

An Allegory of the Impossible *Time's Arrow* Through the Lens of Unnatural Narratology

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To cite this article:

Yang Ting. An Allegory of the Impossible *Time's Arrow* Through the Lens of Unnatural Narratology. *English Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 7, No. 1, 2022, pp. 30-35. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20220701.15

Received: January 22, 2022; **Accepted:** February 13, 2022; **Published:** February 19, 2022

Abstract: The literary representations of the Holocaust are full of critical and creative taboos. While Holocaust survivors such as Primo Levi were producing insightful and touching memoirs of their unfortunate experiences, non-survivors such as Martin Amis were also participating in the imaginative understanding of the nature of Holocaust offense. Academic interests in representations of Holocaust are also thriving. Among them the Perpetrator Studies, a field in response to the WWII and Holocaust, is the most controversial. Focusing on the perpetrators of mass atrocity, this field has developed into an interdisciplinary field. Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* was a literary reenactment of a Nazi doctor's experience during the WWII which had caused great controversy in the studies of Holocaust literature. In this article, it is examined how Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* problematizes those taboos in a very unique way. By adopting techniques of unnatural narratology to narrativize the perspective of a Nazi doctor, Martin Amis creates a postmodern writerly text to allegorize the inexplicable nature of Holocaust. The complex and perplexing reading experience generated by the difficult text not only increase reader's investment in the novel but also in a subtle way ask them to bear witness to the Holocaust in this immersive act of reading. In this way, Martin Amis activates the performative power of literature and fulfills his duty as a moral witness to the genocide.

Keywords: Martin Amis, Unnatural Narratology, Perpetrator Trauma, Ethics of Reading

1. Introduction

Theodor Adorno's dictum that "it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz" has almost become an academic cliché that is most frequently quoted in the discussions of both historical and literary representations of the genocide. Reasons underlying the dictum have already been sufficiently challenged by the outpouring and unrelenting efforts of writers of all sorts to write about and remember the Holocaust. Adorno's fear that aesthetic pleasures generated by witnessing the pains and sufferings of Holocaust survivors will undermine and vulgarize the authentic sufferings and pains turns out to be unfounded. In fact, the incomprehensible nature of the Holocaust has prompted writers to look deeper into human nature and explore harder their representation skills. Martin Amis is one of the writers who have taken up the subject of Holocaust.

Nicknamed as the "bad boy of English literature", Martin Amis does not shy away from controversy and is not afraid to address great cultural traumas in a controversial way. In 1991,

he published *Time's Arrow*, which tells the life story of former Concentration camp doctor Tod Friendly. In this paper it is argued that by adopting techniques of unnatural narratology, Martin Amis turns *Time's Arrow* into a postmodern writerly text to account for the inexplicable nature of the Holocaust. The difficulty of reading the text not only serves as a unique invitation to the reader to engage more in historical commemoration but also turns out to be an ethical demand on the reader to not forget and to keep bearing witnesses to the Holocaust.

2. Review of Literatures

Ever since its publication *Time's Arrow* has caused great controversy [18]. Some critics accused Martin Amis of "profiting from the slaughtered of Auschwitz" and even questioned his basic moral integrity as a human being. Amis was enraged by those accusations and even entered into a correspondence with one of the reviewers of his book to defend himself.

But it has also attracted serious scholarly attentions. Scholars either focus on the exceptional narrative skills and its implications, or debate over the ethical dilemma engendered by his controversial perspective-taking. Richard Menke, for example, discusses the relationship between the narrative reversals of the novel and the thermodynamics of history in his essay [10].

The novel's relationship to the literary representations of Holocaust is also thoroughly explored. Under this category issues such as perpetrator trauma, the impossibility of representation, and the ethical dilemma of Holocaust representation are foregrounded in relation to *Time's Arrow*. Laura Roldan-Sevillano, for instance, argues that "*Time's Arrow's* Nazi protagonist does not suffer from PTSD but, rather, from a traumatic syndrome that specifically affects perpetrators that are haunted by their remorse" [14]. Situating *Time's Arrow* in contested area of the literary representations of Holocaust, McGlothlin examines how Amis's novel challenges the taboo of representing perpetrator with a deft manipulation of narrative skills [8].

Furthermore, scholars have also noticed the challenges the novel poses to its reader. Maya Slater, for example, emphasizes the extra effort the reader has to exert in reading this novel. She claims that the reverse chronology of the novel has deprived readers of the "ease of reading" and that readers must be on constant vigil while engaging with the novel because of its linguistic and narrative intricacies [19]. McGlothlin, on the other hand, warns the reader "about what we might find if we lift the taboo and take a peak into the mind of the perpetrator" [8].

In spite of all those theoretical discussions there are still questions remain to be answered about this novel. Why did Amis write about the Holocaust from the perpetrator's point of view? If he was not blind to the moral implication of writing from a perpetrator's perspective, what kind of moral statement is he making about the nature of offence? Are the narrative skills he employs already suggesting his moral choice? And what ethical demands is he making on the readers of his tale if he problematizes his narrative?

3. Research Methods

Unnatural Narratology is a rising force in the narrative theory in recent years. "In recent years, the study of 'unnatural' narrative and the development of an 'unnatural' narratology has become an exciting new research program in narrative theory" [2]. Together with feminist narratology, rhetorical narratology and cognitive narratology, it constitutes the family of post-classic narratology (Wang Yaping). Scholars, however, disagree on the specific definition of the world "unnatural". At the most basic level, unnatural narratologists are interested in "narratives that have a defamiliarizing effect because they are experimental, extreme, transgressive, unconventional, non-conformist, or out of the ordinary" [2]. This definition correlates with Viktor Shklovsky's notion of estrangement and focuses more on distancing effect produced by targeted narratives. In the *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski summarizes

four functions of literature, one of which is to "shock" the reader into a state of liminality in order for new experience to emerge [5]. Unnatural narratives in this broad definition serves this purpose and what's more, the strangeness of the text will make a new demand on the reader, "require the reader to consciously revert to level IV of Fludernik's model, i.e., the readerly process of narrativization" [2].

Brian Richardson focuses on more specific aspects of unnatural narratives. He defines unnatural narratives as "anti-mimetic texts that move beyond the conventions of natural narratives" [15]. Examples attesting to their definition are John Hawkes's novel *Sweet Williams* which is narrated by a sophisticated horse rather than a human being and Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* in which the narrator ages at a different speed from the other characters in the novel. Finally, Jan Abler restricts the use of "unnatural narrative" to "texts about storyworlds that contain physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios or events. That is to say, the represented scenarios or events have to be impossible according to the known laws governing the physical world, accepted principles of logic (such as the principle of non-contradiction), or standard human limitations of knowledge" [1].

According to Alber's definition, those scenarios or events represented in unnatural narratives are "non-actualizable" in human world and are unavailable for human experience. Those storyworlds are created through narration and have no references in the real world, which challenges the dichotomy between "story" and "discourse" in the classical narratology based on mimesis.

According to classical narratology, a narrative work consists of two levels, that of story and discourse. While the former refers to the represented object, the latter refers to the ways of representation. The meaning of the narrative is usually generated through the interaction between these two levels [20]. In most cases, these is no clear demarcation between two levels. Oftentimes they are inextricably intertwined with each other, a narrative phenomenon often detected in modernist and postmodern fictions. Shen Dan, for example, has noticed the not infrequent appearance of "denarration" in some late modernist and postmodernist fictions, the practice of introducing some information for latter negation. Some narratologists thinks the practice of "denarration" dismantles the distinction between story and discourse. Shen Tan, however, thinks the key to decide whether the act of "denarration" has subverted the distinction between story and discourse lies with the distance between the author and narrator. If the author maintains his distance from the narrator, then the reader still can entertain the hope of getting to know "what really happens" (story). "But if the author creates the work (or some parts of the work) merely to play the game of denarration, the distance between author and narrator dissolves" [20]. If so, the mimetic nature of the narrative is no longer there and the distinction between story and discourse is no longer important. Seen from this perspective, we can see that the "story" level of classic narratology is highly dependent on people's everyday

experience, which is in stark contrast to the “impossible storyworlds” in unnatural narratives.

Furthermore, Alber thinks the “unnatural” in “unnatural narrative” refers to the “representations of impossibilities”, which is anti-mimetic as well as mimetic [1]. When mimesis refers the Platonic notion of representing the experiential world, the impossible worlds that are against human experience or logic are indeed anti-mimetic; but if mimesis means the Aristotelian representation, simulation or depiction, unnatural narrative is indeed mimetic because it manages to represent the “impossibilities”.

Time's Arrow's story can be approached through two levels. In the surface level, it is a story of the resurrection of Tod Friendly, who has a cinematic re-run of his entire life. On a deeper level, it could be read as the *Bildungsroman* of a small town boy who grew up to be a Nazi doctor, and fled Germany when Nazi failed and died in America under pseudo-name. Those two stories are reader's responses to the unnatural narrative strategy of the author. Amis's narrative strategy blurs the boundaries between story and discourse and forces the reader to adopt different reading strategies in order to glean the essence of the story. In the next part, I will examine how Amis creates the effect of “defamiliarization” by representing the unnatural story-world in *Time's Arrow*.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Storywords and Discourse

Storyworlds refer to “the class of discourse models used for understanding narratively organized discourse in particular” (Herman 569). They are “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which interpreters relocate” [16]. Unlike cognate narratological terms such as *fabula* or story mentioned before, “storyworld better captures what might be called the ecology of narrative interpretation” [6]. In the process of accounting for the narrative, the interpreter not only reconstructs what happens but also “the surrounding context or environment embedding storyworld existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are involved” [6]. Storyworlds are often closely connected with the temporal and spatial parameters in the story. Unnatural storyworlds often include episodes or events that are physically or logically impossible.

Ever since its publication, *Time's Arrow* has captured the attention of various narratologists. Its narrative skills fall into the category of “the experimental, extreme, transgressive, unconventional, non-conformist, or out of the ordinary” that produces defamiliarizing effect. It's “antinomic temporality” has also marked its affinity with the ‘anti-chronological narrative’ in the field of narrative studies, which subverts the progressive and chronological order of time and reconstruct the storyworld against the flow of time. Generally, though the chronological order is subverted or dismantled in anti-chronological narrative, its storyworlds remain constant and mimetic, which means that the readers can reconstruct the

storyworld by directly appealing to their daily experiences. For example, in the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), we see the curious transformation of Benjamin Button from an old man into an innocent child, a life trajectory that directly contrasts that of other characters in the film. Martin Amis adopts similar reverse chronology in reconstructing the life of Tod T. Friendly. But what separates those two narratives apart is the differences between the storyworlds they present. While in *Benjamin Button*, the everyday incidents are arranged according to natural and physical law, in *Time's Arrow* the storyworlds, including the “existents” and “actions” are distorted beyond immediate recognition. The familiar worlds are turned upside down. For instance, the eating process is represented as such.

“Eating is unattractive too. First I stack the clean plates in the dishwasher, which works okay, I guess, like all my other labor-saving devices, until some fat bastard shows up in his jumpsuit and traumatizes them with his tools. So far so good: then you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skillful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon. That bit's quite therapeutic at least, unless you're having soup or something, which can be a real sentence. Next you face the laborious business of cooling, of reassembly, of storage, before the return of these foodstuffs to the Superette, where, admittedly, I am promptly and generously reimbursed for my pains. Then you tool down the aisles, with trolley or basket, returning each can and packet to its rightful place.” [3]

Reading this passage is like solving a string of riddles. “Eating” is the only clue Amis gives to the reader. But what Amis identifies as eating frustrates the expectation of the reader entirely. It takes a while to realize that the order of eating is completely reversed. It starts with the dish-washing, and proceeds to trashing, and then to actual eating and chewing, and then to repackaging of the food regurgitated, and then to the shopping process. It is like the rewinding of a movie. Instead of natural eating order, we find a tormenting process of vomiting food. By doing this, Amis forces the reader to reprocess their eating process in order to comprehend this outrageous description.

Those challenges Amis creates for the reader do not stop at this affront of the perceptual logic of the physical world. He also tries to dismantle commonsense causality in daily life. According to Maria-Laurie Ryan, “when chronological order is inverted, these (causal) relations are destroyed, since causality is determined for the original order” [16]. In *Time's Arrow*, however, this does not apply. The causality is not destroyed but reversed. The narrator “me” is often confused by Tod's behavior, uncertain of his moral integrity.

“I can't tell – and I need to know – whether Tod is kind. Or how unkind. He takes toys from children, on the street. He does. The kids will be standing there, with flustered mother, with big dad. Tod'll come on up. The toy, the squeaky duck or whatever, will be offered to him by the smiling child. Tod takes it. And backs away, with what I believe is called a

shit-eating grin. The child's face turns blank, or closes. Both toy and smile are gone: he takes both toy and smiles. Then he heads for the store, to cash it in. For what? A couple of bucks. Can you believe this guy? He'll take candy from a baby, if there's fifty cents for him. Tod goes to church and everything. He trudges along there on Sunday, in hat, tie, dark suit. The forgiving look you get from everybody on the way in – Tod seems to need it, the social reassurance. We sit in lines and worship a corpse. But it's clear what Tod's after. Christ, he's so shameless. He always takes a really big bill from the bowl." [3]

Whereas Martin Amis prepares the reader for a readjustment of their reading strategies in the "eating" episode, in this paragraph Amis challenges the moral code and causality that we take for granted in daily lives. The narrator's uncertainty about Todd's moral characters wins our sympathy. But once we take up the responsibility of helping the narrator, we find ourselves in deep trouble. The conflicted storyworlds created by the unnatural narrative skills give rise to different possibilities of appraising the moral character of Tod. If we take the narrator's words at surface value, we find a morally delinquent or even sinister Tod who takes delight in abusing children and is a stingy miser who has the nerve to steal from the church. However, if we read against the narration, we realize that what Tod actually has done are deeds that are morally praiseworthy for ordinary people, such as buying presents for small children and donating large sums of money to the church. This implicates that narrative plays a very important part in the formation of our moral imagination. But it also warns us against the danger that narratives can be manipulated to abuse people's sense of justice.

As the good can be turned into the evil and vice versa by the manipulation of narrative skills as demonstrated by Amis in this novel, how about life and death? Would that also be possible? For Amis, it is possible as well. As the narrative develops the protagonist regains his strength, his real profession surfaces. It turns out that he is a doctor who has a unique way of "doctoring". *Chapter Two*, entitled "you have to be cruel to be kind", describes the way he cures his patient. Unlike the real doctor who cures the patient and alleviates their pain, he cures the patient through violence, which in his own words "cures through pain". As the story unravels, the identity of Tod surfaces. He is a Nazi doctor whose slogan is creation. In those impossible storyworlds created by Amis's pen, those Nazi doctors are busy creating Jews, homosexuals, the old, the weak, the disabled and the unhealthy, "Our preternatural purpose? To dreams a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightening. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire" [3].

The brutal fact of genocide is turned into the grotesque creation of a race and reveals the difficulty to understand the nature of the holocaust. What's more, by putting Hamlet's words into the mouth of a Nazi doctor, Amis creates a hugely ironic situation, in which the humanist wisdom is usurped by the brutal Nazis to account for their atrocities and it lies within the reader to reset the moral universe that has been "out of joint".

4.2. Ethics of Reading

The unnatural storyworlds created by Martin Amis have posed great challenge for readers. In order to comprehend the strangeness generated by the narrative, the reader has to go through a "readerly process of narrativization" [2], the result of which turns to be even more disconcerting. The narrator is found out to be a former Nazi doctor. By adopting the viewpoint of the Holocaust perpetrator Amis has created a huge havoc in the academic world. Some critics believes his choice to be disrespectful to the victim of the Holocaust and regards his recreation of the life journey of a Nazi doctor as gesture to whitewash the perpetrators. What's more, Amis has also alluded to the physical and psychological trauma the Nazi doctor has suffered from after he conducted the atrocities during the WWII. But question arises: why does Martin Amis chose the Nazi doctor as the narrator? Is it intended as a deliberate affront to the sensitivity of the Holocaust survivor? If not, what ethical roles does the unnatural narrative play in this representation of the perpetrator? In order to answer those questions, we have to learn something about the perpetrator's trauma.

In recent years, some trauma scholars have turned their attention to the study of perpetrator trauma. Perpetrator trauma studies belong to the field of Perpetrator Studies, "a field in response to WWII and the Holocaust" [7]. They notice that the traditional trauma studies tend to focus on the traumatic experiences of the victims to the exclusion of the fact that criminals or perpetrators of evils might also suffer from spiritual and psychological trauma and even experience their own atrocities as trauma. Kali Tal, for instance, writes, "Those exposed to combat or other life-threatening events, and those exposed to the carnage resulting from combat were traumatized...The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing death as well as risking it" [21]. This possibility challenges people's moral instinct but also reveals the fact that the concept of trauma has been overloaded with moral significance. Mohamed, instead, thinks we should regard "trauma as a neutral, human trait, divorced from morality, and not incompatible with choice and agency" [12]. By revealing the ubiquitous nature of trauma in the experience of both the victim and perpetrator of crime, the theory of "perpetrator trauma" highlights the "choice and agency" of perpetrator during their own crime and their subsequent traumatic suffering. It is their "choice and agency" that should be taken into account. By debunking the demonic imagination of the perpetrators, the study of "perpetrator trauma" reveals the true face of those perpetrator as "merely humans". Those "banal humans" will be frustrated by life, will suffer from their evil doings and will leave their countries when their evil-doings become unbearable and die homeless in other countries. The fact that the perpetrators of crime are also likely to be traumatized by atrocities demands people to reflect upon the structure that engenders the atrocities.

In *Time's Arrow* Martin Amis created a former Nazi doctor traumatized by his own wrongdoing during the Holocaust. It

was a bold choice for it not only challenges the representation ethics of the Holocaust but also emotional and ethical sensibility of Holocaust survivors. Firstly, the uncanny nature of the Holocaust has rendered any representation of it problematic. As Hayden White has discussed in "Modernist Event", "by making the Holocaust into the subject matter of a narrative, it becomes a story which, by its possible 'humanization' of the perpetrators, might 'enoble' the event – render it fit therefore for investment by fantasies of 'intactness,' 'wholeness,' and 'health' which the very occurrence of the event *denies*" [13].

Amis's representation of the Tod Friendly's psychological trauma constitutes one possible case of "humanization" of the perpetrators. In the novel we could see Tod Friendly suffering from extreme mental unease and taking it on the furniture of his apartment.

"Around midnight, sometimes, Tod Friendly will create things. Wildly he will mend and heal. Taking hold of the woodwork and the webbing, with a single blow to the floor, with a single impact, he will create a kitchen chair. With one fierce and skillful kick of his aching foot he will mend a deep concavity in the refrigerator's flank. With a butt of his head he will heal from the fissured bathroom mirror, heal also the worsening welt in his own tarnished brow, and then stand there staring at himself with his eyes flickering." [3]

Familiar with the reverse chronology of this novel, we can unravel what is really happening, Tod Friendly's uncontrollable self-sabotaging activities, such as hitting the mirror with his head, kicking the refrigerator and damaging the chair. Those uncontrollable and anxious activities indicate unstable mental states that often are related to trauma. As the voice-narrator has told us, Tod is possessed by fear. In "Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity", the author deliberates on the possibilities of the perpetrators experiencing their crime as trauma [12]. One participant detailed his uncontrollable self-destruction of his life as a result the PTSD he felt because of his experience as a perpetrator of crime. This corresponds to Amis's imagination of Tod's traumatic suffering. But what distinguishes Amis's representation of Tod's trauma from mere unthinking apologies for the perpetrator is the razor-sharp tone he employs to describe Tod's self-destructive behavior. The sardonic mixing up of creation and destruction has cast a chilling gaze on Tod's suffering. There is no sentimentality but cool and penetrating curiosity. What's more, the cognitive effort involved in deciphering Tod's behavior has prevented the possibility of empathy that is not due to the perpetrators. In another word, Amis's representation of Tod's trauma has sidestepped the danger of what Eric Santner identifies as "narrative fetishism", "a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere" [17]. Even though Santner is talking about dangers faced by the memories and novels written by Holocaust survivors, it can also be applied to the representation of perpetrator's trauma. Instead of humanizing Tod Friendly by giving a naturalistic narration of

his traumatic experience, Amis distances him further by this unnatural narrative skill.

In *The Use of Literature*, Rita Felski proposes four "modes of engagement" that often take place during the act of reading, which includes recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock. Those four categories "are neither intrinsic literary properties nor independent psychological states, but denote multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts" [5]. As readers, when we begin to read a book, we "commit ourselves to a complex intersubjective relationship with that characters and conflicts it depicts and positions ourselves vis-à-vis the moral framework and value system it constructs or implies" [9]. Reading Amis's *Time's Arrow* is a journey full of shock and wonder. The obstacles created by his unnatural narrative skills prove the first challenge and demand more investment from the reader. When the unnatural worlds become familiar, Amis shocks us into disbelief by revealing the true identity of unreliable narrator that we feel so close to during the voyage of doubt and uncertainty. This creates an ethical dilemma for the readers. Should we read on in spite of the fact that the narrator is actually a Nazi doctor? Do we feel betrayed? Are we showing our sympathy to this perpetrator by seeing the world, even fictional world, from his perspective? Are we betraying the Holocaust victim by spending time on understanding the memories of a Nazi doctor? Those questions haunt us while we keep reading and give rise to a singular reading experience that calls our own moral judgement into question. Luckily, Amis did save us in the end. The psychological workings of the Nazi doctor are still undecipherable and we are still as helpless as the narrator, puzzled still but with fear that we might make the same mistake.

5. Conclusion

In *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz* J. Hillis Miller challenges Theodor Adorno's dictum that "it is barbaric to write poetry after the Auschwitz". He upholds the idea that literature may constitute a "valid testimony to Auschwitz, however problematic that testimony may be" [11]. Through bearing witness to the massive atrocities human beings have been subjected to, literature keeps us from forgetting those more than six million dead. In his memoir *Experience* Amis argues that "style is morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified. It's not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad that morality makes itself felt. It can be there in every sentence" [4]. By adopting exceptional narrative skills Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* belongs to this witness literature and allegorizes the difficulty in understanding the atrocities from the perpetrators' perspective and warns us against the pitfalls of blindly ascribing to any narratives thrust before our eyes. To turn the world upside down and to reverse the time backwards we might have gained a peculiar perspective on the Holocaust and thus fulfill our moral responsibility of bearing witness to the Holocaust.

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