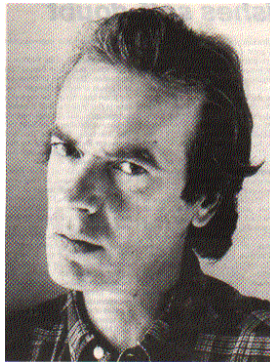


WHAT'S AMIS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION? MARTIN AMIS'S *MONEY* AND *TIME'S ARROW*



1

The son of Kingsley Amis, a writer who began his literary life - with John Osborne and John Wain - as one of the Angry Young Men, Martin Amis outstripped his father's reputation for offending the literary niceties of his day with his first novel, *The Rachel Papers* (1973). Amis was twenty four when the book appeared to admiring reviews. Many of the features that characterize Amis's subsequent fiction are already discernible in this book - its scatological and satiric treatment of sex, its comic description of the indignities of bodily life (spots, smells, toilet habits, sexual infection and the like), and above all its inventive deployment of language. The protagonist and narrator is Charles Highway who spends the last five hours of his nineteenth year reading over his diaries covering the last year of his adolescence, a year in which he manages to seduce Rachel and gain entry to Oxford University. The diaries reveal a representative cool young man of the swinging early 1970s. What is distinctive about the book is its infatuation with the primacy of writing over experience. Experience only becomes real for Charles when it is written down. He prefers reading about his doings of the last year to spending time with Rachel. She has been subdued by stratagems already recorded in one of his many notebooks, *Conquests and Techniques: A Synthesis* (the use of italics forming its own comment on Charles' literary pretentiousness). The novel ends: "I refill my pen." The novelist's transformation of life into text is far from over.

Although Martin Amis (born in 1949) was brought up in a literary household, he records that he never read anything more serious than science fiction until his father's second wife, the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard, took him in hand in his mid teens and encouraged him to start reading some of the classics of English literature. By then he had passed his early childhood in South Wales where his father was still struggling to make ends meet, spent a year at Princeton where his father taught creative writing, left for Majorca with his mother at the age of twelve after his parents separated, and got kicked out of his grammar school in Battersea on their return to London for absenting himself to appear in the film *A High Wind in Jamaica*. Altogether he attended about fourteen schools and only won a place at Exeter College, Oxford University, by attending a number of crammers that taught him enough Latin and other required subjects to meet the entry requirements. A late developer, he left Oxford in 1971 with a formal First. Thereafter his career was characterized by early success. He became an editorial assistant for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1972, literary editor for the *New Statesman* in 1976 at the age of twenty seven, and a special writer for the *Observer*. By 1979 in addition to *The Rachel Papers* he had published two more widely reviewed novels, *Dead Babies* (1975) and *Success* (1978), and became a full-time writer.

Amis established himself as a comic writer with his first novel, but a comic writer whose subject is not the traditional subject of comedy. Charles Highway speaks for his author when he observes: "Surely, nice things are dull, and nasty things are funny. The nastier a thing is, the funnier it gets" (91). Martin Amis appears to

be deliberately staking out territory that is unlike that of his father's (Lucky Jim) Dixon who claims that "nice things are nicer than nasty ones." For his younger generation the world had deteriorated so much in two decades that the only possible subject for contemporary comedy was material considered fitter for tragic treatment in his father's time and before. "I'm not really in search of the sordid," Amis has said. Modern life "just is sordid" (Bragg). Prior to recording his first attempt at seducing Rachel, one that has to be aborted when Rachel announces that she is not on the pill, Charles Highway prepares his reader for the coming anti-romantic outcome: The final kiss we associate with the conclusion of Shakespearean comedies "is now the beginning of the comic action [. . .]. We have got into the habit of going further and further beyond the happy-ever-more promise: relationships in decay, aftermaths [. . .]" (154). For Amis both relationships and the globe itself are in decay. The only available response for a writer who was born, as he has pointed out, four days before the Russians successfully exploded their first atom bomb and inaugurated the era of nuclear deterrence, is comic (*Einstein's Monsters* 1). However, he is interested not in light comedy, but in "a wincing laughter, or a sort of funky laughter [. . .]. Sort of a hung-over laughter, where it hurts" (Morrison 96).

Many of the stylistic characteristics that have come to be associated with postmodernist writing flow naturally from this conjunction of matter and generic treatment. His matter is ready-made - the sordid, ugly, threatening phenomenon of late capitalist Western civilization, a dying world in which love is also in its death-throws. This view radically affects every aspect of his writing - not just its grotesque content, but his attitude to fiction, his rejection of realism, especially psychological realism, his exuberant use of figurative language, his punning allusiveness and his belief in the moral power of language used creatively. For Amis writing is "black fun" (Ross 24). The modern understanding of comedy enables him to laugh at characters in his novels who "aren't just ridiculous but hideous and sinister" (Bragg). His characters are ostensibly manipulated, frequently by an author figure incorporated in the novel. He dismisses motivation as "a shagged out force in modern life." "I have enough of the postmodernist in me [. . .] to want to remind the reader that it is no use getting het-up about a character, since the character is only there to serve the fiction" (Haffenden 19). Amis encourages the reader to identify with the author of his fiction, not with any of the characters. He is constantly surprised when readers admit to feeling sympathy for one of his more horrific creations such as Keith in *Dead Babies* (1991).

He is in full flight from what he calls "the typical English novel [. . .]. 225 sanitized pages about the middle classes" (Stout 35). His imagination is more excited by the savage contrast in wealth and cultural values that prevails between the British upper and lower classes. His third novel, *Success*, describes the diametrically opposing fortunes of a wealthy aristocrat and his lower class step brother. The latter's ultimate success in business and bed acts as an ironic commentary on the changing relationships between the classes in late seventies Britain when the trades unions appeared to control the government and the country.

In his fourth novel, *Other People. A Mystery Story* (1981), Mary Lamb, the female protagonist suffering from amnesia, is made to experience an upward journey through contemporary circles of hell, starting with beggars (one of whom forcibly has sex with her) and ending with her (sexual) victimization of an upper class philanthropist. In this book Prince, the narrator, is also the protagonist's demon-lover and murderer (the Prince of Darkness?). Both narrator and murderer have the power to end Mary's existence. Here Amis gives fictional expression to his conviction that "the author is not free of sadistic impulses. But," he goes on, "it isn't real sadism," because as an author he does not grant any character in his books the reality he accords real people (Haffenden 12). Amis has also made his anti-realist use of time in his fiction more extreme in this novel. It ends as it begins with Mary's awakening into life or death - it is hard to say which in this unconventional mystery story. The entire novel can be seen as a single instant in which her life is reenacted before her murder.

Amis has always put language before realist considerations. Even the names he gives to many of his characters contribute to the primacy he places on language over psychological naturalism. In *Other People* Mary Lamb is both the innocent of the nursery rhyme, innocent also like Charles Lamb's mad sister, while

her previous malevolent identity as Amy Hide suggests that Amy hides her past in Mary (almost an anagram), just as Stevenson's villainous Mr Hyde hides in Dr Jekyll. Amis's delight in onomastics is given full rein in his subsequent novels, as is his conjuring with literary allusion which he employs creatively and mischievously. In *Success* the upper class Gregory opens his diary entry for April (the novel consists of the diary entries of each step brother for the twelve months of one year) with an ironic allusion to T.S. Eliot's already ironically allusive opening to *The Waste Land*: "April is the coolest month for people like myself. Down comes the roof of my ritzy green car. Out burgeons my spring wardrobe. I have a £20 haircut" (92). Amis's use of "cool" and "ritzy" places his fiction at as a great a distance from Eliot's "cruellest month" as that is from Chaucer's "showres soote."

The opposite of his father, Martin Amis considers a plain sentence to be so much wasted opportunity. His father blames the influence of Nabokov on his son for what he calls the "terrible compulsive vividness in his style" (Michener 142). Certainly the son is indebted to Nabokov (especially to *Despair*), as he is to Saul Bellow, the only writer to warrant two essays in *The Moronic Inferno* (1986), his collection of journalistic pieces written about the United States mainly for the *Observer*. But Amis's at times dazzling manipulation of language - often seen when addressing some of the more revolting aspects of human behavior - is uniquely his own. Reviewers unfairly attributed his depiction of the consciousness of Mary, the amnesiac in *Other People*, to the influence of Craig Raine's "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home." In fact Amis began this novel a year before the poem appeared. Some of the effects he achieves are quite stunning. Mary's first encounter with children is typical: "they were shrunken, impacted - mysteriously lessened in some vital aspect. They limped in pairs [. . .]. Some were so bad now that they had to be wheeled round in covered boxes, protesting piteously to their guides [. . .]" (16). Amis achieves a similarly powerful impact when describing a tramp's sexual assault on her: "His two wet red points wanted to get as close as they could to her, to get inside. His two tongues wanted her two mouths" (42). That is a typical Amis effect - the use of linguistic estrangement to take you into the (seeming) consciousness of a character.

2

With the publication of *Money. A Suicide Note* (1984) American as well as British critics began to see Amis as a major force in contemporary fiction in the English-speaking world. As the novel alternates between London and New York this might well have been part of his intention. *Money* paints a consciously caricatured portrait of New York. But it avoids adopting that snide condescending stance towards everything American that so many British writers inherit from their insular culture. In fact London and New York become interchangeable centers of rampant greed in the novel. This is the America of Reagan's deficit-making spending spree and the Britain of Thatcher's sale of state assets such as the North Sea oil fields. In both countries the indigent were being thrown onto the streets to swell the number of the homeless. In both countries the rich were getting richer. In *Money* Amis gives comic fictive life to one financial scam, although this remains small scale compared to the S. and L. or junk bond embezzlements that were concurrently being perpetrated. The novel is set in 1981 and incorporates the Royal Wedding of Charles and Diana, the inner city riots in England and the Polish military coup as symbolic reminders of the new political climate of the eighties. Amis thinks that "the money age we're living through now is a short-term, futureless kind of prosperity [. . .], a 'live now, pay later' thing. Money is a more democratic medium than blood, but money as a cultural banner--you can feel the whole society deteriorating around you because of that" (Stout 36).

John Self, the narrator and protagonist of *Money*, is the epitome of this era - a maker of outrageous television commercials, brought up on junk culture, top of the pops, booze and pornography. His only god is money. It proves a destructive god, which is why Self (and Amis in the subtitle) calls *Money* a suicide note. Amis has pointed out that "money is always connected with excrement in myth" (Smith 79). Self mirrors the untrammelled self, the naked ego (and id), a bundle of appetites. All his actions and relations with others are governed by money. His astonishing consumption of alcohol is, Amis has explained, "more a painkiller than

a quest for a good time" (Haffenden 13). His onanistic and pornographic sex life is the product of having seen too many videos and soap operas and too many hardcore magazines, both of which sell sex as a commodity. Describing sex with Selina, his beautiful and faithless English girlfriend, Self writes: "While making love, we often talk about money. I like it. I like that dirty talk" (143). It turns out that Selina herself is marketing her sexual appeal, and Self is not the highest bidder. He is consumed by consumerism, cretinized by television. All of his sexual experiences come already mediated by his immersion in the porn industry. Self is a representative child of the eighties for whom money has to compensate for a total absence of culture.

Since the entire book is narrated by Self this limitation in his background, knowledge and sensibilities might have acted as a severe curb on Amis's descriptive and linguistic potentialities. The solution he adopted in the book is one first suggested to him by Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*. "Henderson," Amis has said, "has the most elaborate and poetic thoughts, but every time he opens his mouth to speak, it's drivel" (McGrath 190). At one point in the book Amis pays Bellow comic homage when his producer offers Self a Rain King cocktail (24). Amis has fun reducing life's polychrome complexities to Self's monochrome vision: "While others look at art or read books or surrender to serious music, my mind just razzes me about money, Selina, hard-ons, the Fiasco. I'm trying, but that's trying too" (301). Both trying is trying (taxing) and his mind is trying to reimpose its debased values on him. The pun anticipates his failure to enculturate himself. Amis also enjoys having Self describe events as he erroneously sees them. Dead drunk at a media restaurant in Manhattan, Self recalls, "I found a woman talking unhappily into a telephone and tried to cheer her up and went on trying even after her boyfriend or husband appeared from somewhere. I disliked his tone. He hurt my feelings. We had an altercation that soon resolved itself with me lying face down in a damp bed of cardboard boxes [. . .]" (175). Even in the descriptive portions of the book Amis will incorporate literary references of which Self is unaware but which cannot help catching the reader's attention:

And one, and two, and three, and four. I'm lying on the fourteenth floor of the Ashberry, wearing tagglebag only and wiggling my legs in the air like an upended beetle. What am I doing? I'm exercising[. . .]This is the new-deal me. This is my metamorphosis. (312).

Unlike Self we hear the allusion to Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and compare Self's "improved" state as a beetle to Gregor's deterioration in the same circumstances.

Amis has defended his technique of providing characters of severely limited perceptions with poetic thoughts by citing V.S. Pritchett's claim that ordinary people are filled with extraordinary, magical thoughts, but that they have no vocabulary with which to express them (Haffenden 8-9). Ultimately Amis chooses to fly in the face of realism. His antipathy to the whole concept of motivation becomes part of the book itself. Fielding Goodney, the American producer of the projected movie, *Money*, has Self unknowingly finance the entire hoax operation. Why? For no good reason. As a practical joke. After discovering the truth Self worries away at Fielding's motivation. The character, Martin Amis, dismisses Self's demand for a motive: "It hasn't got what it takes to motivate people any more" (331). Later he adds: "it's an idea taken from art, not from life, not from twentieth-century life" (341). On the penultimate page Self takes up the argument: "I've settled the motivation question. I supplied it all. The confidence trick would have ended in five minutes if it hadn't been for John Self. I was the key. I was the needing, the hurting artist. I was the wanting artist" (362). What he wanted was confidence, the confidence that a large bank balance is supposed to offer. And confidence is something Amis considers to be "a wildly inappropriate response to present-day life" (Haffenden 5).

When Self draws the character "Martin Amis" into the novel by asking him to rewrite the screenplay of his movie to resolve the actors' conflicting demands while making them behave realistically, "Martin Amis" replies: "we're pretty much agreed that the twentieth century is an ironic age--downward-looking. Even realism, rockbottom realism, is considered a bit grand for the twentieth century" (231). Amis's postmodern rejection of classic realism then is closely related to his feeling that the present era represents a deterioration in the quality of living. This relation between the present age of late capitalism and its cultural expression

using anti-realist esthetic modes has been extensively theorized by Fredric Jameson. Unlike Jameson and his own father in his youth, Amis is no Marxist. His is nevertheless a representative artistic response to the postmodern era. Both cities between which the novel alternates show signs of irreversible decay. There is "[b]lasted, totalled, broken-winded, shot-faced London, doing time under sodden skies" (150) (the metaphors building up an apocalyptic image of breakdown and entropy). New York is characterized by its birds that, having "been processed by Manhattan and the twentieth century," "have slipped several links in the chain of being" (199). Money values, Amis maintains, are responsible for having "turned paradise into a toilet" (Morrison 102). How can realism afford the contemporary writer an adequate response to the unreality of humankind's collective madness?

By injecting a substitute author figure called "Martin Amis" into the novel Amis is further distancing the reader from Self and the insane lifestyle and values with which he is associated, a distance needed for the satire to be effective. "Martin Amis" lectures a bored Self on the way the modern antihero is so removed from the author that "you can do what the hell you like with him" (229). The most important function "Martin Amis" performs in the plot is to re-write the screenplay of *Money* so successfully that he foils Fielding's plan of seeing Self torn apart by his outraged leading actors. The irony of this development is that it only serves to prolong Self's state of self-delusion. As in *Other People*, Amis confronts his readers with their complicity in the author's sadistic treatment of his main character. At the same time there is a similarity, as he has pointed out, between the "lone gratification" of Self's endless hand jobs and the writer's lone gratification in subjecting his helpless protagonist to such humiliations. As Karl Miller has written, the original Onan of Genesis "is an orphan, and there are two of him" (411). "Martin Amis" acts as Self's cultured alter-ego in London, just as Martina Twain (a feminized twin to Martin?) performs the same role for Self in New York.

Amis employs numerous puns and literary allusions to ironically highlight the gap that separates Self and the world of money from these two cultured alter-egos. One or two of these allusions become more like recurrent thematic motifs. Take for example the allusions to *Othello*. What possible relation can the events in this novel have to Shakespeare's play? In the first place, the play evokes a world that is patently inaccessible to Self. When Martina takes him to the opera to see *Otello* Self congratulates himself for knowing the plot from having seen the TV spinoff. His understanding of the story however is a hilarious misinterpretation that stems from the media stereotypes into which he automatically turns the major figures: "The flash spade general arrives to take up a position on some island, in the olden days there, bringing with him the Lady Di figure as his bride. Then she starts diddling one of his lieutenants, a funloving kind of guy whom I took to immediately" (277). In no time Self has converted Verdi's opera into a soap opera. To add insult to injury he identifies with Cassio and assumes that Desdemona must be sleeping around like the rest of the women in his life, especially Selina.

Amis keeps *Othello* in view throughout the book by such devices as calling "Martin Amis's" car Iago, or having Self take a swig from a bottle of Desdemona Cream. His father works in a pub called the Shakespeare. In a climactic scene near the end Self is waylaid by Fielding in drag. After he has delivered a devastating kick to Fielding's jaw Self hears Fielding cry out, "Oh damn dear go [. . .] Oh and you man dog" (322). It takes the educated "Martin Amis" to explain to Self that Fielding was in fact quoting Roderigo's accusatory words directed at Iago after Iago has fatally stabbed him: "O damn'd Iago, O inhuman dog." As "Martin Amis" remarks, this is a remarkable piece of transference on Fielding's part, since Fielding's relation to Self is like that of Iago's to Othello. But Self is no Othello, as Amis has explained: "he's Roderigo, the lecherous spendthrift and gull" (Haffenden 23). He is a pawn that is forced to move at the cost of its own defeat, as occurs in the chess game he loses to "Martin Amis" near the end. "Martin Amis" explains the quotation from *Othello* to Self towards the end of the game in which he, like Fielding, "zugwangs" Self (i.e. forces him to move and lose). It is ironically appropriate that Self mistakes "Martin Amis's" reference to Iago to refer to "Amis's" old car, convinced that if he wins the author will demand as his prize Self's Italian sportscar, the Fiasco. The truth is that Martin Amis has - just as much as Fielding - acted Iago to Self's Roderigo by subjecting him to 360 pages of humiliation.

Amis's invention of a fictionalized alter-ego enables him to embed the device of the intrusive author and his self-reflexive voice firmly within the narrative structure. It is Self, the narrator, not "Martin Amis," who is finally expelled from the novel at its conclusion, expelled from the world of money that has been his undoing. He is also typographically expelled from the book. The final section of his narrative is in italics to draw attention to the different Self to be found there living his life in the present. While he thought he had money he saw himself as an express train rushing through the night: "Though travelling nowhere I have hurtled with blind purpose to the very end of my time." He continues: "I want to slow down now, and check out the scenery, and put in a stop or two. I want some semi-colons" (288). In the final sentence of the book describing the return from work of his new unpretentious girlfriend, Georgina, Amis has allowed the first and only semi-colon in the book to appear. It is a fittingly linguistic touch with which to round off the narrative of a character so reliant for his fictive existence on Amis's brilliant and witty manipulation of language.

3

Amis's next book was *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), a collection of five short stories and a polemical introduction in which he denounces the insanity of nuclear deterrence. The stories were widely criticized for being no more than exempla of his stance on nuclear weapons. His next long and ambitious novel, *London Fields* (1989), is set in 1999 against a backdrop of imminent planetary disaster (not specifically nuclear seeing that *glasnost* had set in by the time he wrote this book) referred to throughout as the Crisis. Its size and ambitious scope attracted wide attention in the press on both sides of the Atlantic. Once again there is a writer figure in the novel who in this case is dying from the same causes as the Earth. The central character is Nicola Six who seeks her own death by inducing one of two men - a wealthy family man and a working class small-time criminal - to murder her. As in *Other People* the author figure cannot escape complicity in her murder. The novel is burdened by some of the didactic content that marred *Einstein's Monsters*. Nicola's death wish, for instance, is a direct consequence of the death of love at the end of the century. Yet this novel rivals the ingenuity and wit of *Money* whenever Amis abandons his high moral tone. After these last two books reviewers were beginning to think of Amis as a writer taken over by a moral platform - displaying, as Martin Harris wrote unfairly in the *New Statesman*, "the portentousness of the reborn eco freak and the whine of the nuke neurotic" (Harris 34).

Then Amis published *Time's Arrow* (1991) which restored his reputation among critics and earned a nomination for the Booker Prize. Taking as its central character a Nazi doctor who participated in the horror of Auschwitz and then escaped to anonymity in America, the book traces his life backwards from his death in the United States from an automobile accident to his birth in Germany. This is his only novel to take the past for its subject. The device of reversing the flight of time's arrow is not original in itself. It has been employed, for instance, by numerous science fiction writers including Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick. But the audacious combination of reversing narrative chronology so as to retell the story of the Holocaust is both unique and strangely moving. It is bold enough for an Aryan to try and recount this catastrophic event in the history of the Jews. But to render it as the one healing episode in a senseless world by reversing the order in which we experience life requires literary courage and a command of language that Amis clearly has.

The Holocaust is, as Amis has said, "the central event of the twentieth century" (Bellante 16). And the Nazi doctors' role in the death camps was crucial. In an Afterword to the novel Amis acknowledges his debt to his friend Robert Jay Lifton's book, *The Nazi Doctors*. The perverse story it tells of an entire profession adopting an ideology of killing as a means of healing (their notion of ethnic cleansing striking chilling echoes in the Serbian atrocities against Croats, Bosnians and Albanians in the 1990s) struck him as "the only story that would gain meaning backwards" (Trueheart B1). By moving the narration in the direction of the Holocaust Amis imparts to this novel the same feeling of apocalypse that *London Fields* has set in the Crisis of the near future. At the same time to reverse history is to undo it, to return to the innocence of a time before the European Fall - a common theme of Holocaust poetry.

To achieve both effects he introduces as the narrator of the book, not the doctor, but his doppelganger, the doctor's soul, "the soul he should have had," as Amis put it to one interviewer (DeCurtis 146). It is a wholly fictional device that works for the most part and contributes a terrible sense of irony to the historical events we see unfolding in reverse. The doctor and narrator share the same body but otherwise have different identities. The narrator admits that he's slow on the uptake: "It may very well be that I'm not playing with a full deck" (29). He has no memory of the past as does the doctor. So when the doctor seeks to lose his earlier identity the narrator observes: "My presence is never tinier. But it's the same story. Render up your soul, and gain power" (49). The doctor clearly abandoned this "voice of conscience" (47) in the process of becoming a doctor with the doctor's power of life and death over others. Both his wife and later girlfriend tell him he has no soul. His soul which comes to life, which is born at the moment of the doctor's death on the first page of the book, is consequently essentially child-like and innocent of the terrible dreams from which the doctor suffers.

Those dreams act for both narrator and reader as anticipations - the narrator talks of "the prophesy of my dreams" (140), of "a terrible secret" he feels he is journeying towards (5). But for the doctor they represent the past that haunts him throughout the rest of his life. So for the narrator there is something deterministic about the way he is forced to experience the doctor's life in strict reverse. As he remarks, "Suicide isn't an option, is it. Not in this world" (25). The doctor's dreams begin on the second page with an image of a male shape in a white coat and black boots. (Doctors preside over the novel, "life's gatekeepers" (4), who give life to the protagonist at the end of the book and deprive him of it at the beginning.) "In his wake, a blizzard of wind and sleet, like a storm of human souls" (8). The souls become stars in the night sky, souls of babies with enormous power. Next come nightmares featuring a wooden shed and implements. Amis is using the doctor's nightmares to prepare the reader for the period late in the book when he works at Auschwitz. The shed turns out to be Room 1 in which prisoners are put to death by injection. The doctor's most horrific dream occurs shortly before he regresses to the death camp. "He dreams he is shitting human bones" (106). The dreams are then replaced by the historical event, the mass extermination of the Jews, played in reverse.

The way Amis makes use of the technique of narrative reversal is responsible for the savage irony of this book. It is not surprising that *Time's Arrow* has been compared to Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, for it shares with that work an indignation that is all the more powerful for its restraint. Amis maintains a comic tone throughout, although it is "disgusted laughter" he cultivates to "laugh the wicked off the stage" (Trueheart B1-2). David Lehman called the novel "a fictional deconstruction of time" in which history is undone (15). And time, according to Amis, is linked to morality. "Almost any deed," Amis has said, "any action, has its morality reversed, if you turn time's arrow around" (DeCurtis 147). On reading *The Nazi Doctors*, Amis realized that "[h]ere was a psychotically inverted world, and if you did it backward in time, it would make sense." (DeCurtis 146). The sea change that chronological reversal has on causality and moral responsibility enables Amis to defamiliarize an event the shock value of which has become blunted by reiteration.

In fact it is the very playfulness with which he treats the horror of the death camp that makes it strange, both linguistically, in Shklovsky's definition of *ostranenie*, and narratively. He spends the first two thirds of the novel acclimatizing the reader to the looking glass world that the narrator inhabits. In his inverted world fire and violence are creative. Earthquakes erect cities in half an hour. Moral acts are reversed. And of course this makes no kind of sense to him. The doctor's attempts to compensate for his past by buying toys for kids on the street when reversed becomes in the narrator's eyes a mean way of taking toys from the children so as to cash them in at the store for a couple of bucks. Kennedy's assassination is triumphantly transformed into a hero's welcome on his return to life in the streets of Dallas. The conversations of lovers told in reverse have an uncanny way of reading just as satisfactorily as when recorded chronologically, just as love affairs seem to work just as well recounted back to front. The boat taking him from Europe to the States in its inverted form leaves "no mark in the ocean, as if we are successfully covering our tracks" (99), which is precisely what the doctor was doing.

Above all there is the absurd reversal between the doctor's perfectly ethical medical practice in the United States and his lethal medical procedures at Auschwitz. In America he is called Tod Friendly. "Tod" means "death" in German. Amis explains his last name: "'Friendly' America, forgiving, forgetful America" (Bellante 16). His German name is Odilo Unverdorben. His surname in German means "uncorrupt, innocent," as if original sin were undone. In the perplexed narrator's eyes Dr Friendly performs disfavours to his American patients:

The babies get wheeled or carried in here, and they're well enough, and you look them over and say something like "This little fella's just fine." And you're always dead wrong. Always. A day or two later the baby will be back, crimson-eared, or whoofing with croup. And you never do a damn thing for them. (44)

By comparison Dr Unverdorben performs miraculous resuscitations for his Jewish patients at Auschwitz. "Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race" (120). They start off as corpses stacked in the Chamber. "Entirely intelligibly, though, to prevent needless suffering, the dental work was usually completed while the patients were not yet alive" (121). Next the poison gas is returned to the vents: "It was I, Odilo Unverdorben, who personally removed the pellets of Zyklon B and entrusted them to the pharmacist in his white coat" (121). After getting dressed, they leave the Sprinklerroom and miraculously are rejoined on the platform by their menfolk who have synchronistically "completed their term of labour service" (123).

The deluded narrator is so happy at this late turn of events that he begins to use the first person pronoun in this section when describing Odilo's apparent acts of resuscitation. And yet ironically the distance at this point between his and Odilo's moral vision is at its maximum. Amis relies on three different perspectives for this section to work. There is Odilo's perverted misinterpretation of the Hippocratic oath. There is the naive narrator's celebration of Odilo's seeming miracles of healing. And there is the modern reader's sinking knowledge of what really went on at Nazi death camps like Auschwitz. The reader, who is expected to identify with the [implied] author, not the narrator, supplies the truth and the tragedy, as Amis has explained (DeCurtis 146). David Lehman has ingeniously suggested that in the Auschwitz section Amis is appropriating the definitive motif of deconstruction - erasure: "The very instrument of revisionist history is put to the service of heartbreaking fiction" (15). Amis has said that he came up with the technical device of narrational reversal before finding the subject suited to this treatment. But Amis, a novelist and not a theorist, is always "looking for [. . .] a way to see the world differently" (Morrison 99). In *Time's Arrow* he has brilliantly combined a postmodern use of narrative defamiliarization with his recent insistence on the need for moral vision. Powerfully imagined, savagely ironic, strangely moving, the novel is a celebration of the fictive and of what the fictive imagination can wrest from history.

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