end of the novel, when to his mind the Jews who died in the camps have been restored to life, the narrator says "I love them as a parent should, which is to say that I don't love them for their qualities (remarkable as these seem to me to be, naturally), and only wish them to exist, and to flourish, and to have their right to life and love" (152). As Frank Kermode has written, the "image of inhumanity" contained in Time's Arrow "mirrors a notion of humanity, a tenderness for fragile flesh, not extinct though always rare and difficult of access."<sup>[11]</sup>

In the trilogy that begins with Einstein's Monsters, Amis explores the geo-political developments that have recently threatened this image of humanity as never before. But amidst his savage indignation at these developments, a voice of tender innocence can be heard, all the more poignant for the despair that finally overcomes it: "I within, who came at the wrong time--either too soon, or after it was all too late" (165).

## NOTES

[1] Quoted by Anthony DeCurtis in "Britain's Mavericks," Harper's Bazaar, November 1991, 146.

[2] M. John Harrison, "Speeding to Cradle From Grave," Times Literary Supplement, 20 September 1991, 21. For more on the symbolic reach of Time's Arrow, see Richard Menke, "Narrative Reversals and the Thermodynamics of History in Martin Amis's Time's Arrow," Modern Fiction Studies, Winter 1998, 959-980.

[3] Other antecedents include Sylvie and Bruno by Lewis Carroll; Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, where the White Queen claims that she lives backwards in time; Le Testament d'Orphee by Jean Cocteau; An Age by Brian Aldiss; Counter-Clock World by Philip K. Dick; "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," by F. Scott Fitzgerald, in which a man is born at the age of 70 and proceeds backward to a state of infancy; and "Mr. F is Mr. F" by J.G. Ballard. In his Afterword to Time's Arrow, Amis refers obliquely to the Dresden fire-bombing description in Slaughterhouse Five while discussing influences on his own novel (168). Maya Slater notes that Time's Arrow takes up the challenge posed by Nabokov in Invitation to a Beheading: "Nobody can imagine in physical terms the act of reversing the order of time. Time is not reversible" ("Problems When Time Moves Backwards," English: The Journal of the English Association, Summer 1993, 141).

[4] Some critics have attacked Amis for what they call his narrative "trickery" in Time's Arrow, suggesting that his technical brilliance is an affront to the memory of the murdered six million. See especially Rhoda Koenig, "Holocaust Chic," New York, 21 October 1991, 117, and James Buchan, "The Return of Dr. Death," Spectator, 28 September 1991, 38. Amis was so incensed by Buchan's assertion that he used the Holocaust for literary profit—and by the Spectator's cover headline "Designer Gas Ovens"—that he wrote a rare reply ("Creepier than Thou," Spectator, 5 October 1991, 25). He continued the quarrel with Buchan in Experience (94-5), where he calls Buchan

“a humourless worthy” (toned down from something harsher at the suggestion of the publisher’s lawyers).

[5] Martin Amis, "Blown Away," New Yorker, 30 May 1994: 48; rpt. as “I am in Blood Stepp’d in So Far,” The War Against Cliché, 11-17.

[6] Robert Jay Lifton, The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide (New York: Basic Books, 1986) 15. Subsequent references will cite page numbers to this edition.

[7] As the following discussion suggests, virtually every aspect of Time's Arrow--historical setting, plot, characterization, even language--is informed by The Nazi Doctors. The reader who consults Lifton's book will find more parallels than I have space to discuss here. See also Susan Vice, “Form Matters: Martin Amis, Time’s Arrow,” in Holocaust Fiction (London: Routledge, 2000), 11-37.

[8] His first name has a more precise historical provenance: one of the high SS officials in the eastern killing bureaucracy was named Odilo Globocnik.

[9] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," trans. Alex Strachey, in The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 7, 219-256.

[10] Harrison, “Speeding to Cradle From Grave,” 21.

[11] Frank Kermode, "In Reverse," London Review of Books, 12 September 1991, 11.