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**The Holocaust as Zero Hour: Reading and Uncovering  
Guilt Through Silences in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*  
(1991)**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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## **Abstract**

*Time's Arrow* (1991) narrates the life of a German doctor named Odilo Unverdorben through a time-reversal technique. It begins with the “resurrection” of the protagonist as an old man in the United States. As the narration progresses, however, the reader notices he has a heavy secret on his shoulders, and this secret is cryptically confessed throughout the pages: Odilo’s past as a Nazi doctor.

The aim of this paper is to approach the representation of the Nazi perpetrator in Martin Amis’ fiction through the analysis of his doubled self, the active body and the passive conscience. Furthermore, I intend to explore the issue of trauma and guilt representation in second-generation Holocaust literature and interpret the figure of Odilo Unverdorben as a sufferer of PTSD.

**Keywords:** Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*, Holocaust, Silence, Guilt, Morality, Consciousness, Perpetrators, Fiction

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## 0. Introduction

### 0.1 Addressing the Holocaust, trauma studies and perpetrator literature

This dissertation will focus on Holocaust literature and, more specifically, on the representation of ordinary Nazi perpetrators (that is to say, people who did not hold important positions within the National Socialist hierarchy) in fiction. In order to do so, I will analyse Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991) and its protagonist, a Nazi doctor. My paper is going to be divided in two sections; the first one will deal with the difficulties that appear when trying to put into words the testimony of a perpetrator, following Jessica Lang's theoretical approach to textual silences and their connection to guilt (2017) and also Rachel M. Macnair's studies on the effects of violence on perpetrators (2002), whilst the second part will concentrate on the narrative approach to time through the concepts of "caesura" (1999), coined by Ann Parry, and Robert Lifton's "transfer of conscience" (1988). Before diving into the analysis of the novel, however, it is important to contextualise the novel within the main fields of research that have dealt with the Holocaust and its literature.

After Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor in 1933, the Nazi government began to isolate Jews from the rest of the German society and built a network of concentration camps for political opponents and people considered "undesirable". In his history book about Nazi Germany, Joseph W. Bendersky claims that Lanf von Liebenfels<sup>1</sup> and Houston Stewart Chamberlain<sup>2</sup>'s writings on the "Aryan master race" deeply influenced Hitler (Bendersky, 2014: 20). Those writings argued that evolution was responsible for the production of distinguishable races with different characteristics and potential. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> Adolf Josef Lanz (1874-1954) was an Austrian political and racial theorist that coined the term "Ariosophy", an esoteric doctrine that dealt with wisdom and ancient German knowledge applied to Aryans. He also founded the German nationalist magazine Ostara in 1905, where he published anti-semitic theories.

<sup>2</sup> Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927) was a British-born German philosopher whose work greatly influenced the Nazi racial policies that dealt with antisemitism.

they asserted that the Aryan race was the only race “capable of advanced cultural and technological creations” (Bendersky, 20) and that is why not only the Aryans were the superior race, but also why racial purity had to be preserved. According to Hitler, the Jewish race was the greatest opponent of the Arians because they had developed an instinct for self-preservation and therefore retained their racial purity. However, as they could not enhance civilization nor create culture, the Jews “seized upon the achievements of other races to survive” (Bendersky, 21). During the first years of the Second World War, the Nazis did not see genocide as the solution to achieve a Germany free of Jews. Alternatively, they explored the possibility of concentrating Jews in ghettos and also sending them to the French colony of Madagascar (Bendersky, 188). However, neither option appeared to provide “a feasible long-term solution” (Bendersky, 188) to the problem. As a consequence, between 1941 and 1945 around six million people were systematically murdered by the Nazis as an implementation of “the Final Solution to the Jewish Question”, a term they coined to refer to the genocide of the Jews. After the war, especially between 1945 and 1950, the Allied forces endured a complex process of ‘denazification’ across Nazi-occupied Europe that consisted of erasing Nazism from society, including politics, culture, press, economy, and the juridical system. During these years, around 400000 Germans were detained and also sent to camps. However, with the beginning of the Cold War in 1947, the Western Allied countries lost interest in the programme and denazification became increasingly lenient, while in the Soviet area it kept being considered a key element to create a society based on the socialist ideology.

The Holocaust revealed one of humanity’s darkest and most horrifying sides. It rationalized the killing of millions of people and turned perfectly sane civilians into perpetrators or firm supporters of mass murder. How did this become possible? How

could a mentally stable, logical person advocate for such horrors to happen? Post-World War II and genocide studies have offered two main explanations for the subject.

Early Holocaust research and teaching flourished with exiled intellectuals and survivors who firstly focused on the philosophical, socio-political and psychological effects of genocide<sup>3</sup>. A first approach to the horrors of National Socialism might conclude that the reason Nazis engaged with such violence was that they were psychopaths. However, while it is certainly true that some of them were, to attribute genocide to individual mental illnesses is to oversimplify the matter. In the case of the Holocaust, perpetrators were not individuals acting on their own, but members of a larger organised group, who acted under the wing of the Nazi ideology and, most importantly, were supported by the German state and laws.

Scholars Venema and Jettinghoff state that the explanation is to be found in psychological group dynamics, not individual ones. Participants of the Nazi regime developed “all kinds of conscious and non-conscious rationalizing and justifying mechanisms to cope with the cognitive dissonance resulting from the contradiction between their previous habits and beliefs, and their current behaviour” (2018: 153). These mechanisms might vary amongst individuals, but generally consisted of internalising and believing in ideological legitimations, and in the association of the victim with evil, danger, or considering them guilty of some sort of offence or capable of subhuman tendencies. That is to say, those who participated in the discrimination, persecution and mass murder of Jews and other collectives did so rationally. This is very important in perpetrator studies, for to call the actions of Nazis “irrational” creates, in the words of the previously mentioned scholars, “a false sense of a secure distance between ‘us’ and

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<sup>3</sup> A special mention must be made to the key works of Holocaust scholars such as Franklin Littell, regarded as the founder of the field of Holocaust Studies, Hannah Arendt, H. G. Adler, Raul Hilberg, Raphael Lemkin, Primo Levi and Ellie Wiesel, among others.

‘them’” (Venema and Jettinghoff, 2018: 153). It puts them in a different category, as an “exception”, while the truth is that most of them were perfectly ordinary. That is the frightening, and yet true, main statement of the studies that deal with the perpetrators of the Holocaust: everyone, given certain circumstances in their living context, is capable of becoming a group-perpetrator.

Along the same lines, it is also crucial to analyse the term “the banality of evil”, coined by political theorist Hannah Arendt in her report of Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. In her article about Eichmann for *The New Yorker* in 1961, Arendt posed and explored the moral question of whether or not someone was capable of doing evil without *being* evil. Adolf Eichmann was a key figure in the postulation and organization of the genocide, also known as the Shoah. Furthermore, he was in charge of the logistics of mass deportation to ghettos and concentration camps. Arendt found him neither perverted nor sadistic, but “terrifyingly normal” (276). She concluded that Eichmann was an ordinary man and not an amoral monster, who acted on the basis of disengagement from the reality of evil acts and an inability (or unwillingness) to contemplate the possibility of the Nazi doctrines being wrong. Those were the characteristics present in most of the followers of the regime, and Arendt defined them as “the banality of evil”. This term described certain perpetrators not as inherently evil, but simply as shallow human beings, whose need for a sense of purpose and belonging ‘blocked’ their capacity for thinking as individuals.

*Time’s Arrow* (1991), the novel this dissertation will analyse, deals with an ordinary perpetrator, a Nazi doctor that managed to emigrate to North America and not only live under a false identity, but even practice medicine again. It is a told-backwards journey made by what seems to be the suppressed conscience of the doctor. Scholars such as Erin McGlothlin, Adam Glaz, Daniel Guillory and Joseph Dewey suggest in their analysis of the novel that the narrator is an “alter ego” of the protagonist, an “inner voice

or conscience" (Glaz, 2006: 111). McGlothlin claims that *Time's Arrow* contains a "narratological anomaly" (McGlothlin, 2010: 220) because, even though there is an "I" that narrates the story and this "I" inhabits the protagonist's body, the narrator cannot access Tod's mind. McGlothlin suggests that the narrator acts as a "supplemental consciousness, [...] a passenger or parasite" that accompanies the protagonist throughout his life "without being able to communicate with him" (McGlothlin, 2010: 221). Furthermore, Guillory and Dewey describe the figure of Tod as a "creature without a soul" whose death "engenders a moral conscience" that must face, through the revival of his actions, the consequences of his inhumanity (Dewey and Guillory, 2019: 1). Expanding on these approaches, I argue that this narrative consciousness explores, in a very subtle and intelligent way, the remains of the trauma caused by an also silenced moral guilt. Among other issues, the protagonist of the novel leads us to talk about the difficulties and possible problematic representations in the production of perpetrator narratives.

Representing the Holocaust has not been an easy task. After the war, there were controversies about whether it was ethical to represent the Holocaust in art and, if it was, who had the right to represent it and how. According to philosopher Theodor Adorno, to write poetry after Auschwitz was "barbaric", that is to say, that no artistic/aesthetic expression made sense after the horrors of the Holocaust. However, these representations and written testimonies were also key in order to understand, process and heal from this dreadful historical event not only as individuals, but also as a community.

As a subcategory in literary representations of the Holocaust, "(Post-)Holocaust perpetrator fiction" or "perpetrator literature" deals with the legacy of German culpability and the problem of collective identity and memory from the point of view of Germans and German perpetrators. These narratives have endured an ongoing debate in the last

decades due to the fact that, as researcher Victoria Stewart claims, the representation or depiction of perpetrators “contains the possibility of speaking on behalf or in defence of their actions” (2014:101), voluntarily or not. Perpetrator representation is challenging because it might aestheticize the subject. It demands putting yourself in the perpetrator’s shoes in order to construct their narratives, which might soften the fact that they are culprits of a terrible crime. In the words of Robert Eaglestone, “the very fact of representation creates the inescapable possibility of identification” (14). However, precisely because perpetrator representations in fiction might explore more in depth the human side of these criminals, their backstory and psyche, they establish a connection between fiction and Holocaust studies in their thesis: Nazi perpetrators were disturbingly rational human beings, not “brainless” monsters. Amis’ *Time’s Arrow* (1991), Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room* (2001), Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader* (1995), Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* (2006), among others, are a series of contemporary novels which precisely try to challenge an over-simplified vision of history and find new and meaningful ways of engaging with the German past.

As I have stated before, Martin Amis’ novel also explores guilt and trauma and, while there is a vast extent of studies that deal with trauma in the experiences of Holocaust victims, survivors and descendants of survivors, the list concerned with trauma regarding perpetrators is much more limited. The field of perpetrator trauma has not been thoroughly studied, and yet, according to scholars such as Michelle E. Anderson, to acknowledge that a perpetrator might have also experienced trauma “creates space for potential empathic connection, though still with a critical distance” (2018: 96).

We understand trauma as a mental condition caused by an unpleasant experience that leads a person to feel shocked, anxious and upset. Therefore, contemplating the possibility of perpetrators also being victims of trauma and consequential guilt humanizes

them. To explore perpetrator narratives from the perspective of trauma studies makes the reader go beyond the simple rejection of what they did and provokes a self-reflective response that is key in the subject this dissertation is dealing with.

In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association adopted the term ‘Posttraumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD) to refer to the disorder that might follow a traumatic experience. After the Vietnam War, research on the notions of trauma in relation to war grew considerably in America (Gibbs, 2014: 162). However, Gibbs also notes that the guilt of the perpetrator was “much more keenly felt among combatants involved in the Iraq War” (Gibbs, 171). In 1983, a study of Vietnam veterans found very interesting data that could perfectly be applied to Nazi perpetrators. This study reported that veterans who killed in combat suffered more PTSD symptoms than those who did not, those symptoms consisting of intrusive imagery (disturbing thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks), a sense of alienation and hyper-arousal, temperament problems and emotional numbness. As it will be analysed in the following section, the protagonist of *Time’s Arrow* (1991) experiences all of these symptoms. Taking into account the results of the aforementioned study, scholar Rachel MacNair coined the term “perpetration-induced traumatic stress” (PITS), to refer to the specific PTSD perpetrators of violence and killings reported suffering (68).

Furthermore, in the field of trauma studies it is also interesting to point out Robert Jay Lifton’s studies on Nazi doctors and trauma. He claims that “the experience of extreme trauma creates two selves” (1988: 28) and that this doubling “represents a way of adapting to evil” (29). Lifton asserts that a traumatic situation can trigger the creation and co-existence of two different consciences (or two selves) in the same mind. The new leading conscience would be the one that not only is able to adapt to the situation at hand, but also the one that “enables a relatively ordinary person to commit evil” (29). Lifton

introduces the term “transfer of conscience” (29) to define this phenomenon. This transfer of conscience consists of associating only one of the two selves with the perpetrating group and the duties they must carry out. Therefore, this self that has resulted from adapting to an extraordinary situation should be the only one morally judged and bearer of guilt. This is the dichotomy that seems to be present in *Time’s Arrow* (1991), whose narrative voice is intriguingly detached from the narrator’s bodily self.

## 1. Textual Silences

### 1.1 Presence of textual silences in perpetrator literature: applying Jessica Lang and Rachel MacNair’s Studies to *Time’s Arrow*

“The work looks like hell to me. Blood and bodies and death and power. I suppose you can see the connexion. They are reconciling themselves to their own morality” (Amis, 1991: 65)

In the afterword of *Textual Silence: Unreadability and the Holocaust* (2017), subtitled as “Reading the Fragments of Memory”, scholar Jessica Lang claims that, in Holocaust literature, reading has its limits (175). According to Lang, the contemporary definition of ‘reading’ is “to experience, feel, understand, empathise and connect with the text” (175). Notwithstanding, reading texts that deal with a traumatic memory carries an implicit refusal to be read and, therefore, the inability to fully complete our task as readers.

Many survivors of the Holocaust expressed that language was insufficient to describe their experience. In the case of the literary representation of the Shoah, language becomes a barrier between writer and reader. In her book, Lang describes this barrier as a ‘textual silence’, as aspects of the text “that simply cannot be opened, accessed or decoded” and, yet, a crucial bearer of meaning (9-32). According to Lang, there was a shift in Holocaust narrations by third-generation authors. Early fictionalizations of the Holocaust placed its horrors as the central point of the narration. On the contrary, third-

generation fictions moved towards a more indirect approach to the genocide, focusing on moral reflections and their legacy on society rather than on eye-witnessing horrifying experiences. This difference can also be seen in Amis's novel, in which, despite the fact that the protagonist's role in the genocide is central to the narration, the plot approaches it indirectly and it focuses more on its psychological consequences than on the protagonist's involvement in the crimes committed.

In this section, I am going to apply Lang's definition of 'the unreadable' to the told-backwards narrative of *Time's Arrow* (1991) and analyse the narration's textual silences as the repressed guilt of the narrator's conscience. Furthermore, I intend to go beyond Lang's studies and link the presence of textual silences as a way of representing what MacNair coined as "PITS", Perpetrator-Induced Traumatic Stress, in literary fiction.

*Time's Arrow* (1991) is divided into three distinctive parts. The first part, consisting of chapters 1-3, takes place in the US, where the reader gets to meet an elder man on his deathbed who gradually starts getting younger. This part is crucial not only for the analysis of textual silence, but also for the hypothesis that the protagonist is in fact suffering from "PITS". The novel starts with an old man coming back to life in a hospital, surrounded by doctors. However, soon enough, the reader discovers that no extraordinary resurrection has occurred, but that time is going backwards. Interestingly, it is on the first page where we encounter the first instance of something that is being hidden from the reader. There is an 'unreadable' presence lurking as a dark shadow, haunting the conscience of the protagonist, but he cannot (or does not want to) identify it. This seems to be connected to the presence of doctors in the room. The protagonist states that he hates doctors because "they are life's gatekeepers" (Amis, 3). Even though he says this in a very casual way, this is a powerful statement because, even though a doctor's mission is,

at its core, to heal and save lives, to see doctors as ‘gatekeepers’ implies that they might get to choose who lives and who dies.

As regards the presence that seems to haunt the narration, on page 4 the reader gets a glimpse of its form: a “male shape or essence [...] wearing a white coat (a medic’s stark white smock). And black boots” (Amis, 4). Throughout this first part there is special stress placed on the fact that this alleged doctor always wears black boots, as if they were part of his uniform. Interestingly enough, black boots were a characteristic of Nazi uniforms.

Right from page four onwards, the reader discovers through narrative hints that whatever the protagonist’s trauma is, it has to do with a Nazi doctor. Here, it is interesting to note Lang’s claim as regards narrative silence: “by reducing or restraining the vast trauma and destruction of the Holocaust to the margins of a narrative, the act of reading and the act of unreading draw closer together. Precisely because the Holocaust is in the background, there is an understanding that it is not being read” (156). The act of ‘unreading’, of uncovering what is not being said but (un)willingly implied by the narrative voice, is especially decisive here, for otherwise there is no possible way to understand what is going on. Everything is told backwards, including conversations. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator, or the protagonist’s conscience<sup>4</sup>, acts as a mere eyewitness and therefore simply describes what he sees, makes it necessary for the reader to read between the lines, or, as Lang would say, ‘unread’ the textual silences.

The first chapters also set the tone for the analysis of PTSD symptoms in Tod Friendly. As it has been briefly explained in the previous section, the most common symptoms of PTSD are re-experiencing trauma (including flashbacks, nightmares, repetitive images and distressing physical sensations such as sweating or trembling),

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<sup>4</sup> Taking into account the studies mentioned in the introduction, I will expand on the idea of the doubled narrator in the following section.

avoidance of people or things that might trigger remembering the traumatic experience, emotional numbing and hyperarousal, which can bring about irritability or difficulty in concentrating or sleeping. Moreover, mental diseases such as depression, anxiety, phobias or substance abuse are also frequent (MacNair, 68-72). Nevertheless, the study on Vietnam veterans that Rachel MacNair analyses claims that intrusive imagery, irritability outbursts, alienation and personal disintegration (that is to say, numb depersonalization, restlessness or even self-hatred) were much more common in those who had killed. Taking these symptoms as a point of departure, I will point out specific instances in which these symptoms occurred in Tod's psyche.

To begin with, Tod Friendly does not seem to have a high self-esteem. An instance in which the reader can notice that is when the narrator says "no one could accuse Tod Friendly of being in love with his own reflection. On the contrary, he can't stand the sight of it" (Amis, 8). Moreover, "he sheds the thing he often can't seem to bear: his identity, his quiddity, lost in the crowd's promiscuity" (Amis, 41). Tod appears to hate himself and, although the reader does not know there is a specific reason for that yet, we must take into account that MacNair establishes a clear connection between self-hatred, depersonalization and PTSD (MacNair, 69). The narrator also makes reference to Tod Friendly avoiding his reflection in mirrors, and he even uses the word "depersonalized" (Amis, 41) to describe Tod the first time he sees his own, emaciated aspect in the bathroom mirror. Furthermore, at some point the narrator states that the body he lives in, "Tod's body, feels nothing" and that his tone is generally distant (Amis, 21). In the words of MacNair, this would be a good example of a "sense of unreality" and "depersonalization" (69). In my opinion, Tod seems to have undergone a process of numbness in order to be able to live with himself. This general detachment can also be seen in the way Tod Friendly socialises. Throughout the first part of the book, the reader

can see he has quite a few lovers, however, there is something that refrains him from opening up, as it is described in the following instance: “Tod can’t feel, won’t connect, never opens up, always holds something back” (44). MacNair describes this phenomenon as a “detachment from others” (69) that, in PITS victims, is often linked to a sense of paranoia that comes from the fear of repercussions or even reprisals (70). The way I see it, as a guilty fugitive, he is probably unable to trust anyone anymore because he is afraid that someone might discover the truth about him and turn him in. In addition, the reader witnesses an outburst of anger that makes Tod throw his clothes all over his room and also hints of him vomiting due to alcohol abuse. As MacNair suggests, while alcoholism is suffered by many PTSD victims, physical “outbursts of irritability” (MacNair, 68) such as the one mentioned before have been especially reported in PITS victims.

There are also certain smells and visions that seem to trigger uneasiness in Tod’s conscience. For example, the narrative voice despises the time Tod spends at the hospital. He points at specific smells that distress him, such as “the smell of altered human flesh” (Amis, 21), the smell of fire or, more concretely, of things being burnt in flames. The only explanation the narrator gives for this loathing is the fact that, in a told-backwards narrative, a doctor’s job is not to heal, but to harm, and, in his own words, the hospital is “an atrocity-producing” chamber (76). Surprisingly, the narrating consciousness also says the following regarding doctors: “we mediate between man and nature. We are the soldiers of a sacred biology. Because I am a healer, everything I do heals, somehow” (64). Going back to the act of ‘unreading’ the novel, this is a clear hint to the fact that, at one point in the protagonist’s life that we have yet to discover, doctors were seen as biological soldiers, and harming, or even killing, meant ‘healing’ society. Furthermore, the narrator states that it is “the same kind of trigger when he hears that other language” (42). This language is obviously German and, even though it is not explicitly said, one can certainly

make the connection between ‘the black boots’, a ‘biological soldier’ and a certain European language.

Lastly, there are several instances combining PITS symptoms with textual silences that hint that Tod Friendly is not only traumatised, but also unable to cope with his past. His long-repressed guilt, however, resurfaces in his dreams, in nightmares. In those dreams, he claims his innocence over and over to people that are scattered “in the wind like leaves, souls forming constellations like the stars” (Amis, 24). This is a recurring image in his thoughts, and also what seems to be a metaphor for the floating ashes of cremated bodies in Auschwitz.

He is also deeply concerned about babies. In a told-backwards narrative, of course, the birth of someone implies the disappearance of the baby inside the mother’s womb and, a few months later, the baby ceasing to exist: “Where do they go, the little creatures who disappear: the vanished?” (32) Tod’s conscience seems to be obsessed with this, with people that are no longer alive. He even dreams of what he calls a “bomb baby” (39), a baby whose impact in the world would be devastating. In the second part of the book we learn that Tod and his wife lose their daughter when she is very little, and that tragic occurrence changes everything for him.

In the second part of the novel, from chapter four to chapter seven, the protagonist ‘sets sail to Europe’. It is here when the reason for the existence of the previous textual silences is revealed. 1948 is the last year Tod spends in Europe, however, he is no longer called Tod, but Dr. John Young, a false name under which he is able to travel and hide until fleeing to the States from Portugal at the age of 31 by boat. This scene has quite a hopeful message for the protagonist because, as time moves backwards, the boat leaves no mark on the ocean. The narrator thinks of this as “successfully covering our tracks”

(82). Nevertheless, the reader knows that, even though he does manage to escape justice and die as doctor Tod Friendly, he cannot elude guilt.

The protagonist changes names again and, while hiding in an Italian monastery, he tries to hang himself because of his shame and fear. He suffers panic attacks which, at this moment, could be linked to the fear of getting caught. However, I read this as a PITS symptom, as the narration is on the verge of entering Auschwitz. As scholar Michaela Praisler suggests, “the guilt, as well as the blame, looms larger in the context of Tod’s preparing to engage in the war” (2017: 181). At the arrival of the most important chapter, chapter five, the reader finally finds out what the narrator’s real name is: Odilo Unverdorben. Disturbingly, the chapter begins by stating that now is when the world will start “making sense” (95). This has to do with the fact that, until now, the doctor’s job was to harm, but, in Auschwitz, as everything is told backwards, doctors actually heal and create life, that is to say, resuscitate people. Nonetheless, the reader knows that this is the moment in which the Odilo that has healed patients in previous chapters will now become a killer.

In this chapter, the narration unveils the source of Tod Friendly’s trauma. Although the twisted order of events complicates its understanding, we can still interpret this narrative technique as textual silence, as a force that tends to remove the experience of genocide from the page. Still, Odilo’s crimes seem to emerge from the page more vividly and explicitly than ever. We learn that the smell that will later trigger him is related to fire because of the corpses’ cremations, a smell he describes as “sweet” (97). He was responsible for selecting those who would be destined to the gas chambers at their arrival in Auschwitz—generally women, children and elder people—and, ultimately, for

introducing the Zyklon B<sup>5</sup> pellets on the gas chamber pipes and watching the selected victims die.

Overall, Odilo's behaviour throughout this chapter is very mechanical and detached. One could think that the crimes he is committing do not affect him. However, the sense of distress is still present between the lines. It is mentioned that officers are almost always drinking (102), which I read as their necessity to escape morality and, therefore, as a PITS symptom. Moreover, even though he is a frequent visitor to the brothel in which Jew women are kept as sex prisoners for their own entertainment, he refuses to touch the girls before sending them to the gas chamber, as other soldiers do. In the narrator's words, "there is a patina of cruelty, intense cruelty" (100) in these acts, but he does not participate in them because he "has not been corrupted by creation" (100). This "creation", of course, is a twisted way of referring to the systematic killing and absolute power of the soldiers at the camps. I read this instance as a claim of innocence or even moral superiority to his peers, as he does not participate in the cruel acts that are not part of his duty. Nevertheless, as I have stated before, he does attend the brothel, so his argument is complete nonsense. In fact, in this part we also discover that Odilo has a wife at the time. Her voice is indirectly hinted as a disapproving echo of what Odilo is doing in the camps and, in turn, Odilo's repressed guilt is made evident through his impotence in the sexual act.

Lastly, the narrative moves back to Odilo's childhood and, even though Auschwitz does not exist at the time, the narrator quickly identifies the spot Odilo visits on a trip as the place where, later in time, the enormous concentration camp would be located. This brings to the narrator's mind the 'sweet smell' and the doctors with black

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<sup>5</sup> German name for Cyclone B, a pesticide based on cyanide that was invented in Germany in the early 1920s. Hydrogen cyanide interfered with cellular respiration, and the Nazis began to use it in extermination camps around the beginning of 1942. It is estimated that around 1.1 million people were killed using this method.

boots. The narration concludes with Odilo's "death" or with the ceasing of his existence or his presence in the world, just as it begins with his resurrection as an elder man. In this sense, the narration gives a sense of circular closure to Odilo's guilt, a feeling that is so deep that extends over the bonds of time and logic.

## 2. The Holocaust as the Zero Hour

### 2.1 Analysis of the Protagonist's Approach to Time through Ann Parry's Concept of "Caesura" and Robert Lifton's "Transfer of Conscience"

"You'd think it might be quite relaxing, having (effectively) no will, and no body anyway through which to exercise it. [...] Yet there is always the countervailing desire to put yourself forward, to take your stand as the valuable exception" (Amis, 1991: 34)

The method Amis uses to structure the novel's narrative follows the conventions of "the detective or mystery novel" in the sense that it deals with the tricky reconstruction of a crime (McCarthy, 1999: 306). In the case of *Time's Arrow*, the reconstruction is tricky not only because it is easy to miss certain details in this 'chronological' unfoldment of events, but also because the narrator is unreliable.

The narrator, through a time-reversal structure that he cannot (or does not want to) understand, consciously or not, hides the truth from the reader. Therefore, the reader has to act as the detective in search for the source of Odilo's trauma or the nature of the offence, the actual subtitle of the novel.

Scholar Ann Parry coined the concept of "caesura" to define a "radical break that necessitates a re-thinking of the relation between past, present and future, as well as completely reconstituting ideas about evil and what it is to be human" (Parry, 1999: 249). The Holocaust set a before and an after in human history, a breaking point that needed deep reflections and radical changes to be implemented in order to be able to understand it, represent it and heal from it. Parry explains that the Holocaust "could not be

rationalized as one event amongst others and, hence, its effect as a caesura was to have produced 'a debt' from which European humanity could not be freed" (Parry, 249). As she understands it, a caesura implies the need to come to terms with its "radically disorienting impact" (Parry, 249). It is a break in time that cannot be diminished or dissolved into the adjoining historical events, and whose consequences challenge all former aspects of life, such as politics, morality and artistic expressions.

I contend that the narration of Odilo Unverdorben's life also experiences this caesura, for his work as a Nazi doctor and his participation in the horrors of the Jew genocide radically change not only the course of his life, but also turn him from an ordinary person to a perpetrator consumed by his repressed guilt in the following years. Interestingly, making reference to the title of the novel, throughout the "chronillogical" (McCarthy, 1999: 294) narrative of Odilo's life, the arrow of time seems to be always pointing to this caesura. The protagonist is trapped in the psychological consequences of his crimes. He is unable (or unwilling) to process them and, therefore, he always returns to Auschwitz subconsciously.

One could argue that the narrative consciousness simply acts as a confused and non-participative eyewitness that is trying to make sense of his distorted reality as he experiences it, or to think that there is a clear distinction between the bodily self of Odilo and the narrator, his alleged conscience or soul. However, the changes in pronouns throughout the novel, from a distant "he" to a participative and personal "I" or even a unified "we" imply that it is much more complex than that. The narrator describes himself as a "rich consciousness of solitude" (Amis, 5), an "ardent ghost" (45) who has "effectively no will and no body through which to exercise it" (34), suggesting that he is indeed a separate being from Odilo. This theory seems to be supported by the aforementioned use of pronouns as in "we set sail for Europe in the summer of 1948 [...].

Well, I say *we*, but by now John Young was pretty much on his own out there" (Amis, 81). Furthermore, there is a textual implication of the narrator realising that Odilo's conscience has suffered a break in two, and that this narrative consciousness is a consequence of a caesuran moment: "some sort of bifurcation had occurred, in about 1960, or maybe even earlier" (81).

As explained in the introduction, Robert Jay Lifton claims that the experience of extreme trauma creates two selves. Applying this to the case of perpetrators, this doubling of the self represents "a way of adapting to evil" (Lifton, 1988: 29). Furthermore, it also acts as a way of avoiding guilt. The source of extreme trauma or stress triggers a "caesurean" break in the psyche of the perpetrator, whose conscience doubles and is transferred, or subdued, to the dominant group conscience. Therefore, that conscience should be the carrier of guilt and grief, for it is the one who adapts to the Nazi doctrine and commits crimes in its name. For example, Odilo, "as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit" (127). The narration suggests that Odilo is dependent on the approval of society and follows the Nazi doctrine not because he believes in it, but rather because it is what everyone around him does. Bendersky claims that nationalism "provided a needed group identity and a feeling of belonging" (Bendersky, 22) to those who felt alienated in the mass society of the cities. However, the way I see it, this is not so much the case of Odilo. I interpret his association with Nazism as his need of actually not feeling alienated, an example of what Arendt coined as the "banality of evil": Odilo is an ordinary human being that becomes a perpetrator in order to belong to a group and have a sense of purpose.

Speaking concretely of Auschwitz, Lifton claims that it was an institution that "operated on doubling" (29). The Nazi doctors created their "Auschwitz self" (Lifton, 29) through a certain degree of ideology, extreme numbing and the paradoxical mixture of

power and impotence. To the ‘Auschwitz self’, the ‘transferred conscience’ allowed the doctor to kill while maintaining a sense of professional identity as physicians. In this aspect, Lifton adds that doctors conducted and supported experiments “in an effort to remain doctors” (29), even though the reality was that they were violating every doctor’s moral code. Here, it is important to note that Odilo assisted a scientist called ‘Uncle Pepi’<sup>6</sup> in conducting insanely cruel experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz, at what he calls the “Hygienic Institute, a world of bubbles and bottles” (Amis, 105). The narrator describes the rooms within the block as “laboratories” (105) and reports the experimental procedures with scientific objectivity and precision. Applying Lifton’s theory, I consider this detailing of the tortures a clear example of the narrator’s need of continuing to see himself as a doctor.

The character of Odilo Unverdorben lends himself well to the analysis of the fictional representation of this moral dichotomy not only because he was a Nazi doctor working in Auschwitz, but also because his work as a Nazi is narrated by what it seems to be his repressed conscience. Commenting on Guillory and Dewey’s view that Tod Friendly has no soul (2019: 1), I want to add McGlothlin’s interpretation on the narrator. According to her, the narrative consciousness experiences a certain development throughout the novel. McGlothlin argues that, despite the narrator’s inability to affect Tod’s thoughts or behaviour, “he is called upon to function as Tod’s soul in absentia” (McGlothlin, 12). At one point the narrator even wonders if he is Tod’s soul, and asks himself whether or not his soul’s disappearance would make any changes in Tod (88). I consider this reflection an interesting distinction between Tod, whose actions are possible because of his transfer of conscience and therefore lack of moral introspection, and the

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Uncle Pepi’ is a fictional character from Time’s Arrow, but modelled on Josef Mengele. Mengele, also known as the “Angel of Death”, was a German officer and physician. He performed deadly experiments on prisoners, especially twins, in order to study human genetics at Auschwitz.

narrative consciousness, who does contemplate morality. This can be seen by the use of certain adjectives when describing Odilo's actions and work. For example, the narrator states that Odilo has "a mortal and miserable power" (114) in his hands. The way I see it, this personal additions to the narration of events might imply that the narrative consciousness is no longer a simple eye-witness, but a being that reflects on the matters he sees.

There is a clear caesurean moment in the novel, and that is chapter five. As I have explained in the previous section, this chapter deals with Odilo's time in Auschwitz and it begins with the quote "the world is going to start making sense... now" (95). Analysing this quote from the point of view of the repressed conscience, it refers to the fact that in this chapter the doctors finally perform their logical duty, which is saving lives. However, the told-backwards narrative evinces that it was actually the contrary. The way I see it, this is the chapter Odilo's world finally makes sense not only because of this, but also because, for the first time, it explicitly describes the nature of Odilo's offence.

It could be argued that the protagonist's doubling starts at Schloss Hartheim, for it is then when he gets deeply involved in the systematic killing procedures of the Nazis. In fact, the narrator's conscience reveals that Odilo cried the day he started working there, once he got home: "I was still crying when I put on my boots and picked up my kitbag" (Amis, 117). His wife notices that Odilo's attitude has changed, even though the conscience does not believe it because, up to this moment, he only has only known the traumatised Odilo (Amis, 119). Moreover, his wife also "seems to be more and more put out" by his impotence (Amis, 119) around this time, and the fact that she is more irritated than before suggests that it is a recent incident. Recalling that impotence can be a PTSD symptom, this seems to indicate that his trauma begins with his first contact with systematic killing at Schloss Hartheim. The 'sweet smell' is also mentioned followed by

the word “again” (118), although, chronologically, it must have been the first time Odilo smells it. This remark confirms for how long Odilo has been involved and haunted at the same time by the fragrant proof of his crimes.

Nonetheless, while it is true that Schloss Hartheim was the birth of Odilo’s trauma, Auschwitz was responsible for its climax. At the beginning of chapter six, the narrator asks himself: “well, how do you follow that? You can’t. Of course you can’t” (112), slightly echoing Adorno’s words that no artistic representation made sense after Auschwitz. Furthermore, a few lines below, he states that the first days and, especially the first hours at the extermination camp, were so traumatic for Odilo that he “would never recover from the suffering” he underwent (112). Curiously, chapters five and six are enclosed by other chapters narrated in third person, as if the conscience was reporting someone else’s doings but, in the fifth and sixth, this narrating consciousness adopts the first-person narration. The way I see it, this asserts the importance of these two chapters in order to understand the protagonist’s doubled soul. While the novel uncovers Odilo’s caesura, both protagonist and soul are one being. Nevertheless, as the novel moves away from this crucial moment, the narrator’s distance from Odilo grows gradually in both directions, that is to say, in the previous and also following chapters.

Taking this into account, I argue that there is no possible reconciliation between Odilo’s two selves. It is almost as if, after his death, Odilo had been given the chance to go back in time and reflect on his actions. Notwithstanding, he refuses to acknowledge and own what has clearly been his life and, therefore, continues to avoid facing the repercussions of his actions, just as he did while he was alive. By the end of the novel, the narrative voice describes itself as an entity “who has no name and no body” (120) and states that, while this conscience will always be there, Odilo is on his own. On top of that, I would like to highlight the last line of the novel, which says that this conscience,

separated from the protagonist whose life we have just witnessed to disappear, “came at the wrong time – either too soon, or after it was all too late” (134). I interpret this line as if, in the end (or at the beginning of Odilo’s life, if we consider the time-reversal narrative), Odilo’s soul realises he made a mistake, and that he is not a separate being from Odilo. This word is in fact repeated on the same page, as Odilo gets younger, and he wishes for the doctors of the future to wear something appropriate and not “the white coat and the black boots” as he did. Just after this, there is the word “myself” followed by “mistake” (134). Odilo is forgetting how to speak due to his age. I consider that these two instances evince a very brief, and obviously late, moment of acknowledgement of his crimes. However, just as the narrative voice admits in the last line, it comes too late to make any difference on Odilo’s actions.

### **3. Conclusions and Further Research**

Overall, this dissertation has explored the way perpetrator guilt has been represented in the work of a second-generation Holocaust writer, Martin Amis. More concretely, in his 1991 novel *Time’s Arrow*. The central point has been the representation of the perpetrator self. Through the application of Rachel MacNair’s research on trauma and Jessica Lang’s studies on textual silences, I have approached the figure of the narrator as the repressed conscience of Odilo Unverdorben. In the logical development of Odilo’s life, this conscience seems to be already present in him because, as it has been pointed out in the previous sections, there are several indications that he is experiencing the effects of trauma, such as impotence, crying or outbursts of anger when the protagonist becomes a perpetrator. Thus, I argue that, deep down, Odilo knows that what he has done as a Nazi doctor is wrong. However, this conscience is silenced and has no control over Odilo’s actions. As the soul failed in saving Odilo from becoming a perpetrator, after the

protagonist's death this narrating consciousness comes back and is forced to reexperience Odilo's crimes without being able to change anything (Dewey and Guillory, 2019: 1).

The question of who is (or should be) the bearer of guilt in the novel has been accessed through Lifton's claim that extreme trauma triggers the doubling of the self and, in the case of perpetrators, the dominant conscience is the one who is able to adapt to evil, commit evil and therefore survive it. This point of exposure to extreme trauma has also been studied as a caesurean moment, a term coined by Ann Parry to describe a radical break in time, which also accounts for the doubling of the narrator's voice.

Taking my approach to these studies as a point of departure, there is room for further research in the field of philosophy. For example, scholar Ahmed Badrigeen has interestingly approached the figure of the soul as "a post-Enlightenment presence" (2018: 56). According to him, the soul-like narrator serves the philosophical purpose to undo "the philosophy of enlightened modernity through its nature, statements and values" (66) and, therefore, revive and question the philosophical and theological accounts and approaches to humanity.

In conclusion, I argue that *Time's Arrow*'s "narratological anomaly" (McGlothlin, 2010: 220) accounts for the sentimental journey of a soul that had been repressed throughout the life of his bodily self. It is the conscience's second chance to acknowledge his crimes and come to terms with his past, a recurrent theme in post-Holocaust literature, in a reversed narrative that twists the real unfoldment of events. The difficulty that lies in unreading a reversed narration is proportional to how difficult it is for the protagonist to stop running away from his guilt and accept the moral punishment for the atrocities he has committed. Even though the novel has no clear closure of the break between Odilo's two selves, taking into account what has been discussed in the previous sections, I

consider that the soul manages to become morally superior to Odilo in the end. Thus, the conscience's second chance serves its purpose.

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