

## CHAPTER TWO

### PASSAGES IN TIME TRAVERSED, PASSAGES IN TEXT UNWRITTEN: A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO MARTIN AMIS'S *TIME'S ARROW*

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Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, also published in the U.S as *The Nature of the Offence*, is a novel that sets out to terrify with its re-imagined concepts of morality and immorality as manifest in the narrative inversion of life and time. As a model example of postmodernist writing, the novel self-consciously inverts reality and narrative in order to question the notion of existence and the subjective nature of perspectives on the real. Approaching the text as such, this chapter will offer a theoretical approach to the idea that narrative reversal in the novel is an example of a process defined here as "un-writing". It will furthermore analyse this concept of un-writing as it relates to the dislocation of passages in time and text and as it may be understood in terms of presenting that which is unrepresentable.

The novel is quite a radical departure from conventional storytelling and offers the life-story of the protagonist, Tod Friendly, formerly a Nazi doctor, in a mode of narrative that appears much like a movie being watched in rewind. Un-writing is cleverly achieved in the work via this primary inversion and more specifically through the use of two separate consciousnesses in one character: Tod, the narrating identity being an observer of his own life in reverse. The narrating identity is effectively "dislocated from the lifeworld" to refer to Jurgen Habermas (Habermas qtd. in Dews 1999, 17), and so, beginning at the moment of his death, he runs backwards, through his youth, to the moment of his inevitable birth and conception, observing a universe in which "a child's breathless wailing is calmed by the firm slap of the father's hand... a dead ant revived by the careless press of a passing sole, a wounded finger healed, sealed by a knife's blade" (Amis 2003, 34).

To clarify, the term “un-writing” refers to that process of narrative reversal distinctive of this text and used in related works such as Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5*. It effects a disruption of time-moving, both in the world of the reader and the world of the novel, problematising the reasonable interpretation of the text and reasonable navigation of the written passage. Though this whole process results in a very distracting and defamiliarising read, it is clear from the outset that *Time’s Arrow* presents Dr. Tod T. Friendly as an embodiment of two separate consciousnesses that exist in two separate and equally terrifying realities that are presented as the inverse of each other. Interestingly, this intriguing representation of the de-centred self operates to expose the linguistic nature of those basic binary oppositions that uphold all concepts of identity. Due to the emphasised reversal of the narrative, everything is its own assumed opposite in this case. And the narrative itself is not an exception. Writing becomes un-writing and identity is being erased instead of formed.

For example, in many instances in *Time’s Arrow*, passages of dialogue are printed on the page in reverse and must be read from end to beginning if one is to attempt rational interpretation of the text. James Diedrick has argued that “faced with this confusion the reader develops coping mechanisms... [and] the world becomes comprehensible because it follows predictable rules” (Diedrick 2004, 135-6). By presenting the reader with an inverted passage, the author offers an alternative or inverted presentation of the text. Significantly, despite this inversion, unwritten narrative codes remain in place. The reader effectively translates the reversed passages into standard, forward moving textual sequences. After some time spent at this type of reading process however, the mind of the reader can run into trouble as the defamiliarised becomes familiar and one is compelled to accept the inverted passages as they are presented. An example of this in the novel is when Tod the narrator comments on his own attempts to interpret the reversed narrative of his own life. Observing conversations he has had with people, backwards, is something that takes some getting used to, particularly those conversations he has with women, one of which reads as follows:

“Don’t go, please.”

“Goodbye, Tod.”

“Don’t go.”

“It’s no good.”

“Please.”

“There’s no future for us.”

“You’re very special to me.”

"Like Hell."

"But I love you."

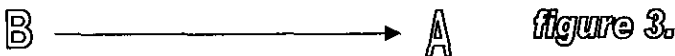
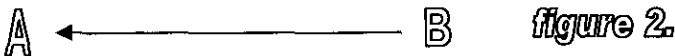
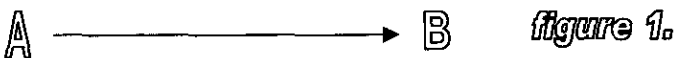
"I can't look you in the eye." (Amis 2003, 60)

After this, Tod comments:

I have noticed in the past, of course, that most conversations would make much better sense if you ran them backwards. But with this man-woman stuff, you could run them any way you liked—and still get no further forwards (Amis 2003, 60).

Amis is clearly playing on the nature of the reading process here, as well as the hidden structures of literary language. He also seems to be seeking out a way to break through the linguistic structures that make up reality, in order to write the un-writable: that which lies beyond common language; that which is unrepresentable.

The diagram below might serve to illustrate this shift in the reading process whereby writing becomes un-writing and the unrepresentable can be represented.



In *figure 1.* we see represented the normal transition of a narrative sequence. The reader interprets events as they are represented from A (past) to B (future). In *figure 2.* we see the basic reversal process used in Amis's novel, whereby the reader must navigate to the end of the passage and move backwards up the page to make sense of the narrative. In *figure 3.* however, we see that the sequence of interpretation has changed significantly whereby B is taken for A and vice versa. The beginning of the novel is understood as such by the reader, despite the fact that the narrator has just died, and the end of the novel, where the narrator is created is taken for the end. Importantly, this third step, involves a

significant un-representation on the author's part, and inference on the part of the reader. A new method of extra-linguistic communication is achieved and interpretation moves onto a different and new level. What is communicated, in this respect, is of importance in epistemological terms. It has implications for our acceptance of things as they are and the repressed knowledge that is involved in this practice.

Arguably, this process is also a reflection on the possibility or impossibility of escaping narrated existence and it investigates an existential problem by attempting to represent that which is "unrepresentable" (in the Kantian sense) as can be seen in the sublimely terrifying realities to be decoded in many of the reversed passages of the novel. Of these, most poignant, is the point when the narrator watches his birth in reverse, which becomes a death, characterised by screaming.

Our corporeal bond will be tied, with Solingen scissors. When I enter her, how she will weep and scream... Soon Father will have her all to himself... Naturally I cannot forgive my father for what he will have to do to me. He will come in and kill me with his body (Amis 2003, 171).

Effectively, Amis's approach to narrative in this passage offers a unique handling of that fine, volatile line between being and non-being, knowing and not knowing, representable and unrepresentable. The moment of conception is conceived of as murder and the moment of birth, a horrific and grotesque event. Similarly, the son "entering" the mother and the concept of infanticide on the part of the father takes on manifold connotations from a psychoanalytic point of view. All of this contributes to a confounding representation of a birth, which is in no way represented directly. In fact, the word birth is not mentioned at all.

Significantly, this extract explores the very real potential for the binary of life and death to be reconciled and the reversal of the two conditions of being and not being is quite similar to Beckett's handling of the subject in *Malone Dies*.

All is ready. Except me. I am being given, if I may venture the expression, birth to, into death, such is my impression. The feet are clear already of the cunt of existence. Favourable presentation I trust. My head will be the last to die (Beckett 1979, 114).

For an existentialist like Beckett, life is death as a work in progress, expressed of course in the darkest and most ironic terms. In his epistemological explorations, Beckett parodies existence itself from its physical polarities of life and death and dislocates all of its conceptions: selves, realities, beliefs and roles. Like Amis, many of his characters and

narrators paradoxically strive toward a devolution of self. *Unnamable* is a good example in this respect. Stripped of the trappings of existence, much like Amis's observer narrator, *Unnamable* is characterised only in terms of his own monologue which disintegrates as we progress through reading it, in what David Pattie calls "[a]n open ended process of echoes and reduplications" (Pattie 2000, 159). Beckett writes:

[n]o voice left, nothing left but the core of murmurs, distant cries, quick now and try again with the words that remain, try what I don't know, I've forgotten, it doesn't matter, I never knew, to have them carry me into my story...perhaps it's a dream, all a dream, that would surprise me, I'll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, or dream, dream again dream of a silence, a dream silence, full of murmurs, I don't know, that's all words, never wake, all words, there's nothing else (Beckett 1979, 381).

Seemingly, the panic expressed in this extract is a result of the anarchy outside of the structures of language. The repetition of words is a defamiliarising process and leads one to a distrust of the ambiguity of language, and its claims to knowledge and reality. Significantly Pattie refers to this type of narrative as the "literature of self erasure" (Pattie 2000, 168).

Another example that might be considered is Paul Auster's narrator/detective: Quin, in *City of Glass*, whose demise might be regarded as a form of linguistic suicide. At the point when Quin finally loses his shadow in the city and disappears into his own narrative, he finds himself in a "windowless cubicle". Here, he sits, naked, with his notebook, and continues to write until everything becomes one and he erases himself with his words. We are told that finally:

his words had severed from him [and] were now part of the world at large... He wondered if he had it in him to write without a pen ... what will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook? (Auster 1992, 131)

Again, here, we have a writer who is pondering issues related to the concept of narrated existence. Beyond the physicalities of "writing", Quin does not have the capacity to exist outside of being a re-read fictional character in a fictional work. Central to Auster's self-conscious novel, this problem is readily translatable to a more philosophical discourse whereby it can be read in terms of subjectivity. "What lies beyond the narratives of selfhood", is the essential question here. And the answer falls with the unrepresentable aspects of being, those, which are un-writable, incapable of presentation.

The term “unrepresentable” refers, particularly, to that which is incommunicable; that, which is so often described as “ineffable” or “unspeakable”. On a more general level it is also that “unrepresentable” of sublime experience, which, when encountered by the subject and due to its extra-linguistic nature, effects the interruption of subjective action, causing a split between rationality and imagination (Lyotard 1991, 210). The sublime condition of an encounter with “the unrepresentable” is according to Jean François Lyotard, whose theory is based on Kantian philosophy, one that results in terror at the loss of “time moving” and “exultation” at the comprehension of the “finite”. The feelings, to cite Kant, are the consequence of a conflict of reason as it comprehends the sublime, and imagination as it fails to “re-present it” (Kant 2001, 24-26). Though it is of course impossible to present what is by nature unrepresentable, Lyotard states that postmodernist art has an obligation to the unrepresentable, whereby it must invent allusions to the conceivable that cannot be presented and celebrate the effects of sublime heterogeneity evoked by unrepresentability so valuable to our postmodern condition (Lyotard 1986, 79). Amis honours this obligation by “undertaking un-representation, thereby presenting the lack of communicability of the experience” (Beville 2007, e-text) and the hesitation involved in encountering the reversal of textual passages, arguably mimics the liminal experience of the sublime encounter with the unrepresentable on a conceptual, extra-linguistic level.

The unrepresentable event dealt with in the reversed passages of the text is, most obviously, related to the protagonist’s role in the genocide that was committed at Auschwitz. Introduced as something of a Promethean figure, Dr. Tod Friendly is first revealed as a “good” but troubled character and it is not immediately clear that terror lies beneath his surface. Only as the narrative evolves (or devolves in this case) through dreams and emotions, the terror of “the nature of [his] offence” is laid bare. This offence itself however, remains quite abstract throughout the first part of the novel, but the atmosphere of mystery and evil and the fictional reality that our main character has just expired at the beginning of the novel, sets something of a darkened scene and tone that leads us, in suspense, back in time towards the unspeakable atrocities of Nazi Germany and the horrors of the concentration camps.

As a doctor in the Auschwitz camp, Tod, then known as Dr. Odilo Unverdorben is un-written through the changed direction of narrative time to become one of the people who provided “help” and “gave life” to the Jewish people. In the reversed passages, he replaces teeth, restores eyes to sockets, heals wounds that are soon to disappear with a corporal beating, and leads the bald, moaning women away from the gas chambers.

Regardless of this inversion, however, Tod can only be interpreted as a maker of ghosts and the true nature of his offence, effectively remains the same, if not more deplorable. The implications of his immorality seem to transcend the reversal of time and text. In life, following their murder, the Jews remain spectral beings. Through the stethoscope “their hearts sound far away” (Amis 2003, 131). This condition is illustrated in very poetic terms by Amis as he inserts the potent image of the sky as the locus of death before life. In Auschwitz, the narrator notices that “there was a new smell in the air. A sweet smell” (Amis 2003, 127), and comments that “[n]ot for elegance did I come to love the evening sky, hellish red with the gathering souls” (Amis 2003, 128). He relates quite poignantly that the Jews in the camp walk around with their heads bent back. He knows why they do it:

they are looking for the souls of their mothers and their fathers, their women and their children, gathering in the heavens—awaiting human form and union... The sky above the Vistula full of stars. I can see them now. They no longer hurt my eyes (Amis 2003, 131).

In Auschwitz, we are informed that “[t]ime had no arrow, not here” (Amis 2003, 151) and significantly it is here that Tod’s existence is for once outside of time “the human dimension, which makes us everything we are” (Amis 2003, 76). Beyond this context and within the so-called human dimension, though reversed, Tod’s character remains empty. In his hospital work in the U.S., later in his life and at the beginning of the novel, he is presented as dehumanised and through the inverted and grotesque depictions of violence, terror, horror and dark irony, he is given to us as “othered” and monster-like as his help becomes torture.

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 to suffer in agony (Amis 2003, 85).

Interestingly, the narrator, as an observer detached from this rewound existence, does put forward the idea that “[p]robably human cruelty is fixed and eternal. Only styles change” (Amis 2003, 49). Even when human actions appear to be “good” on the surface, what lies beneath is often destructive. “[D]estruction” he continues—is difficult, is slow. “Creation as I said, is no trouble at all” (Amis 2003, 26).

In this deconstructionist approach to morality, there is no good and bad but both at the same time as we see through Amis’s “sinister reversal”. In

relation to this idea, Diedrick comments that “the narrative conceit of *Time’s Arrow* is placed wholly in the service of a grim moral reckoning” (Diedrick 2004, 135). This must be considered, however, in light of the fact that moral codes are presented in reverse, and that these codes are unwritten as time’s arrow inverts the relationship between cause and effect, action and consequence. Significantly, regardless of the linguistic systems that uphold our societal concepts of morality, the author seems to suggest that there is something in our being, something essential, that sources our conscience; some unwritten law or unspoken obligation; and he investigates the implications of this by posing the question “is human cruelty fixed and eternal?” (Amis 2003, 49) From the perspective of the narrator, the observer of this harsh inverted world, it certainly is. And it would seem that he is correct in the sense that no matter which direction time’s arrow takes in the world of the novel, the work of the doctor, “life’s gatekeeper” (Amis 2003, 11) has colossal and evil repercussions. Significantly, Amis’s findings are quite uncanny, as they centre on the often repressed knowledge that we are all inherently bad as we are good, propounded by the religious myth of man’s fall from grace. In line with this, Amis includes a satirical observation on this when the narrator asserts that Tod’s Garden of Eden (the garden of his home) “was heaven when we started out... don’t blame me. Don’t blame the serpent if man has free will” (Amis 2003, 26).

Behind this overt commentary on human morality/ immorality, the manipulated misinterpretation involved in the reversed reading processes of the text operates, quite cleverly, as something of an inevitable pitfall for the reader. Recalling the result of un-writing in figure 3. when the reader finally reaches the stage of accepting the narrative at face value, it might be said that he or she is lured into a sort of *meconnaissance*. While this of course lends itself to a psychoanalytic approach to the un-writing process, Amis clearly has more explicit issues to be dealt with first. The commonplace acceptance of man’s inhumanity to man is at the heart of the novel thematically. While historically, the wide-scale human conformity to such an unspeakable atrocity as the Holocaust seems unexplainable to many of us, it is psychologically evidenced that in the same situation, most of us would turn a blind eye to the suffering of others and comply with the behaviour of our social peers.

It is quite an interesting handling of this somewhat uncanny issue that Amis undertakes, in terms of leading the reader to question themselves through their responses to the un-written narrative. Throughout history, human ignorance and denial have been key factors in creating situations in which horrors such as genocide can occur and the question of individual



responsibility is too infrequently taken into account. Our judgement as a reader of Amis's narrative, in this respect, however, becomes a judgement of ourselves and we are obliged to question our own un-written personal moral codes, which should impel us to show compassion for our fellow man. What is revealed to most of us in this is that like Amis's novel our lives are made up of a doubled narrative: one written and outward, and one un-written and inward. And the incongruity of the two revealed through defamiliarisation is quite shocking.

In many ways, the sense that morality has been defamiliarised is reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's narrative appropriation of the idea in *Slaughterhouse 5*, possibly an inspirational source for Amis's technique. At one point in Vonnegut's novel, the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim sees a war movie backwards. In this context, war is presented as "peace and help". Billy is then a witness to "[t]he American fliers [who] turned in their uniforms and became high school kids" and extrapolates that then Hitler and in fact everybody "turned into a baby and all humanity without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed" (Vonnegut 200, 54). The irony in this is quite brutal but what is significant is that the expression is quite poetic and even more importantly the terror in this is not lost. It lingers for that little while longer as we decode the representation.

It is this lingering or hesitance, caused by the un-writing process that has the most significant impact on the reader and this is something that Amis is aware of. Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy focuses on the concept of lingering/ hesitation in a way that may shed light on the importance of this experience to the reader. Beginning with the idea that the self is unrepresentable and unimaginable, Levinas considers that in spite of this, "there is" (Il y a) a self that exists. This self endeavours to exist, and thus becomes an "existent" in a process that Levinas terms "hypostasis". He proposes that hesitant experiences (and he gives fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, sensuality and death as examples) are liminal or suspended states of being, which involve a hypostatic condition of subjectivity: "[i]n thinking of infinity the 'I' from the first thinks more than it thinks" (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002, 10). Levinas would see this as a situation in which "the I I's". In other words, the identity recedes from the "I" it identifies, resulting in a doubling of self: "[i]n place of the 'I' that circulates in time, we posit the 'I' as the very ferment of time in the present" (Levinas 1995, 92). This, significantly, mirrors the very process in the novel of both the narrator's and the narrative's coming into existence but it also mirrors the reader's situation of split subjectivity as they interpret the text on two different levels. The reading, conscious I,

circulates in time, while the reading, unconscious I, becomes part of the “ferment of time in the present”, taking up a liminal position on time’s arrow in the novel.

In this sense, narrative inversion and passages of un-writing in *Time’s Arrow* effectively present Tod, like the reader, with a mirror on to his life and as would be expected the inversion/ distortion parallels Jacques Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”. In Lacanian theory

[t]he mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject... the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality (Lacan 1995, 5).

When, as a result, all is reduced to subjective interpretation, “self” and “other”, “conscious” and “subconscious” are on some level reconciled, arguably, on the level of an unrepresentable self. In the narrated world of the mirror, the symbolic world of self-recognition as we know it, what we are, is written, inscribed through the intricate processes of language. By undertaking to un-write the character of Tod Friendly, Amis is effectively stripping away the psychoanalytic implications of subjectivity. He appears to be working toward a notion of self outside of language, a self removed from the trappings of linguistic existence and the repression that it involves.

Interestingly, however, *Time’s Arrow* is in this way, also a reflection on the impossibility of escaping narrated existence and investigates this existential problem by attempting to represent the “unrepresentable”, not only in the grand transcendental sense articulated by Kant but in the sense of the many unrepresentables that are repressed in the processes of subjectivity. This is evident in the numerous sublimely terrifying realities to be decoded in the reversed narrative. This can be read from more mundane passages such as:

[o]n the corner of Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue, every morning, there is a circular pool of mulch, like a vast bread pizza, like a physical calamity awaiting clearance from some twelve-foot drunk or mutant dog sickened by its own size. No. An old lady descends from the black branches of the fire escape every morning and wearily gathers it all up and clammers home with it in paper bags: the food left for her by the birds (Amis 2003, 97);

to more profound passages contemplating death, such as when the narrator comments on the way in which death becomes birth and vice versa for the babies who

no longer smile... They go to the hospitals, [w]here 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 (Amis 2003, 41).

The concept of Death in this sense is a form of regeneration and true death, the real mystery, is the rapture of being born and conceived. Tod worries about babies: “[w]here do they go, the little creatures who disappear: the vanished?” (Amis 2003, 47). This leads the narrator to conclude in a darkly Beckettian fashion that “[p]erhaps that’s the point of this process: the search for invisibility” (Amis 2003, 47).

At the close of the novel there is a metafictional inclusion that proposes that writing, like painting “seem[s] to hint at a topsy turvy world, in which so to speak, time’s arrow moves the other way. The invisible speed-lines suggest a different nexus of sequence and process” (Amis 2003, 95). This nexus is close to the perspective that seems to push us towards a better or at least different understanding of humanity. The process of narrative reversal, therefore, or “un-writing” to use a more distinctive phrase, in terms of narrated existence and confinement in language, presents a liminal, unrepresented state of perception; that state of heterogeneity that is so valuable to our postmodern condition. By proposing an abstract extra-linguistic view of the world and self, the passages of time and text in this novel deconstruct narrated existence and the binaries that uphold it. *Time's Arrow*, may thus be seen as fulfilling an obligation to the unrepresentable aspects of experience by presenting an identity that is not totalised and a life that is disjointed, multiple and symbolic in that it is beyond the limits of passages in time and space. And in this context, it is possible for Amis to present, as he does, the ghosts and monsters within, not merely as abject forms but as realities that need to be accepted and understood, as manifestations of negative desires which go against the grain of our misguided essentialist philosophies of democratic, autonomous and progressive mankind.

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