TWO VERSIONS OF MARTIN AMIS’S TIME’S ARROW,
OR THE NATURE OF THE REVISION

Different versions of a text sometimes reveal a hitherto unnoted but crucial point for its interpretation: this is the case even in contemporary literature. Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow, or the Nature of the Offence* was first published by Jonathan Cape in September 1991. A month later, an American edition of the novel, with some small but significant revisions, was released by Harmony Books. Most of these changes were purely formal. British words such as ‘lorry’¹ and ‘pushchairs’ (JC 41) were replaced by their American equivalents, ‘truck’² and ‘strollers’ (HB 33), and spellings were Americanized, the title of the HB edition becoming *Time’s Arrow, or the Nature of the Offense*. However, the ordering of certain paragraphs was also rearranged. These revisions might be passed over as trivial tune-ups if the novel’s narrative scheme did not involve an unusual feature: the reversal of time.

*Time’s Arrow* narrates the story of a Nazi doctor stationed at Auschwitz; it tells his life history from birth to death, in reverse: snow is sucked up into the sky, sanitation trucks distribute garbage onto the streets, and genocide is performed as the genesis of the Jewish people, as if ‘the film [were] running backward’ (HB 8). To make a coherent narrative possible within this world, Amis employs as narrator a

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¹ Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow* (London, 1991), 122. Subsequent references to the two versions will be given parenthetically with abbreviations of the publishers’ names.
² Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow* (New York, 1991), 112. In principle, I refer to the HB version since some small errors are corrected in it.
secondary consciousness of the protagonist or, in the author’s word, the doctor’s ‘soul’.

This narrator shares the doctor’s emotions and dreams but does not have access to his thoughts or memories. While the narrator’s speculation about the doctor’s past drives the story backward, the reversed narrative structure requires the reader to reconstruct an intelligible chronology from the narrator’s account. In such a narrative, rearranging the order of paragraphs is significant, because the order of discourse determines the flow of causality.

The first instance of reordering appears in Chapter 3, in which the doctor Odilo Unverdorben, having escaped from Europe, works in a New York hospital under an alias. Odilo forms a romantic relationship with a housekeeper, Irene, but grows promiscuous after learning she had once given away a child. In the JC edition, the narrator notices a scrub nurse called Nurse del Puablo ‘giving [him] the eye’ during an operation (JC 99, HB 87), before Irene confesses that she had once abandoned a daughter (JC 97, HB 89). In the HB edition, the order of these events is reversed, and Irene’s confession (chronologically) precedes del Puablo’s flirtation. Amis’s intention behind this revision is obvious. Since Odilo has participated in the mass murder of the innocent children and has himself experienced the early death of an infant daughter, Irene’s past extremely disturbs him. As a consequence, he resorts to sexual promiscuity with the ‘timely’ offer from del Puablo. The narrator, as he often does throughout the text, misinterprets the cause-effect relation and wonders why Odilo had become intimate with Irene even though ‘[Odilo] doesn’t like women who have children’ (HB 89). In fact, Odilo only approached Irene because he was unaware that she had a child; consequently, her revelation alienates Odilo and

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ultimately leads to their breakup. This episode, as the discourse rearrangement clarifies, emphasizes the importance of children in Odilo’s psychology.

Puzzled at the topsy-turvy surroundings, the narrator ‘keep[s] expecting the world to make sense’ (HB 82). He gets the first glimpse of the doctor’s past when Odilo makes a confession to Father Duryea at the Vatican. In the Cape edition, when Odilo relates that he had ‘lost [his] idea of the gentleness of human flesh’, the narrator responds: ‘So. Sense. Here it comes. It’s all coming out. It’s been in here too long and now it’s all coming out’ (JC 120). In the HB edition, however, the revelation is moved a few lines down to where the doctor says, ‘We lost our feeling about the human body. Children even. Tiny babies’ (HB 110), and is expanded to include additional references to the events that the narrator (and the reader) have seen by this point of the novel (the added portion is italicized):

So. Sense. Here it comes. It’s all coming out. It’s been in here too long and now it’s all coming out. *The corridors and theaters, the Peter Pan Ward, the desk-top terminations, the eyes of the unlistened-to: that world of pain with darkness at the bottom of it.* (HB 110)

These references, as well as the rearrangement of the paragraphs, again point to the role that children play in his trauma: the corridors and operating theaters in the hospital where he worked as a pediatrician, ‘the Peter Pan Ward’ for children, ‘the desk-top’ abortion he secretly performed, and ‘all the dreams of the unlistened to, all the entreating eyes’ (HB 88) which haunt Odilo, all connect to his experiences with children. The dreams are particularly explicit. Infant figures recurrently distress the doctor in his dreams, and at one point the narrator observes that ‘the baby [in these
nightmares] is more like a bomb’ (HB 46). This ‘“bomb baby” is related’, as Sue Vice correctly explains, ‘to a specific memory from Tod’s [one of the doctor’s assumed identities] Nazi past: a baby’s crying gives away the hiding place of some Jews, and Unverdorben is the one to open the door’. Nick Bentley lightly touches upon the theme of children: ‘Babies and their defencelessness form a central theme in the novel but their power over Tod’s psyche is expressed especially in his dreams’. In furtherance of Bentley’s observation, I wish to add that Odilo’s experiences concerning children are the main cause of his trauma throughout the novel. In fact, the narrator interprets the Holocaust, the central theme of the novel, through an analogy employing children (or misinterprets it, as he characteristically does in this time-reversed world): ‘I am childless; but the Jews are my children and I love them as a parent should’ (HB 152). What Odio did during the war is, as we know, anything but to ‘love them as a parent should’. To this central irony, Amis gives a finishing touch at the end of the story. As we follow Odilo back to his mother’s womb, the narrator says: ‘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’ (HB 164).

As far as I am aware, only a few critics have focused on the importance of children in Time’s Arrow. Maya Slater, for example, touches upon an episode where the protagonist walks up to a child and gives him a toy (which is of course narrated in reverse). Focusing on Amis’s language, she notes that the expression ‘to back away’—instead of ‘to walk backwards’—from the child ‘implies a strong negative emotion’. Addressing the same episode, Leona Toker observes that ‘the sight of the

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4 Sue Vice, Holocaust Fiction (London, 2000), 17.
5 Nick Bentley, Martin Amis (Tavistock, 2015), 66.
child’s hurt face “after” the interaction with Tod may bring in dark memories.\textsuperscript{7} Although both comments are compatible with my claim, they do not develop the theme’s potential. One exception is Tamás Juhász’s article, which explores the ‘theme of children’s abused trust in parent figures’\textsuperscript{8} through a parallel reading with another Holocaust fiction. But children’s thematic significance is not only conspicuous throughout \textit{Time’s Arrow} but is also clear from the author’s own comments in an interview: ‘What distinguishes the Holocaust from other great brutalities is the state murder of children’.\textsuperscript{9} According to another interview where Amis related his first encounter with the Holocaust, this association of the Holocaust with infanticide may date back to the author’s childhood; when his mother told him that ‘There was a man called Hitler who wanted to kill all the Jews’, he recalled that ‘the question of killing children was very much on my mind’.\textsuperscript{10} But the more immediate inspiration for the novel was probably his fatherhood. James Diedrick, a leading scholar of Amis, suggests that Amis’s having a son in 1985 ‘influenced the narrative strategies and themes of his fiction over the next six years’,\textsuperscript{11} that is in \textit{Einstein’s Monsters} (1987), \textit{London Fields} (1989), and \textit{Time’s Arrow} (1991). Nevertheless, even specialists do not appear to have elaborated upon Amis’s revision of \textit{Time’s Arrow}, and the way in which it highlights the importance of the children in the novel.

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\textsuperscript{8} Tamás Juhász, ‘Murderous Parents, Trustful Children: The Parental Trap in Imre Kertész’s \textit{Fatelessness} and Martin Amis’s \textit{Time’s Arrow’}. \textit{Comparative Literature Studies}, xxxvi (2009), 645.
\textsuperscript{11} James Diedrick, \textit{Understanding Martin Amis} (Columbia, 2004), 104.