

Five British Writers

Day 26
(of 28)



Who is Martin Amis?

- Born in South Wales, the son of well known novelist, Amis spent time in Princeton, New Jersey, and Majorca, as well as England, as a child.
- His first novel appeared in 1973; his novels have used Shakespearean dramatic plots and Chaucerian narration twists (*Money* has the author Martin Amis appear as a character within a work narrated by a man named Self, and repeatedly rewrites and references *Othello*) but turn from the realm of romantic or even gothic fantasy to the sordid.
- *Time's Arrow*, published in 1991, is his best known novel; it was nominated for Booker Prize

What is the nature of the narrator?

“Something isn’t quite working: this body I’m in won’t take orders from this will of mine...Why am I walking *backward* into the house? What is the sequence of the journey I’m on? What are its rules? Where am I heading?” (6)

“I have no access to his thoughts—but I am awash with his emotions” (7)

“I am equipped with a fair amount of value-free information, or general knowledge” (8)

“I am generally pretty slow on the uptake. Possibly even subnormal, or mildly autistic” (29)

“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 your self forward... Don’t just go along” (41)

“I suppose I really am the soulful type. Visualize the body I don’t have and see this: a sentimentalized fetus, with faithful smile” (42)

“Tod seeks and loves the company of crowds...My presence is never tinier. But it’s the same story. Render up your soul, and gain power” (49)

“Perhaps Irene puts it best...when she tells Tod that he has no soul. I used to take it personally, and I was wretched at first” (53)

“He is traveling toward his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am traveling there with him. It will be bad. It will be bad and not intelligible... I *will* know *how* bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offense. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time” (63)

“I’m like the baby taken from the toilet. I have a heart but I don’t have a face: I don’t have any eyes to cry. Nobody knows I’m here...Maybe I’m tired of being human, if human is what I am. I’m tired of being human” (93)

What is the nature of the narrator? What is the nature of the protagonist?

“I say *we*, but by now John Young was pretty much on his own out there. Some sort of bifurcation had occurred, in about 1959, or maybe even earlier” (98).

“I, Odilo Unverdorben... I was one now, fused for a preternatural purpose” (116). “Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather” (120)

“He walks on alone, Odilo Unverdorben. Fully alone. I who have no name and no body—I have slipped out from under him... I’ll always be here. But he’s on his own” (147).

“I am, I would say, one of nature’s philo-Semites... I am childless; but the Jews are my children and I love them as a parent should...” (152).

“How fortunate that I am unkillable. Unkillable, but not immortal” (154)

“I’ve come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional” (157)

What Does “Time’s Arrow” Mean?

- “words make plain sense even though Tod always reads them backwards” (24)
- “Time will tell and I put my trust in time, absolutely” (69)
- “Here’s a little moment I’d like to share...anyway, it’s soon over, this lucid interval” (81-2)
- “Like writing, paintings seem to hint at a topsy-turvy world in which, so to speak, time’s arrow moves the other way. The invisible speedlines suggest a different nexus of sequence and process” (87)
- “Every station, every journey, needs a clock... But we passed again, later, and the hands hadn’t moved to an earlier time. How could they move? They were painted and would never move to an earlier time. Beneath the clock was an enormous arrow, on which was printed: Change here for Eastern Trains. But time had no arrow, not here” (143)
- “What finally concerns me are questions of time: certain durations” (164)
- “before the slope of pine, the lady archers are gathering with their targets and bows. Above, a failing-vision kind of light, with the sky fighting down its nausea...When Odilo closes his eyes, I see an arrow fly—but wrongly. Point first. Oh no, but then... We’re away once more, over the field. Odilo Unverdorben and his eager heart. And I within, who came at the wrong time—either too soon, or after it was all too late” (165)

Babies and Stars

Babies



- “the long goodbye, the long goodbye to babies” (33) What do babies symbolize in a life lived backwards?
- A dream of a powerful baby and the story of a baby hostage (45-6); the narrator guesses at baby dream’s origin (91); the baby dream is fulfilled (140). Does time operate in the same way in dreams? What are the two other dreams? (58, 106)
- Babies appear frequently in the text, besides the dream: prostitutes’ babies, Irene’s baby, Mrs. Goldman’s baby, Odilo’s baby Eva, Odilo as a baby, etc.
- “Thank God. He’s out. Like a baby. Though naturally I’m still here: even in the darkness I keep a watch upon the world. Sometimes—now for instance—I look down upon Tod, on John, as a mother might (mother night), and try to find hope in the innocence or neutrality of his sleep” (69)

Stars

“I cannot bear to see the stars... don’t join the dots” (15)

“souls who form constellations like the stars I hate to see” (29)

“the stars are motelike, just twists of dust. Yet I feel their fire. How they burn my sight” (91)

“They are looking for the souls of their mothers and their fathers...gathering in the heavens...The sky is...full of stars. I can see them now. They no longer hurt my eyes” (123)

“we...watch the stars, which seem to soothe our sight. A parallel pleasure and comfort, for me at any rate, was to watch the Jews” (155)

- “Look at the heavens and count the stars... So shall your offspring be” *Genesis* 15.5

Doctors and Excrement

- Which passages seem important to tracing the importance of these recurring images?

For example:

Doctors

- “a life of crime” (75)?

Excrement

- “ordure, ordure everywhere” (117) “coprocentric” (123) “anus mundi” (124)

What other images recur? E.g., Atlantis (12, 131), or a smoke?



Next Class: Tod, Odilo, Martin

You can read one of the articles/reviews of *Time's Arrow* appearing on the Amis website:

Finney, Brian. "What's Amis in Contemporary British Fiction? Martin Amis's *Money* and *Time's Arrow*" (1999)

Diedrick, James. "Tracing Time's Arrow," excerpt from *Understanding Martin Amis* (1995)

Kakutani, Michiko. "Time Runs Backward to Point Up a Moral." *New York Times*. 22 October 1991.

Wood, James. "Slouching toward Auschwitz to be born again." *Guardian*. 19 September 1991.

Wood, James. "The literary lip of Ladbroke Grove." *Guardian*. 7 September 1991.

Marta, Jan. Review of *Time's Arrow* (February 1996)

Alternatively, if you are interested in reading the book's perhaps harshest critique, you can find the *Spectator* on microfilm in Healey Library (call number [AP4.S7](#)). In the issue appearing on 28 September 1991, James Buchan argues that Amis wrongly uses the holocaust for profit in his article "The Return of Dr. Death" (page 38). Amis's reply, "Creepier than Thou," also appeared in *Spectator*, on 5 October 1991 (25).

We will discuss such questions as the meanings of the central character's names as well as the critical reaction in our discussion tomorrow. Be sure to apply the critical questions discussed in relation to *Jane Eyre* responses to the secondary work that you choose to read on the subject of *Time's Arrow*.

Pick up your second essay if you have not already done so! Consult me about any feedback that is unclear.