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Martin Amis and ‘the nature of the offence’: from expressions of outrage to the experience of scandal

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To a reader of contemporary English literature looking for a definition for outrage, Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, which tells the story of a Nazi doctor’s life in reverse, may appear as a good starting point. The subtitle of the novel programmatically presents it as a meditation on ‘the nature of the offence’. A quote from Primo Levi’s *The Truce*, the phrase directly refers us to the worst transgression in human history: the Shoah.¹ Within the conceptual and referential framework associated with this event, the words outrage and offence work as synonyms in that they both imply an attempt on another’s integrity, the transgression of a boundary, be it legal, moral or physical. They are associated in their seriousness: both touch on a breach of sanctity, or of what appears as most sacred in a non-religious, humanist context—human life and freedom. And finally, both serve to designate the response to such acts as go beyond the bounds of what is acceptable, as we take offence or express outrage.

While its title lets us hope for a definition of the offence, the novel relies on aesthetic and structural choices that offend our very sense of meaning as historically determined and informed subjects. The narrator whose voice and perceptions we depend on experiences time backwards. In addition to subverting the founding principle of physical existence and perverting the order of logic, this inversion makes for what may be the most outrageous depiction of genocide: in the eyes of the narrator, mass murder is envisaged as a life-giving process. The Nazis conjure up a human race, gathering ashes from the heavens and moulding them into human figures whom they eventually send on their way across Europe.

Time’s Arrow can be described as an emblematic piece of British contemporary writing: since its publication criticism has often turned to it, showing its adaptability to evolving approaches. Earlier studies tackled its experimental treatment of narrative and shed light on its nature as postmodern fiction. Michel Morel made a close reading of its narrative and linguistic make-up. Dermot McCarthy and Richard Menke explored its metatextual comments on the interaction between history and fiction. The subversion of aesthetic and narrative traditions was at the heart of Jean-Michel Ganteau’s article on the novel’s approach to literary and biological filiation. Similarly its complex inscription within literary tradition at a specific moment in history informed Brian Finney’s piece on the ‘postmodern sublime’. Later studies have tended to go beyond the issue of postmodernism *per se*, to find further meaning in the novel’s experimentation. James Diedrick’s monograph presents *Time’s Arrow* in a section entitled ‘Apocalypse Now’, and indeed Amis’s exploration of mankind’s tendency to self-destruction, as

¹ In this paper I will use the term *Shoah*, rather than *Holocaust*. Both are imperfect in their equation of genocide with a form of divine punishment. In making this choice, however, I have in mind Giorgio Agamben’s reminder that the word Holocaust was used ironically in anti-Semitic contexts from the Middle-Ages onwards (Agamben, 31).

evidenced in the Shoah and the threat of a nuclear holocaust, made for possible interpretations within the thriving fields of holocaust and trauma studies. Valentina Adami read the novel as ‘trauma fiction’; Maria Martinez-Alfaro connected its evocation of trauma with a specific treatment of ethics, and Jakob Winnberg explored its consequences in terms of commitment. All three emphasised the reader’s response and responsibility in reading the novel.

While these approaches touch on vision and visuality, pointing to irony as a pattern of ‘double vision’ (Menke, 965) or elaborating on the compulsion of repetition as a need to re-envision traumatic events in human history (Martinez-Alfaro), they do not make it their central concern. I propose to show how the novel deals with vision, starting from this crucial point where visual representation is presented as the ultimate offence to the memory of the Shoah.

As a fictional attempt at defining the ultimate offence, and in its outrageous revision of genocide as a process of generation, *Time’s Arrow* finds its place within an ongoing critical debate surrounding the Shoah and its representation. This controversy finds its origins in the outrage felt once the extent of the Nazis’ crimes was revealed, and expressions of outrage are still part and parcel of it. Outlining its aesthetic, political and ethical implications will help us understand the ambitions underlying the writing of *Time’s Arrow*.

Since the 1950s, critical indictments of artistic accounts of the Shoah have been grounded in the sense that fictional or aesthetic constructs have no claim on the offence in its essence. Fiction cannot grasp the absolute horror and downfall of civilisation embodied in genocide: the idea of artistic and narrative reconfiguration is not permissible with such a historical object. This critical position draws its substance from multiple reinterpretations of Theodor Adorno’s famous statement in *Prisms*: ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Adorno 18). In the context of an unprecedented moral and ethical crisis, when the values that once made the core of Western civilisation seem to have been voided of all meaning, artistic representation proves hopelessly inadequate, and must therefore withdraw altogether. Visual representation, in particular, is doubly offensive in the context of the Shoah, in that it suggests a fascination for images that disregards Jewish aniconism, and its rejection of idolatry. This may explain some of the strong reactions elicited by the 2001 Paris exhibition *Mémoire des camps*, an event dedicated to four photographs snatched by one of the Sonderkommandos at Auschwitz while the process of mass killing was still under way. At the time, Georges Didi-Huberman’s contribution to the catalogue, an essay entitled ‘Images in Spite of All’, attracted highly critical responses. Gérard Wacjman, a psychoanalyst and University lecturer, stated that when it came to the Shoah there was no such thing as visual archives; that considering the photographs as relevant was nothing short of fascist. He contrasted what he felt was an obscene fascination with images with the choices made by Claude Lanzmann in his film *Shoah*, which dismissed archive footage, and used only contemporary images of former camp sites and interviews with survivors. What appeared then was the fear that a transgression of the ban on visual representation should try and reinstate the image to the detriment of verbal testimony. By commenting on the photographs, Didi-Huberman seemed to have implied that the witnesses’ voices were not proof enough. In the eyes of his detractors, this equated to adopting the Nazis’ viewpoint regarding material proof, and insulting the victims. Similar arguments have been made in the field of literary criticism. In 2010, charges of collusion with the perpetrator’s ideology were levelled by Charlotte Lacoste in her book *Séductions du bourreau*, as she set out to expose novelists who, by adopting the point of view of barbaric narrators, played on spectacular aesthetics and contributed to the ‘nazification’ (Lacoste 224) of their reader. Lacoste argues that such authors

distort Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil,² encouraging us to think of mass murderers as nothing more than fellow human beings, in a sweeping ontological assessment of mankind that collapses all ethical, moral and political boundaries between perpetrator and victim.

In contrast to the promotion of an iconoclastic aesthetics, which denies the hermeneutic validity of the perpetrator's perspective and rejects the ethical notion of a common measure, some thinkers have foregrounded the powerful ambiguity at work in visual representation. In *Images malgré tout*, for instance, Georges Didi-Huberman insists that images, in their very imperfection and 'in spite of all', may say something of the experience of absolute crisis associated with the Shoah. This seems to be the case in *Time's Arrow*, where the loss of logic and meaning implied by the reversal of time is approached through the prism of a visual crisis, namely: the adoption of a viewpoint that is 'wrong in time'. The inversion of the arrow of time cannot be considered outside the context of the novel's visual aesthetics. Indeed, this main structural choice entirely depends on the narrator's powerless and essentially visual perception of a Nazi doctor's life, from death to birth. The 'I' who speaks to us does not exist as anything other than a gaze, an intensity of visual apprehension. This explicitly visual take on the Shoah does not, however, transgress the rule of testimonial precedence, any more than it professes a deeper confidence in images than in words.

The term outrage implies a clear understanding of the lines that should not be crossed. This demand for clarity seems to extend to the discourse of outrage: indeed, the account of a transgression, or the indignant response to an offence, aim at the highest expressive transparency. But in *Time's Arrow*, fiction attempts to approach the Shoah as subject through a challenging, troubled experience of vision. It situates itself poles apart from the supposedly transparent voice of testimony. In its opacity, the narrative elicits not outrage, but scandal: it erects a stumbling block,³ in the form of a potential loss of faith in liberal humanist values, in time, and in language itself. Through a disquieting experience of blurred and restless vision, the novel repeatedly confronts us with the scandalous possibility that all meaning might be lost. In doing so, it touches on the offence in its more metaphysical acceptation. Yet it never anaesthetises us or transfixes us; rather, it encourages us to find in the gaze a common ground that highlights rather than negates our political and ethical responsibility as historical beings.

Tripping the reader up: the visual aesthetics of scandal

The visual paradigm adopted in *Time's Arrow* does not primarily rely on the feelings of outrage elicited by the disclosure of the perpetrator's viewpoint. The French origins⁴ of the term outrage indicate a deliberate step taken beyond the pale of what's acceptable. In contrast to that, the narrative effectively works to trip us up in our visual apprehension of the Nazi doctor's life. Far from revelling in the transgression of visual boundaries or turning us into

² In Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt reads Eichmann's trial as 'the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil' (Arendt 252).

³ The word *Amis* borrowed from Primo Levi bridges the gap between outrage and scandal: 'offence' comprehends the judicial implications of outrage, but it can also refer to a stumbling block, 'a cause for spiritual or moral stumbling, an occasion of unbelief, doubt' (OED, 'offence, offense, n.').

⁴ The term dates back to the Anglo-Norman *outrage*, in which the French root *ultr-* *outr-* identifies a movement 'beyond' (OED, 'outrage, n.').

complacent voyeurs, it challenges our perception in ways that give us pause and make for a deeply unsettled experience of reading. The ethical and metaphysical crisis inherent in the evocation of the Shoah constitutes a threat to sensual experience.

In *Time's Arrow*, the narrative agency finds itself confined to the role of focaliser. His position as 'passenger, or parasite' (Amis 16) inside the protagonist's body is explicitly envisaged with reference to the visual paradigm of film. The first mention of cinema is indeed one of the initial keys offered by a plainly confused narrator to an even more confused reader. After a few very disconcerting pages describing the heart attack, resuscitation and demise of the character in reverse with no previous warning, we start gathering clues pointing to the inversion of time—such as the regressive sequence of dates on newspapers. But the explicit formulation of this formal constraint is made through the metaphorical identification of the narrator to a spectator. In answering his own question: 'How do you figure that?' with this tentative explanation, 'It just seems to me that the film is running backwards' (Amis 16), the narrator retroactively motivates the dead metaphor that links understanding and visualising through 'figuring'. In emulation of the narrator, if we are to make sense of the way the plot unfolds, we will need to figure out what is being told, to apprehend it visually, as we would a series of images whose sequence runs contrary to our expectations. This piece of advice to the reader recurs throughout the novel, as the cinematographic paradigm resurfaces. In describing his own posture within the protagonist's perceptive system, the narrative voice identifies with your typical cinema-goer or tv-spectator: 'I just settle back, with some apprehension, admittedly, and give witness to the late show screened by Tom's head' (Amis 54). In the context of a traumatic nightmare which adds to our suspicions as to the ultimate truth of Tod Friendly's secret, the equation of cinema-goer and 'witness' verges on the outrageous. Indeed, those who bore witness to the event at the heart of the narrative are radically dissociated from the familiar, relaxed posture of the film spectator 'settling back' in his or her seat; and designating traumatic reminders of extermination as images in a 'late show' is seriously offensive. The dangers of a complacent spectator's point of view transpire in the narrator's failure to acknowledge signs of the character's guilt.

But as we readers have already realised by the time the narrator characterises his own position within the protagonist's visual world, reading things backwards is far more demanding than watching a film. Things do not unfold as we sit back and wait for them to appear on a screen. As active reader-viewers, we take a detour via a medium that constantly reminds us of another direction in which time's arrow points: our experience of vision is conflicted and blurs our sense of time. This is emphasised by the narrative voice's fascination for the written word, and his insistence on the peculiar status it holds for him: while Tod starts at the bottom of a page to read his way upwards, the focaliser finds in texts indications of a strangely familiar sense of direction. The written medium heralds the return of a repressed form of sequentiality. The few moments of access to this alternative understanding of time are significantly associated with reminders of Tod's past, for example as he peruses Hippocrates' oath or notes that observant Jews read the way he would, turning the pages from right to left (Amis 51). Much later at Auschwitz, the narrative order begins to work against the grain of the temporal inversion. In the evocation of Selection and the murder of children, a particular use of temporal adverbs justifies the depiction of images in the order in which a historical account of facts would present them. In the following sentences, 'Even the most skeletal patients thrust their chests out for medical inspection . . . a scant fifteen minutes earlier they were flat on the floor

of the Inhalationsraum' (Amis 142), 'a child clinging to me after I held her down for "Uncle Pepi"' (Amis 144), the succession of visual impressions contradicts the words 'earlier' and 'later'. This makes for an experience of double, palindromic⁵ vision, in which we are reminded of the ghost-like or negative persistence, within the narrator's backwards account, of Tod's life as it was first experienced.

The feeling we experience in this moment of suspension between two incompatible readings is scandal: when the written word works as a stumbling block, when the collision of its two timelines leaves us floundering, helplessly looking for a firm anchorage in chronology, in language or in meaning itself.⁶

Challenges to perceiving and understanding: making sense, from grand narratives to dissensus

The scandal of double vision constitutes an attempt on language itself.⁷ In the collision of inscription, visual apprehension, and narration, all meanings are subverted, and we are waiting for things to make sense just as much as the narrator. But while the Shoah brings full satisfaction to the focaliser's thirst for meaning, it insults ours. The narrative does begin to make sense, but in a way that is too grim for us to be at peace with it. Inversion leads us to put all of the central concepts and values we normally rely on 'under erasure'.⁸ In that sense, scandal signals what Lyotard describes in *La Condition postmoderne* as 'the end of grand narratives', and paves the way towards 'dissensus' or, the vertiginous coexistence of heterogeneous, radically non-reconcilable lines of discourse.

The fifth chapter, entitled 'Here there is no why', begins with the protagonist's arrival at Auschwitz under his final name, Odilo Unverdorben. Dramatically opening with the sentence: 'The world is going to start to make sense... / Now' (Amis 124), it erases all of the narrator's ontological doubts, as he enthusiastically adheres to what he perceives as a preternatural process of creation. But the unacceptable nature of this resolution brings into question the very concepts which serve as its foundation, and which constitute the basis of a liberal humanist frame of mind: rationality and freedom.

The development of a consensual focus, indicated by the sole use of the first-person pronoun, is associated with what may appear as a tyranny of absolute rationality. This is suggested by the ambivalence of the chapter title, 'Here there is no why'. In Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, the quotation encapsulated a world where logic had been engulfed in the absolute arbitrariness of the camp. But in the context of the narrator's inverted account, the sentence signals the opposite of absurdity. Its immediate contact with the first sentence delineates a world where everything makes so much sense and is so clearly determined that the adverb *why* has become redundant. In celebration of the meaning he has found at last, the narrator's voice

⁵ The word 'palindrome' makes an appearance quite early in the novel (Amis 16).

⁶ Spatial inversion is easier to deal with: neurological experiments have shown that subjects will quickly compensate the effect of mirrors swapping top and bottom: after a moment of unease they can see things upright again. But the vertigo created by *Time's Arrow's* two contradicting chronologies cannot be neurologically compensated: again and again, we run the risk of falling.

⁷ In that respect, it reminds us of the Nazi Sprachregelung, which prescribed the use of euphemisms such as 'special treatment' for extermination and 'resettlement' for deportation (see Arendt 86).

⁸ I borrow this phrase from Jacques Derrida, who uses it extensively, for instance in the second chapter of *De la grammatologie* (1967), 'Linguistique et grammatologie'.

harks back to one of Levi's persecutors: his diametrical reversal of the process does not turn out to make the Shoah more acceptable; it presents us with the risk of totalitarian rationality. Such a risk is again suggested by the narrator's use of the word 'enlightenment', when he asserts: 'Enlightenment was urged on me the day I saw the old Jew float to the surface of the deep latrine, how he splashed and struggled into life' (Amis 132). The association between the unbearable account of a death/birth and the ideological principle of liberal humanist thought again reminds us of Lyotard's thesis on the end of grand narratives. The development of postmodern dissensus can be read as a counterpoint to the failure of modern civilisations, whose consensual faith in the enlightenment of mankind eventually led to barbarity.

The sentence 'Here there is no why' refers us back to a book the title of which brought this ontological issue into focus: a question without a question-mark, hoping for no clear answer, Primo Levi's words 'if this is a man' presented humanity as one of the notions the Shoah most put to the test. In *Time's Arrow*, the unhinging of time says something of the nature of the offence: it negates humanity in that it replaces absolute contingency with absolute determinism.⁹ In that sense, it robs man of the right to die, as the narrator points out when he stresses the impossibility of suicide: 'Suicide isn't an option. Not in this world' (Amis 33). This final negation of freedom constitutes the ultimate challenge to humanity in the terms of liberal humanism: it renders all notions of free will and responsibility null and void.

Yet this crisis comes at a point when the reader desperately needs to rely on the notions of human agency and responsibility, just as the international community did in the aftermath of World War Two, so that the perpetrators might be brought to justice.¹⁰ In that sense, the experience of scandal does not paralyse us, but urges us to preserve and revisit, in all their imperfection, those values and concepts that may help us apprehend life in its contingency. The presence of dissensus does not leave us helplessly staring into the void. Ultimately, it makes for a process of seeing that includes our dynamic response: it encourages reading as a form of active dissent whereby we refuse to simply see eye to eye with the focaliser.

The gaze as common measure?

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben explores the challenge which the Shoah posed to the very idea of humanity. His interest in what Primo Levi terms the 'grey zone', a zone in which Auschwitz created 'brotherhood in abjection' (Levi 1997, 216; Agamben 17), conjures up a metaphor which apparently confirms some of the doubts expressed in critiques of visual representation. One of the main reasons for such critical iconoclasm when it comes to the Shoah is the fear that images should suggest the visual as a possible common ground, a sign of similitude between human beings. And indeed, the 'grey zone' visually breaks down the clear boundaries of good and evil; as it questions what it is to be human, it allows us to think of a common ground between perpetrators and victims.¹¹ It is as if images erased all sense of

⁹ As the narrator remarks: 'people are free, then, they are generally free, then, are they? Well they don't look free. Tipping, staggering, with croaked or choking voices, blundering backwards along lines seemingly already crossed, already mapped out.' (Amis 51).

¹⁰ In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt evokes the legal argument that called for the creation of a court whose scope of action would transcend national laws: the mass murder by the German State of its own nationals could only be tackled by the humanity court.

¹¹ 'the only thing that interests him is what makes judgement impossible: the gray zone in which victims become executioners and executioners become victims' (Agamben 17).

difference, and erected an ontological category oblivious to historical, political and moral responsibility. Visual representation must be banned, in short, because it ultimately aims at sideration, or a form of visual fascination culminating in paralysis.¹² In response to such an understanding of the powers and dangers of the visual, I would argue that despite the challenge it poses, the need to think of humanity as a common measure presents itself, after World War Two, as a political and moral imperative.¹³ What *Time's Arrow* as well as Agamben's reading of Primo Levi show us, furthermore, is that this can be done in visual terms, and need not lead to sideration.

Remnants of Auschwitz begins with the assertion that the Shoah, as it is narrated by Primo Levi, saw the emergence of a new ethical territory, inaugurated by the figure we see in his poem 'If This Is a Man': the Muselmann. A liminal entity, this non-human man presents us with the insufficiency of the limits in which former theories of ethics previously defined humanity. Most urgently, he reminds us of the fundamental lack at the heart of any testimony. Those who do testify are not, in Primo Levi's words, the actual witnesses: as he asserts in *The Drowned and the Saved*, they who have seen the Gorgon haven't come back, or haven't been able to tell.¹⁴ Dwelling on the paradoxical motif of Medusa's face, which cannot be seen but cannot be escaped,¹⁵ Agamben defines the oxymoronic status of testimony as an impossible necessity to see shared by the witness who never spoke and the survivor speaking for him. On the new territory of ethics, a sign of similitude seems to be found in a complex commonality of the gaze—the visual call of that which cannot be seen. Agamben's reflection does not end with the silence of those whose existence and death question the notion of humanity: he sees in this silence the necessity to redefine the bounds of a common ground. Because not doing it would imply leaving the witness in silent sideration before the Medusa, and granting the Shoah the status of a deity.¹⁶

In its fundamentally paradoxical nature, the survivor's discourse is not to be saved by aesthetics: as Agamben reminds us, 'it is testimony, if anything, that founds the possibility of the poem' (Agamben 36). This is definitely the case for *Time's Arrow*, which asserts its debt to Primo Levi's voice from subtitle to Afterword. And in a homage to Levi's attempts at producing the Gorgon for us, Amis's novel conjures up its own Medusa. Through the recurrent motif of star-gazing, *Time's Arrow* presents us with a visual experience that dismisses sideration and insists on the historical and political nature of the human gaze.

12 The visual implications of sideration are mostly present in the French acceptance of the term, though the English does find its roots in the Latin for 'planet-struck', in a world-view where the stars influence human destinies.

13 Arendt repeatedly points to the presupposition, by the legal order, of a common ground between the accused and the court sitting in judgement of him/her, at one point referring to 'perpetrators, that is to say, human beings' (Arendt 290). This argument is taken up within the field of ethics in Didi-Huberman's reminder: '[C]'est en tant que semblable qu'un être humain devient le bourreau d'un autre . . . La relation du bourreau à la victime se fonde sur leur commune 'espèce humaine', et c'est bien là que gît le problème éthique de la haine raciale, de l'humiliation, de la cruauté en général et du totalitarisme nazi en particulier' (Didi-Huberman 191).

14 See *The Drowned and the Saved*, 'we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses . . . [we] did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses' (Levi 1989: 83, Agamben 33).

15 As Agamben reminds us, the Gorgon has no prosopon, no face, and yet on Greek urns she is always represented full front. In her paradoxical invisibility she is the ultimate visual object: an image.

16 'To say that Auschwitz is "unsayable" or "incomprehensible" is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does a god. . . . We, however, "are not ashamed of staring into the unsayable"' (Agamben 32-33).

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator's wish to uncover the truth of Tod's secret is contradicted by his visual aversion for the stars, and the secret they seem to hold: 'I cannot bear to see the stars; even though I know they're there all right, and I do see them, because Tod looks upwards at night, as everybody does, and coos and points. . . . The stars, to me, are like pins and needles, are like the routemap of a nightmare. Don't join the dots...' (Amis 23). Physically speaking, the stars embody light in its historicity: because we only see a differed image of what they are, they bear witness to our past and, in the inverted sequence of the narrative, constitute harbingers of destruction and trauma. As the remotivation of their metaphorical description as pins suggests, they pose a threat to the narrator's integrity as an eye, just as trauma does to Tod's. In the evocation of his nightmares, 'full of figures who scatter in the wind like leaves, full of souls who form constellations like the stars I hate to see' (Amis 37), the order implied by the word 'constellation' is met with the same reluctance to 'join the dots'. What the narrator fears in the stars is the map they set for what he immediately anticipated as 'a terrible journey, towards a terrible secret' (Amis 12). Directing our gaze towards the past, the stars tell the message of our moral and political responsibility towards those 'souls' which the dream, according to a principle of condensation, metaphorically identifies with them. Keeping in mind this constellation of souls, we obey an imperative to join the dots, to look for a meaning, however nightmarish.

At Auschwitz, the star-lit sky and the 'storm of human souls' (Amis 16) are brought together again in apparent negation of the narrator's worst fears. Indeed, his description of the attitude of prisoners at the camp constitutes an occasion to affirm a sense of harmony: 'There's a thing they do, with their heads. They bend their heads right back until their faces are entirely open to the sky... I was puzzled at first but now I know why they do it, why they stretch their throats like that. They are looking for the souls of their mothers and their fathers, their women and their children, gathering in the heavens—awaiting human form, and union . . . the sky above the Vistula is full of stars. I can see them now. They no longer hurt my eyes' (Amis 131). In their juxtaposition, however, the two pictures of the sky once again conjure up for the reader the metaphor of Tod's nightmare. While the narrator happily replaces this memory with the assurance of reconciliation, we are reminded of the political implications of the image: the journey has brought us back to a time when a Jewish soul was summed up in the emblem of a star. For us, far from confirming the hope of union, the stars work as symbols of the Jews' branding and persecution.

Later appearances of the stars in the novel persist in this reminder of our common history. In a later mention, the stars, compared once more with the souls of those they will come to designate, become, like history, a shard in our eye: 'On Krystallnacht . . . the fizzy shards swirled like stars or souls' (Amis 165). Finally the narrator, although systematically critical of what he terms the 'human talent for forgetting' (Amis 89), proves completely oblivious to the metaphorical association. A few pages later the stars appear one last time, during a camping trip near Oświęcim. But what the narrator describes then as their 'uncrackable code' and the 'innocence' (Amis 169) of a virgin landscape can only be seen by us through the double prism of collective and personal memory, as the names Auschwitz and Birkenau refer us both to history at large and to our own reading of the novel. In our eyes no image can be innocent, pre-political: the politics of visibility define the common ground on which we play our role as readers.

Writing an outrageous novel about the Shoah would have implied sustaining a clear awareness of the rules being transgressed, and thus preserving to an extent our epistemological and ethical bearings. But *Time's Arrow*, in its opacity, aims at a more radical form of unsettling. Instead of bringing us across a clearly visible line, the narrative erects its principle of inversion as a stumbling block, and repeatedly forces on us the experience of scandal or, the loss of all bearings. It creates a feeling of vertigo, as we are made to question the concepts that normally regulate our relation to experience, knowledge and ethics.

Yet this experience of scandal does not simply turn us into anaesthetised spectators. When it addresses the ontological quandary which the Shoah brought to the fore, it does not leave us in silent fascination for the inhuman within man, but visually reminds us of our responsibility as political and historical beings. In that sense it revisits a paradigmatic motif of Enlightenment ethics: in *Time's Arrow*, the 'starry skies' above the Kantian subject compound the 'moral law'¹⁷ within him or her with images of a shared human history.

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¹⁷ See the opening sentence of the conclusion to the *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within" (Kant, 164).

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