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Backwards

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BACKWARDS

Life can only be understood backwards; but must be lived forwards.—Søren Kierkegaard

What was yet to come would also be a memory.—Carlos Fuentes

Memory implies a certain act of redemption. What is remembered has been saved from nothingness. What is forgotten has been abandoned.—John Berger

In my next life I want to live my life backwards. You start out dead and get that out of the way. Then you wake up in an old people's home feeling better every day. You get kicked out for being too healthy, go collect your pension, and then when you start work, you get a gold watch and a party on your first day. You work for 40 years until you're young enough to enjoy your retirement. You party, drink alcohol, and are generally promiscuous, then you are ready for high school. You then go to primary school, you become a kid, you play. You have no responsibilities, you become a baby until you are born. And then you spend your last 9 months floating in luxurious spa-like conditions with central heating and room service on tap, larger quarters every day and then Voila! You finish off as an orgasm! I rest my case.

—“My Next Life Backwards,” by Woody Allen

Time and Space, Space and Time. Narratives work, as we all know, in both dimensions. But, as Lessing argues in the very subtitle of *Laocoon*—“An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry”—other kinds of discourse do not. The “pure” visual arts—paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs—are radically spatial. Of course,

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it takes time to view a painting, but that time is not structural, as it is in a narrative (with its two orders—discourse-time and story-time). Obviously, pictures can tell stories: a multi-frame narrative painting or a comic strip moves from one event or state of affairs to another. But it does so by applying *narrative* rules, not those of visual design. A single-frame historical painting depicts a frozen moment in a story, functioning more as an allusion to than a translation of its series of events. Pure visual art-works do not control the order of our perception as tightly as do narratives. Though some works—for example, a painting of a forest with an open path in the foreground—seemingly force us to begin at a given point, many do not. We approach *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, for example, either from the right, the left, or the middle. Our eyes' path may follow reading habits, design principles (the diagonal dominates, according to Sergei Eisenstein), subject matter preferences ("I particularly love the petals of roses!"), or the exigencies of the viewing experience (another museum visitor is partially blocking our view).

Music, of course, more strictly controls our temporal experience, second-by-second. But unlike narratives, its units are not individually meaningful, at least in the usual sense of the word. (I refer here to "pure" or "absolute" music, not songs with lyrics, program music, operas, or the like.). Individual musical segments—notes, phrases, and themes—do not explicitly refer to anything in the outside world. True, music evokes moods and emotions—happy, wistful, sad—and composers or their editors stimulate such associations with titles like *Les Adieux* or *Night on Bald Mountain*. And music can imitate natural sounds: repetitive drumbeats do indeed suggest marching or hoofbeats, but much less specifically than language. Music is not a semiotic system. To endow its elements with "meaning" in the strict sense of unit-by-unit signification, another textual system must be applied. Listening to a musical composition that "narrates," say, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, a specific story matching the music only comes to mind if we know it before hand, in this case either the original, Goethe's "Der Zauberlehrling," or some retelling. And even then we cannot correlate individual musical segments with specific story-events. No listener could ever match Dukas's melody and rhythm with so specific a narrative as the one Disney assigned to them in an astonishing sequence in *Fantasia*—Mickey Mouse conjuring up a catastrophic flood by animating a broom to carry water and mop to the strains of marching music, and then, to Dukas's intensifying crescendos, Mickey's attempt to slay the original broom with an axe, only to see the fragments proliferate like sown dragon's teeth, into an endless army of water-carriers that threatens to drown the dreamer and the rest of the world.¹

Like music, narrative is also vectored. It directs us from one moment to the next. The direction is usually forward, from an initial state of affairs to a final one. But narrative discourse need not trace a straight path. Since antiquity, narratives have routinely presented an earlier event in the story at a later moment in the discourse. Gérard Genette calls this reversal *analepsis*, a "going backwards" (Genette 40). He cites as a founding instance the eighth line of the *Iliad*, in which the narrator goes backwards to recount the cause of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. He also distinguishes between reversals at the micronarrative and at the macronarrative levels. His micronarrative example is a paragraph of *A la recherche du temps perdu*

in which, after the narrator jumps backwards, telling how Swann had suddenly decided that Bloch (whom he previously disdained) actually was an intelligent person because a Dreyfusard, like himself. Then the discourse returns to the moment of the soirée which Swann was attending. Reversals also occur at higher, macronarrative levels, those of whole episodes. In the cinema, these are called “flashbacks,” a term which filmmakers have used since the earliest days of the medium. For the silver screen, the term is particularly evocative, stressing as it does the instantaneous nature of the technique. Since examples of this structure occur in all media, I’ll extend the term *flashbacked* to any episode which precedes the previous episode in story-time (though itself moving from an earlier to a later moment).

In the late twentieth century, a new sort of narrative began to appear which systematically and continually goes backwards. Brian Richardson, in his excellent typology of unusual discourse processes (Richardson 49), calls these reversals antinomies (from Gk. *anti*- “opposite” or “against” + *nomos* “rule,” “law”). Richardson sees antinomy as one of six kinds of temporal hocus-pocus worth distinguishing. I interpret “antinomic” to mean “self-contradictory” in the sense that constant, as opposed to occasional, movement backwards intentionally flouts ordinary laws of historical sequence. Traditional flashbacks interrupt the plot on occasion, whereas antinomies *constitute* the deviant plot flow, sustaining a backward pattern throughout the text.

Two subclasses of sustained backwards narration can be recognized—one in which as the later episode ends, the previous episode begins. Once begun, the events of each episode move forward as they do in normal narratives. This subclass can be called *episodic*. An episodically reversed narrative is essentially an extension of simple analepsis but with the additional constraint that each succeeding episode of the story must precede the previous one in the discourse. The other, or “sustained” subclass, consistently reverses *each event*.² In addition, the event may be “antonymized,” that is, expressed as the opposite of what it is: people move backward from their goal; swallowing becomes spitting; when you go to the store, the clerk gives you money instead of taking it; and so on.

Here’s a tree-diagram of the distinctions among *flashbacked* and *sustained* backwards narratives:

The most familiar example of *sustained episodic* reversal in English is Harold Pinter's play and movie *Betrayal* (1983). To tell the story of a 7-year adulterous love affair, Pinter moves early episodes—like the lovers' first erotic encounter—to the end of the play, and later episodes to the beginning. Each of the episodes is played straightforwardly, that is, from its own earliest moment to its latest, but with the constraint that each succeeding episode must occur earlier in the discourse. *Episodically sustained* narratives are the most common and least challenging to read. Some other examples are *Christopher Homm* by C. H. Sisson, a novel about a dismal working-class Londoner; *The Long View*, by Elizabeth Jane Howard,³ which, like *Betrayal*, is about a failed marriage; and *Mr Mani*, by Israeli novelist A. B. Yehoshua, about the history of an ill-fated Jewish family going back from contemporary Israel to Greece in 1848. Variations on the technique appear in Julia Alvarez's *In the Name of Salome*, in which a mother's narrative goes forward and a daughter's backwards, and in Andrew Sean Greer's *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*, in which time-reversal operates only in the story, not the discourse: Tivoli, the homodiegetic narrator, has an anomalous birth: he is born as an old man, lives a long life and dies as a baby. A short story by Lorrie Moore, "How To Talk to Your Mother," moves backwards from 1982 to the narrator's birth in 1939, and is also interesting because it uses a second-person narrator. For my purposes, *sustained* backwards structures are well-illustrated by three texts: a short story by Ilse Aichinger called "Story in a Mirror" ("Spiegelgeschichte," 1949), a Czech film by Oldrich Lipsky called *Happy End* (*Stastny Konec*, 1968), and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow or the Nature of the Offense* (1991). The complexity of Amis's novel is the main subject of this paper.

The discourse of "Spiegelgeschichte," presented by an authorial narrator, recounts, backwards, the story of a young woman—"now" dead—starting with her removal from the grave, through her return from the cemetery to the hospital, through a fatal abortion performed by an old boozier, to her first meeting with her young man, the father of her baby, her sad childhood, and finally her birth. In both the German and the English translation the events are told in the simple present tense. The dead protagonist is addressed in the second person, *du*, and sometimes in the imperative voice "Lass es geschehen" ("Let that happen"). These imperatives tell the girl to disregard the opinions of doctors who pronounce her dead and to go backward to her previous life. The instructions often have an authoritarian cast, as if ordering the girl to do so. The very first sentence admonishes the corpse "wenn du dem Vikar die Leichenrede ersparen willst, so ist es Zeit für dich aufzustehen" ("if you want to spare the curate the trouble of a funeral sermon, then it is time you got up"). But the imperative also challenges others, taking the girl's side against them—the curate himself, boys along the street peering at the hearse, the abortionist, and so on. The discourse ends not at the moment of birth but with the sentence "'Es ist zu Ende'—sagen sie hinter dir, 'sie ist tot!'" ("The end has come,' they say behind you, 'she is dead.'"). This seems a rebuke to those attending her birth or to the doctors in the hospital where she will die, but ultimately to society at large. Then the narrator gives the girl permission to violate the normal order of things, to live on, despite the doctors' pronouncement of death: "Still! Lass sie reden!" ("Quiet! Let them talk!"). The nar-

rator rejects the girl's death in favor of the bright image of her birth, basking in the warmth of the sun. She instructs the girl—and thus the narratee—to think only of the promise of life, not of its dismal end.

From the structural point of view, it is important to understand what “*Spiegelgeschichte*” does *not* do. It reverses time, but it does not *semantically reverse*—or, as I shall term it—*antonymize* events. In other words, it doesn't turn “buy” into “sell” or “swallow” into “spit.” For example, after the pallbearers pick up the coffin at the grave site and return it to the chapel, the candles are lit again. If Aichinger had used the sort of antonymizing employed in *Happy End* and *Time's Arrow*, the pallbearers would have backed up with the coffin, and the candles would have sprung back to life on their own. By “antonymizing” I mean the term in the broader rather than stricter sense: it includes not only antonymic pairs like “buy” and “sell” but any situation which is the *opposite* or at least quite different from what one might expect.

“*Spiegelgeschichte*” does not explore the comic implications of backwards narration. *Happy End*⁴ does nothing but. The humor rests on twisting the cuckolded husband cliché. The film opens with a close-up of the face of the protagonist, Bedrich. He rolls one eye, and his voice-over tells us that this grim gallows room was his birthplace, though no parents were present. The camera pulls away and we watch black-gloved hands carry Bedrich's severed head back to the guillotine and replace it on his trunk. Or, we see Bedrich's wife's lover fly out the window after the man lies flat out in the street and after the ambulance driving backwards arrives for him.

We see and hear in these two events a moving backwards in time, but *also* an antonymization, a reversal of meaning: the hands are reconnecting the head to the body, not carrying it away. We must recognize the two reversal systems working together: first, reversal of the order of events: the ambulance arrives before the body lands; and second, (and antonymizing): the body soars *up* from the street into Bedrich's apartment. In *Happy End* these are made clear by both the visual- and audio-track. We see Bedrich's head sitting on a platter, his voice-over is telling us not that he is dead, but that the gallows room was his birthplace. More about the distinction between time-reversal and antonymizing below.

Judges read Bedrich's condemnation backwards—the soundtrack for a few sentences reverses the very phonemes, rendering their speech unintelligible. (Fortunately, Lipsky does this only once.) Next, Bedrich has a backward conversation in his cell with a priest. Though the phonemes now go forward normally, their order in the conversation is reversed. For example, when the priest asks Bedrich whether he knows the appropriate prayer of repentance, his response is that he threw his wife's lover out the window (which is the answer to the priest's previous question). Later (earlier) still manacled, Bedrich listens to the birds out in the prison yard, and his voice-over joyfully anticipates the glories of his future life.

Thereafter, the narrator's voice-over regularly disconnects from what we see. The disconnect often derives from a misinterpretation of the event—an instance of Bedrich's unreliability. He calls the handcuffs on his wrists a gift of “silver derbies” from the arresting policeman, whom he thinks is a porter. The voice of the actor playing Bedrich serves two functions: as character-protagonist and as after-the-fact

narrator. As narrator, the offscreen voice is clearly distinguished from the character's onscreen voice, the latter being lip-synchronized with the action. For example, in the scene in which he finds Jenik, the lover, in bed with his wife, Bedrich's onscreen voice yells in rage, but his narrator's voice-over calmly reminisces about the event.

A comic movie will rely pretty much on the bizarre effects made possible by cinema's technology. The humor in seeing a character sailing up into a window instead of falling out of it rests on our common experience of gravity. It takes only a few of these self-evident "antonyms" for the audience to understand the principle. Instead of cutting up his wife, Julia, and carrying the body parts in a suitcase, Bedrich backs into his apartment and "assembles" her from the pieces. But in a few cases, even a broad comedy like *Happy End* goes beyond simple physical jokes and into the brainier dimension of irony. The stereotyped cuckolding of a husband is universally known, and we can quickly predict what has happened, even if presented backwards. Irony, on the other hand, requires a more knowing audience, those who recognize something about the wider implications of an event. In *Happy End*, for example, the garbled reverse dialogue of the judges speaks both to the universal gibberish of the law and to the special political repression of the then Communist government.

The most interesting sustained backwards narrative is Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991). As commentators have noted, this postmodern novel takes up Nabokov's gauntlet that "nobody can imagine in physical terms the act of reversing the order of time. Time is not reversible."⁵ The novel goes backward through the life of a Nazi doctor, Odilo Unverdorben, who performed atrocities at Auschwitz and ends up unpunished but miserable in America. His story is told temporally backwards piece by piece and through elaborate antonymizing by a strange being, a newborn soul or conscience who somehow has found his way or been placed into the doctor's body at the moment of his death. Like *Happy End* it maximizes the comic effects but also preserves a degree of the seriousness demanded by the Holocaust.

In the comic mode, Amis's reversals, like Lipsky's, can sink to the smallest units of language: phonemes. Here is a passage in which the protagonist, who now calls himself Dr. Tod Friendly, shops for hair lotion. The time-reversal can be clearly seen if the order of the dialogue is read from the bottom up.

"Dug, Dug," [i.e., "Good, Good"] says the lady in the pharmacy.

"Dug," I join in. "Oo yirrah?" ["How are you?"]

"Aid ut oo yirrah?" ["How are you too, dear?"]

"Mh-m" [negative, the opposite of the affirmative "M-hm!"] she'll say as she unwraps [not "wraps"] my hair lotion. (Amis 7)⁶

This is the vocal counterpart of characters walking backwards or heads returning to their bodies. *Time's Arrow's* verbal reversals go to the phonemic level only twice (the other time is when Tod, asleep, murmurs "Shtib," backwards for "Bitch"). Obviously, reversing phonemes for pages and pages would tax readers beyond endurance.

The backward/antonymizing principles are very much like those in *Happy End*, except they work solely by means of words. The temporal dimension emerges very clearly in dialogues, all of which reverse the order of speeches: an answer precedes its question, and so forth. Here Dr. Tod interviews a gerontological patient:

Tod pauses. "That's an abnormal response. The normal response would be: 'Nobody's perfect, so don't criticize others.'" "They'll break the glass," says the patient, frowning. "What is meant by the saying 'People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones?'" 'Uh, seventy-six. Eighty-six.' (27)

Amis is deft at antonymizing, especially verbs—a clerk unwraps a package instead of wrapping it; you don't take milk from the milkman, you give it to him and get an empty bottle in return; you don't drive a car to the body shop to get it repaired but to get it wrecked; sanitation trucks come in the early morning not to pick up but to deliver rubbish, and shit for dogs. Verbs that are most useful for antonymizing are in the *punctual* (or "perfective") aspect, that is, those whose force is consummated by simply being named: "buy" consummates the event, but "haggle" is unconsummated, that is, its duration is not limited; similarly "consume" (not "chew"), "win" (not "is winning"), "leave" (not "stay"). The opposite aspect is the *durative* (or "imperfective," or "progressive"). Duratives do not complete the action they name, e.g., "sit" or "stand" (not "sit down," or "stand up"), "start" (not "finish"), "swim" (not "dive"), "decide" (not "consider"). As we shall see, duratives are important components of "stasis" statements in narratives.

The difference between stasis and process statements must be explained. All narratives consist of events and existents—characters, elements of setting, states of affairs, narrator's commentary, and so on (Chatman 96–145). These in themselves do not further the flow of the plot as events do. But they are essential to *either* a forward or backward version of a story. Existents do not contribute to the vector of events, whether forwardly or backwardly represented: a transformation back to forward narration would not in itself prompt an antonym for "glass houses." A crude analogy: existents are like the bones of a skeleton: they are there but do not move in any particular direction unless made to do so by the muscles (the events). Unlike other text-types—Argument, Description, or Exposition—Narrative uniquely identifies itself through explicit and implicit statements of movement through time, what I've called *process* statements (Chatman 31–32). But it also frequently introduces stasis-statements representing the story's existents, its characters, props, locale, narrator's observations and commentary, and so on. A process statement is in the mode of "do," a stasis statement is in the mode of "is." Existents may be mentioned expressly or by-the-by: in "John ate an apple," eventhood is marked by the punctual verb, "ate" or "a mangé." *John* and *apple* are necessary existents but the sentence itself functions as a process statement of an event. A sentence of pure description, however, names the existent explicitly. "The apple was bright red" does not signal an event but rather asserts a state of affairs, that is, the presence of something in the story-world, a something which would be there without regard to the direction of

time's arrow. In the sentence "John was hungry, so he ate an apple" there are again two existents, but in two narrative statements—one process and one stasis. The second part of the sentence renders the event explicitly, that is, actualizes a process statement (John did $x = \text{ate}$)—while the first half expressly renders a state of affairs, hunger, and hence actualizes a stasis statement (John was $y = \text{hungry}$).

Here is an early passage in *Time's Arrow* in which both systems clearly operate: time goes backwards and antonymizing reverses meanings. Note how the effect is achieved not only through the reversal of punctual verbs, but also of auxiliaries—prepositions, adverbs, and adverbials. Instead of walking toward something you walk away from it. Nouns also can be reversed, though to a more limited extent: patients become agents and agents patients, donors become recipients, and so on.

The event is described by the narrator, whom I'll call Soul. The narrator is initially "all-seeing but nothing-knowing" (Trueheart B1). He is so unknowing that he does not seem to know his own name. The word "soul" occurs in the text, so I'll use it to emphasize the narrator's odd structural role, but also to highlight elements of moral reasoning not in keeping with Odilo's character. Both systems are established thoroughly at the outset of *Time's Arrow's*.⁷ They are easy to recognize because they simply reverse everybody's daily experience:

Eating is unattractive too. First I [i.e., Tod, physically, and Soul, the narrator, through a kind of cognitive echo] stack the clean plates in the dishwasher, which works okay . . . then you [again Tod and Soul but also perhaps a narratee who needs instruction] select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my [Tod's and Soul's] 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. (Amis 11)

Consider the two systems at work. Soul's discourse goes backwards through time by reversing the order of sentences, regressing from garbage pail to supermarket led by simple adverbial markers—"first," "then," "after," "next," and so on.

Concurrently, antonymizing melds smoothly with time-reversal: instead of *scraping* bits *into* the garbage, Tod *collects* them *out of* the garbage; then instead of food *descending into* his stomach, it gets regurgitated—"gulped up into my mouth"; then instead of *raising* food from the plate to his mouth, he *lowers* it to the plate. *Heating* the food becomes *cooling* it, and it is *returned to* instead of *taken from* the Superette. Amis introduces these strong backward markers early in the novel to unequivocally establish the novel's reverse orientation. But, as we shall see below, some events are represented by weaker markers, and then the context may become thin enough to lead to uncertainties or at least questions about what "really" happened.

It is noteworthy that some of the words Soul uses to antonymize betray an uneasiness about his plight, as if he were trying to explain it to himself or as if he felt the presence of a narratee who may not grasp the full implications of living in reverse. To whomever they are addressed, explains Maya Slater (143), certain antonyms suggest Soul's sense of obligation to fully interpret the backward life. They are "idiosyncratic, over-technical, obsessional." In the above passage, "cooling" is a neutral antonym of "heating," but "reassembly" (rather than simply "a return to the cupboard") seems excessive. So do "collecting" garbage instead of "scraping" it, or "reimbursing" instead of simply "paying the clerk." In the forward version, one would not ordinarily say "I selected a clean dish." It's hard to think of a neutral term for "swallowing" since the whole notion of reversing peristalsis is too taboo for polite conversation.

Soul's occasional discomfort about his peculiar alliance with Tod/Odilo is also marked by a mixing of personal pronouns to refer to himself and/or his host. "He" means Tod alone, and "I" sometimes means Soul alone but sometimes both Tod/Odilo and Soul ("Physically I'm in great shape. My ankles and knees and spine and neck no longer hurt all the time.") "We" always refers to both. But "you" may or may not do so; it can also function as a generic pronoun, equivalent to "one," as in the "eating" passage quoted above.

Different pronominal choices can have important thematic relevance, as when Soul distinguishes between Tod's unpleasant treatment of his erstwhile mistress, Irene, and his own affection for her. The most telling pronoun choice is the exclusive use of "I" in the Auschwitz chapter (five), a choice which confirms the unity of body and soul. Soul asserts twice "I was one," surely meaning "a single unit" or "unified being." There are a few moments when Soul seems to speak for himself—for instance, when he says "my German crashed out of me—" for it seems doubtful that Odilo had forgotten his native language. But there is no "he" to refer to Odilo alone. Unification under "I" also confirms Soul's prediction upon reaching Auschwitz: "The world is going to start making sense . . . now."

Elsewhere the reader is sometimes challenged about which being is named. Except for his time at Auschwitz, the mix of pronouns illustrates the narrator's confusion about his place in Tod's life, a confusion later confirmed by the odd word "ourselves" (not "ourselves"). In the homodiegetic mode, as in the passage above, whether by "I," "we," or "you," Soul shares in the food's retrieval, mastication, tasting, and delivery back to the Superette. In other passages, in the heterodiegetic mode, he simply describes what Odilo is doing as if he were a neutral observer, living outside Tod's body. For instance: ". . . in the Superette these days, the eyes of Tod Friendly linger on the bodies of the local frauleins as they tug [not "push"] their carts. The ankles, the join of the hips, the inlet of the clavicle, the hair."

Time's Arrow distinguishes narrator and protagonist in a bizarre way. Up through modernism, readers were accustomed to two conventions: the heterodiegetic, in which the narrator refers to herself as "I" and to the protagonist as "she;" and the homodiegetic, in which the two are the same person, that is, "I," but one "I" who lives inside the story and another, the narrator, outside in the discourse.

Time's Arrow, however, asks us to understand, or failing that, at least to accept a relationship in which the narrator differs from the protagonist but shares the same body with him.

Soul is homodiegetic—he exists both as the narrating agent of his own story and the protagonist of his search through Tod's past. But in that search, he is also the implicit heterodiegetic narrator of Odilo's story. Unlike more traditional secondary character-narrators, the one, for instance in Amis's *London Fields*, Soul's access to his protagonist's or anyone else's mind is strangely restricted. He can understand Tod's dreams and resonate to his emotions. But practically never does he hear Tod's daytime thoughts, so he must infer from external events what Odilo is or was thinking. We learn that Tod had another mind pre-mortem, but its activity is inaccessible to Soul. Further, "There's another language, a second language, here in Tod's head," a language which Soul doesn't understand. The second language, of course, is German, which Soul will only come to understand when he's farther along into Tod's past.

The reader is left with the problem of deciding who this Soul really is and how he got into Tod's body. To begin the novel, Dr. Friendly has just died and Soul has apparently just come alive inside a resurrected corpse. How can that be? Tod had an old soul which presumably died along with him, and for some reason (never explained) this new Soul has been assigned to or otherwise gained access to his body.⁸ Is Tod resuscitated by Soul's birth? Or is Soul going back over some sort of mortuary archive? The answers to such practical questions seem unknowable, and, indeed beside the point. As mysterious as they are, they are simply part of the general axiom of the novel. There's not much Soul can do about this since he's only "passenger or parasite" in Tod's body. Though he wants a more comfortable association with his host, Soul has no power to arrange it or to affect Tod's behavior. Early on he recognizes "this body won't take orders from this will of mine" (Amis 6).

Though the novel evidently begins with Tod's death, how he died is not totally clear. Some readers say he was a victim of an auto accident, but I think he succumbed in his own garden, "straining out over the rose bed to adjust a loose swathe of clematis on the wooden wall. . . . Look around, I [Soul] say, but his neck ignores me. His eyes have their own agenda" (Amis 6). Tod has perhaps suffered a stroke. The nascent Soul emerges from "blackest sleep" and asks "Where am I heading?" He thinks it might be to a bad place: "I sense the heat of fear and shame. Is this what I'm heading toward?" Then he sets out "on an unutterable journey toward a terrible secret," a secret he does not fully understand until Odilo is back at Auschwitz. "Tod" in German means "death," and "Unverdorben" means "uncorrupted," "innocent"—an ironic name for a doctor who later (earlier) participates in history's greatest betrayal of the Hippocratic oath. And there is an irony inside this irony. Now, as Dr. "Friendly," a name adopted only to escape punishment, the protagonist has gone from doctor-murderer to doctor-healer, valued among his American colleagues as a tirelessly diligent practitioner. Of course, Soul interprets this in reverse: as Tod works over patients, Soul sees him badly wounding them and then sending them home worse off than ever. He concludes that the task of doctors is to "demolish the human body" (Amis 74). When Soul finally arrives at Auschwitz-Birkenau, however,

he reports that “the world . . . has a new habit. It makes sense” (Amis 129). Here he and Odilo create life, heal wounds, send inmates to freedom. Some critics feel that in his descriptions of breathing life back into the victims of Nazi genocide the narrator effects a poetic undoing of the Holocaust, all the more poignant for the reader’s knowledge that it never *can* be undone. Amis, however, has said about his treatment: “‘You present it as a miracle, but the reader is supplying all the tragedy. It was that kind of double-edged effect that I wanted’” (DeCurtis 146). Other critics note that the Nazis believed they *were* “healing,” not the inmates, but the body politic, by ridding it of what they thought were sick elements, the “defective” Jews, Gypsies, Communists. Finally, the discourse ends as it goes back to Odilo’s youth, childhood, infancy (reporting, for example, the mistakes he made as he learned to speak: “we brang, we putten . . . we tooken away”).

Tod and Soul move in opposite temporal directions. For Tod the discourse moves backwards, from his death to his birth; for Soul, the movement is “forward into the past.” And like the rest of us he moves into his own future in ignorance. But the rest of us can come to understand something of our lives retrospectively, whereas Soul has trouble understanding Odilo’s. The implied reader is presented with two narratives—the narrative of Tod’s life, and the narrative of Soul’s effort to uncover and understand that life. Nor does Soul quite grasp the dynamics of his situation as both heterodiegetic narrator of Tod’s story and homodiegetic of his own. He thinks that perhaps it is his own problem: “words denoting motion or process . . . always have me reaching for my inverted commas.” (Note “process” as an apparent synonym of “motion.”) Early on, he wonders why Tod’s backward orientation (like that apparently of the rest of the world) is the opposite of his own. Indeed, only a Japanese intern seems to share Soul’s sense of time’s direction, at least to the extent that he reads Japanese books right to left (as do readers of Hebrew).

Most of the information that Soul directly accesses appears in dreams. But some of it seems to leak out after Tod’s death or later (earlier) during his waking moments. Early on, he oneirically glimpses the figure of a man in a white lab coat and black boots—presumably the regular attire of doctors at Auschwitz. Also at a couple of odd moments, he has an isolated *déjà vu*, or “trigger” moment, about something he does not (yet) know. For instance, during nail-clipping in his New York apartment, “It’s the odor the sawdust gives off, as they cook and crackle in the fire . . .” These are flickering harbingers of the narrator’s future experience of the protagonist’s grisly past.

Soul is a forced witness to the past as it is unveiled, a detective *malgré-lui*, apprehensive but curious about what his future (Tod’s past) holds. But his attitude to the events is distinctly more humane than Tod’s. Not always but sometimes, Soul provides an explicit moral norm against which Tod’s behavior can be measured. For instance, he disagrees with Tod’s “sensing mechanism,” even in America, that disparages Hispanics, Asians, Arabs, Amerindians, blacks, Jews, and his “alerted hostility toward pimps, hookers, junkies, the insane, the clubfooted, the hairlipped, the homosexual male, and the very old. Soul acknowledges, “I’m really a simp in many areas—but I’d say that I was way ahead of Tod on this basic question of human difference.” Despite his long residence in the United States and his successful treatment

of patients, Tod's nasty prejudices apparently linger on. Or do they? Soul's values sometimes go awry on their own, and it's not clear that a full antonymy is meant. In a hypercorrection of "Tod [being] very down on pimps," Soul finds them "outstanding individuals, who, moreover, lend such color to the city scene. . . . Where would the poor girls be without their pimps, who shower money on them and ask for nothing in return?" Soul claims that he is no dummy. Indeed, his mind is well-stocked with "value-free information" like astronomical facts. And in the moral sphere, he is often to be believed, especially in anticipating the horrors to come. Indeed, his intuitions about the approaching Holocaust provide a source of suspense where the backward orientation would seem to dissipate it.

Though Soul is trapped in Unverdorben's body for much of the novel, there is at least one moment when he seemingly escapes it, saying: "I who have no name and no body—I have slipped out from under him and am now scattered above like flakes of ash-blond human hair" (Amis 147). About this puzzling passage, James Diedrick echoes Robert Jay Lifton's explanation of the "Faustian bargain" struck by Nazi doctors. Odilo, Diedrick notes,

struck *his* bargain before Auschwitz, at Schloss Hartheim [where Dr. Mengele's gruesome medical experimentation started]. Significantly, when the narrator returns to the period in Unverdorben's history before his host embraced the ideology of medical killing, he emerges from his dungeon of suppression to hover in the higher regions, like a soul or conscience. A terrible irony is embedded in this image, which associates the ghostly narrator with the Jews whose ashes will soon float through the skies of Auschwitz. (Diedrick 139, original emphasis)

But at Auschwitz Soul returns to his post in Odilo's body and wholeheartedly accepts Nazi values. He does so by reversing cause and effect, for example, seeing the smoke from the incineration of Auschwitz inmates as the beginning of a return to their normal lives.

The odd backward constraint put on the narrator's knowledge raises the question of his reliability. Through the recognition of antonymizing, we quickly come to understand that Soul often gets things wrong with the same innocence as Huck Finn and Henry James's Maisie Farange. At the level of events it constitutes a systemic unreliability—as James Phelan puts it, "a kind of global condition of unreliable narration on the axis of interpretation/perception" (letter to the Narrative list).⁹ The misinterpretation may be quite farfetched: when doctors are examining Tod in the emergency room, Soul thinks they are "admiring" him. What he takes to be a paramedic's "kiss" is really mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Soul's unreliability is particularly interesting because it is as much predictive as judgmental. Since he is a new soul, he comes upon everything with fresh eyes. That is an interesting source of his unreliability—he doesn't know *yet*, so he is often reduced to guessing *before* the fact, and many guesses can't help being wrong. Though Soul may be unreliable with respect to his interpretation of events, he (like Huck) may draw valid moral and psychological conclusions from them. And some of these are quite acute.

A consequence of backwardism/antonymizing is that the reader finds it difficult to determine what in fact has happened. A simple example: In chapter three, Odilo, at the moment called John Young, gets a message from his American contact, “the Reverend,” that he has to change identity and leave New York to avoid capture. He takes a cab, tearing up old “John Young” papers—“Scraps of paper . . . came [not went] twirling in [not out] through the cab window”—(Amis 67). At the lair of the identity card counterfeiter, a “kid” with a monocle, he has to pay double because it’s the weekend, and curses about his new name, “Tod Friendly.” Then we read: “the kid handed over the new papers and a ton of money” (68). Being paid by the kid, instead of paying him, of course, is a clear antonym, but what about the kid’s handing over the new papers? Wouldn’t the backward version of “handed over” be “took back” or the like? Obviously not, but why?

A more serious example concerns Tod’s attitude about the Hippocratic Oath:

One day Tod took from the trash a framed certificate and went and hung it on the toilet doornail. With amusement he surveyed the wrought script—for several minutes. And of course I get a big boost when something like this happens, because words make plain sense even though Tod always reads them backward. (Amis 24)

The text of the oath is then quoted,¹⁰ and Soul observes “Tod had a good laugh at that. . . .” Given all the reversals, it seems not unreasonable to ask whether the sentence is or is not antonymous: did Tod laugh or did he cry? The question is knotty indeed. Most readers would probably say that Tod’s crying seems unlikely—but why? After all, tears form in Odilo’s eyes elsewhere in the novel, and he suffers many moments of anguish throughout. One answer might be that, as part of the general axiom of the novel, Soul always tells the “truth,” and in this case laughing is what he senses Tod is doing. But that’s not the issue. Sometimes Soul’s report is exactly what Tod feels, but sometimes he reports the opposite of what Tod feels. And sometimes it’s hard to know which, since Tod’s behavior before or after offers no implicit support for a decision. In that case, the reader must be resigned to uncertainty.

Even if we agree that Tod did laugh, what is the meaning of the laugh? Any answer must depend on our interpretation of the whole novel, particularly on the degree to which we feel Tod is truly struggling to redeem himself from his crimes at Auschwitz. That he *wants* to repent was ostensibly made clear in an earlier (later) event in Rome before he got to America. His confession to a priest named Father Duryea was explicit—“I still want to heal, Father. Perhaps, that way, by doing good . . .” (Amis 111). But, Soul observes, Odilo’s suffering and fervent prayer stems from fear. It could be fear of heavenly retribution, but also that of being caught by Interpol. Further, there is a hint that Father Duryea’s proffered services go beyond the merely spiritual, that the cleric may be part of a ring helping Nazis get out of Germany. Still, his very decision to return to doctoring, and his obvious success at it, is evidence of a desire to repent.

Even if we insist that Odilo laughed cynically, there remains another uncertainty. Did he laugh cynically at the oath, thus demonstrating that his atonement is

not really sincere? Or is his cynicism directed at himself? In other words, did he laugh ruefully, feeling that despite all his efforts he remains and will always be culpable? A profound question for the overall interpretation of the novel: Is Odilo repentant or not? Or neither: does he vacillate between cynicism and remorse according to his mood? Of course, the general enigma is that Soul, for all his intimacy with Tod's body, does not always know Tod's state of mind. On some important matters he can only surmise, and some of his inferences are too bizarre to enable us to reconstruct a reliable antonym. In that sense, backwardism/antonymism clearly enhances the sense of moral confusion—which of course, is an important leitmotif of the novel.

The evidence that passages reverse time and/or antonymize events may be stronger or weaker. The mealtime passage quoted above quite clearly demonstrates both systems at work because all the signals—our experience with how eating meals usually proceeds, the temporal adverbs, the antonyms, and so on—coalesce and reinforce each other. Similarly, the whole drift of the story tells us that Odilo and his wife Herta have split up, even though the stages of the split-up are reported in reverse order. But in the Hippocratic Oath passage, the evidence for or against antonymizing is weaker. Time-reversal does not seem to elucidate. There are no temporal adverbs and little in the way of context to help. Tod may or may not feel sorry about his past failures to abide by the Oath. Or feel sometimes sorry and sometimes cynical. Evidence of guilt and shame are awash in the novel. Tod's strenuous efforts to help patients, so admired by his American colleagues, suggest a continuing search for redemption. On the other hand, Soul reports Tod's unabated prejudice against a variety of minority groups, including old people. Are these prejudices still carried over from his Nazi past, or has Soul reversed what Tod actually feels? Disliking pimps reversed would be liking them (which Soul does). But disliking old people doesn't square with becoming a specialist in geriatric counseling, as Tod does. Is Tod's counseling cynical or done in good conscience? Does he do it willingly or as part of a self-scourging atonement? And to what ends?

I believe that our decision about whether to interpret a passage as backward/antonymized or not depends on the *strength* of the evidence. Such evidence is not always black or white; rather it is a question of *degree*, from strong to weak. In a way, the decision-making process is like that of figuring out a metaphor or irony. "In reading any figure of this sort, the reader must reconstruct unspoken meanings [in I. A. Richards' term "tenors"] through inferences about surface statements ["vehicles"] that for some reason cannot be accepted at face value" (Booth 22). The vehicle is what "carries" the hidden meaning, the tenor, into the explicit text. The structure of a backward report—what we actually read in the book—is like metaphor's "vehicle," whereas the underlying or "real" event is like metaphor's "tenor." In a metaphor or simile, the vehicle may be more or less immediately comprehensible, that is, lead to a more or less obvious tenor, for example, "love" = "red, red rose." Or, the tenor might be more difficult to determine, as in "reality's overcoat." I believe that the same holds true for ostensible backwardisms and opposites.

The strongest evidence for clear backwardism/antonymizing is where such features as the following apply (and the more of them apply, the more certain we feel about our interpretive decision):

- (1) The context is very confirmative. In the mealtime description, for example, we are told explicitly at the outset that eating was “unattractive.” By “context,” I mean not only the immediate context (as above, in the passage itself), but also the larger context, going up to the level of the whole novel. Deciding what happens at the macro level determines what we accept at the micro level. For example, our interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath event depends on our judgment of the degree to which Odilo has rejected his Nazi values and accepted more humane ones. What is most important is the spirit in which he has done so, in a range from total to merely nominal. Sometimes we are unable to determine because of Odilo’s seemingly conflicting actions and of Soul’s lack of access to his host’s cognition;
- (2) Soul’s backward or opposite interpretation clearly conflicts with our own usual experience; e.g., using soiled plates instead of clean ones, returning groceries to the Superette instead of buying them there;
- (3) Backwardism/antonymizing
 - (a) is repeated in serial moments,
 - (b) and these are part of a given semantic pattern; in the mealtime example they all belong to the category of (reverse) digestion;
 - (c) and the choice is strongly confirmed, i.e. it rests on *absolute* antonymies rather than *near* antonymies or on alternatives from a totally different semantic field (in which case the “real” event is unclear and may even become a flip-of-the-coin matter). Examples: “soiled” is a strong antonym of “clean,” “to cool” of “to heat,” and so on. On the other hand, the possible antonym of “collect” that comes first to my mind, is “disperse” or “disseminate” rather than “dump” or “toss into.” Still, the latter are near enough to qualify. “Massage” and “sculpt” are more problematic as antonyms for what goes on in the mouth, presumably “tasting,” “chewing,” and “swallowing.” We need an imaginative stretch to understand them. (It is important to note that Amis prepares the way for these more far-fetched antonymies by starting with unexceptional ones).
- (4) Time-reversal phrases are clearly arranged in a sequence marked by time indicators like “next,” “later/earlier,” etc.
- (5) How much we feel that Soul’s interpretation is accurate at this particular juncture, compared to our own capacity to infer what “really” happened.

Not only stasis statements prove indifferent to backwards or antonymic orientation. Even certain process statements may be. And that gives rise to another kind of uncertainty perhaps endemic to backwardism. We’ve already seen one in the Hippocratic Oath segment. Soul reports “One day Tod took from the trash a framed certificate and went and hung it on the toilet doornail.” But shouldn’t that go backwards—shouldn’t he “remove” the certificate “from” the doornail and *then put* it in the trash? Or consider the beginning of chapter 3 (Amis 66) concerning Odilo’s “arrival” in New York: “We eased in under the city: Grand Central, where the train

sighed, and the passengers sighed, one by one. The first people to leave went off hastily, while others lingered, girding themselves for the streets" (Amis 66). A forward reading would interpret the sentence, "We eased in under the city . . ." as Odilo's trip from the boat dock to Grand Central station. But we assume from the broader story context that "easing in" must really mean "easing out" or "away from," that is, *leaving* New York City for Boston, under duress, with a new identity. But then how do we understand the rest of the sentence, and the one that follows: "Where the train sighed, and the passengers sighed, one by one. The first people to leave went off hastily, while others lingered, girding themselves for the streets"? If Tod is leaving rather than arriving in New York, aren't his co-passengers entering rather than exiting the terminal? And are we supposed to read their "sighing" as its opposite, say, "sucking in their breaths" or "cheering"? Do the "first people" "enter lingeringly," while the others do so hastily? Clearly Amis's backward/antonymic reporting is selective. We tend to accept the apparent disparity (perhaps not even notice it) because of our need to get on with the story, in other words to opt for narrative coherence. That means we must recognize one more system at work in the novel: not only the backward/antonymizing orientation but also the *diegetically forward* orientation we bring over from other narratives we've read. These systems are always in tension in *Time's Arrow*, but especially so when the reversal of meaning is not supported by evidence from the other sources mentioned above—the context of the narrative as a whole, temporal adverbs, and so on. This ambiguity would never happen in *Happy End* because the backward/antonymizing orientation is constantly reinforced by the visible presence of the existents, especially the reversed movements of the characters, plus the narrator's antonymizing voice-over interpretation of events.

The description of passengers sighing and entering the streets—even though the verbs are punctual—acts as a stasis, not a process statement. But it seems easy to accept the discrepancy, perhaps because the form and function of train stations is so familiar. In other words, we treat the movements of the crowd as dispensable satellites, attached to the kernel¹¹ marked by "arrive," to fill out a scene with naturalistic detail. In any case, the antonymizing principle is restored in the next two sentences when Soul misinterprets Tod's secretive behavior: "Tod held his head down for a couple of minutes, then sloped off. Among the shadows of the platform he kept wrenching his neck around—for the first time in his life he seemed to be trying to look where he was going." From Soul's antonymic perspective, Tod's wrenching his neck to see what's behind him (the police? the FBI? the CIA?) becomes simply watching where he is going.

Temporal movement is effected most clearly by punctual verbs, especially if yoked with sentence modifiers like "next," or "earlier," or "then." On the other hand, plot-time may be *paused*, in which case its direction is no longer determinable. However incapable he may be of shaping events, Soul is always ready with commentary: judging, predicting, explaining, generalizing, even pontificating about them. Commentary arrests time. The flight of the plot's arrow has frozen momentarily. There is no event to reverse. (This is true even if the comments are wrong—misinterpretations, misjudgments, misgeneralizations, and so on.)

Here are two examples of Soul's commentary that halt plot movement:

(1) Soul's *prediction* of what awaits him in New York (the last sentence of which is the novel's subtitle):

I am traveling toward his secret. I know it will be bad. It will be bad, and not intelligible. But I will know one thing about it (and at least the certainty brings comfort). I *will* know *how* bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offense. (Amis 63)

(2) There is a secret and it turns out to be bad, whether one reads forwards or backwards. Soul's generalization is about the real world—which, like any generalization, may or may not be true but certainly may certainly sounds wise enough:

For most of our lives we are doctors to ourselves. Not when we're old and everything feels so numb and dead, and decency and disgust forbid inquiry. And not when we are young, and the body is an unexamined ecstasy. Just the time in between. (Amis 89–90)

From the ethical point of view, Soul's most important comments are his *judgments*, especially when he disagrees with Nazi ideology or Tod's bigotry and chauvinism in America (if in fact Tod is bigoted and chauvinistic). For instance, at Schloss Hartheim, the site of Nazi experimentation with "deviants"—the mental cases, the clubfooted, the cleft-palated—Odilo and his colleagues say, "There is such a thing . . . as life that is unworthy of life"; but Soul comments, "I don't know about that . . ." (Amis 145). On the other hand, the degree to which Soul is corrupted by life at Auschwitz clearly emerges as Odilo starts working in "Uncle Pepi's" (Dr. Josef Mengele's) own lab, room 1, Block 10. Recanting his own earlier premonition, Soul says: "I recognized room 1 from my dreams . . . This is the room, I had thought, where something mortal would be miserably decided. But dreams are playful and love to poke fun at the truth . . . Already showing sign of life, patients were brought in, one by one" (Amis 127). Early on, Soul, just emerging from Tod's deathbed, had a dreadful dream about what Odilo had been up to. But "now," at the camp itself, antonymizing helps him correct his earlier "erroneous" view. The dead inmates are coming back to life as "patients" and will soon be sent home completely "cured."

An amusing example is Soul's misdescription of the Manhattan taxi-cab scene. Again there are punctual verbs like "thank," but the overriding context is static because this not a single event but a generalizing iteration of the same event:

The business with the yellow cabs, it surely looks like an unimproveable deal. They're always there when you need one even in the rain or when the theaters are closing. They pay you up front, no questions asked. They always know where you're going. They're great. No wonder we stand there, for hours on end, waving goodbye, or saluting—saluting this fine service. The streets are full

of people with their arms raised, drenched and weary, thanking cabs. Just one hitch: they're always taking me places I don't want to go. (Amis 65–66)

Finally, of course, we must ask whether Amis's extreme Sustained reversal of time is merely a stunt, a one-trick pony, or a technique of genuine esthetic consequence. What does backward/antonymizing discourse add to a story that could not have been narrated with equal pungency in a more traditional way? Narratologists are not obliged to evaluate the relations between discourse and story, but it seems unsatisfactory to simply describe an odd kind of discourse without considering its esthetic implications, and thereby its viability. What is the motivation for the extreme Sustained reversals of *Time's Arrow* or even for the modest Episodic reversals of *Betrayal*? What do authors gain from employing backwards and/or antonymizing discourse—with all its extra burdening of the reader's attention and patience? How far can an author expect the reader to go in deciding whether a passage is reversed or not? Richardson notes "the drama of determining what exactly is going on," as in the line, "A day will come when you see him for the first time." He asks does that mean "never again?"

It is interesting to see how critics have answered these questions. Three justifications seem most frequent:

One (cited above) is that a backwards/antonymizing discourse destroys possibilities of Suspense (vs. Surprise, [Chatman 59–62]). Suspense entails "foreshadowing." With Surprise there is no warning. As Alfred Hitchcock, "the master of suspense," explained, suspense builds up tension by disclosing what will or at least might happen. An author hints at future events, leaving it to the audience to worry if, when, or where it will happen. In *Sabotage* (1936), Hitchcock's adaptation of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, the director works it both ways. Young Stevie unwittingly carries a time bomb on a bus to the London Underground; the episode is intercut with shots of Big Ben, whose hands relentlessly approach the minute when the bomb will go off. The audience apprehensively waits in suspense, but confident that he will somehow escape. But he doesn't, and that's the surprise. The bus explodes, killing everyone. A Hollywood cliché, the traditional last-minute rescue of the innocent, is subverted, and it's shocking. And many audiences complained.¹²

"Spiegelgeschichte" does not employ either of these effects. Aichinger's intention is to give the narrator the power of moral instruction by reversing the events so that justice can be done to the young heroine. Starting with the terrible consequences of her pregnancy and abortion and working backward through an otherwise uneventful life, the narrator at once reassures the poor girl (albeit posthumously), and admonishes the bourgeois public about its prejudice. The technique allows the narrator to shame people who condemn unwed mothers.

As for *Happy End*, however surprised the audience may be upon seeing a decapitated head returned to its body, the reversal of events soon becomes more or less predictable. Even the reassembly of the wife's body parts seems too much of a joke to cause much suspense or shock.

In *Time's Arrow*, the traditional suspense of "What finally happens?" is obliterated at the outset once we surmise that Tod has died. But another source of suspense arises, namely, who is this investigative narrator and what's he going to find out

about Tod? Backwards/antonymizing narration intensifies our sense of how Nazi ideology twisted the minds of young physicians like Odilo who might otherwise have treated patients humanely. How that could happen is a source of (at least) intellectual suspense. Odilo's earlier (later) transformation from innocent youth to Auschwitz monster is, from the outset, inexplicable, and that seems to be Amis's point. How could such a thing happen? How could a practitioner of the most highly respected and idealistic profession be so dehumanized by political ideology?

As for Surprise: a few readers might be shocked to discover that the estimable Dr. Tod Friendly is really Odilo Unverdorben, an Auschwitz butcher. But for most, this possibility is dissipated in advance, if for no other reason than the ubiquitous practice of giving novels' plots away. Realistically, how many readers can be expected to begin this novel without knowing that it's a "backward" account of the life of an escaped Nazi doctor? The very publisher's blurb on the back cover of the paperback edition tells us that "Tod's life races backwards toward the one appalling moment in modern history when such reversals make sense."¹³ In an ideal narratological world, we would close our ears to advertisements and start the novel with no notion of how its discourse works. But the dynamics of the publishing industry makes that pretty much impossible.

A second proffered critical justification is that backwards narration increases Intensity. In its simplest form the argument goes as follows (from Vincent Canby's early review of *Betrayal*): "Though the film moves backward through time, it doesn't have the lugubrious manner of an extended flashback. It moves forward from a sense of lovelessness and loss to discover, at the film's end, the initial ecstasy, which, knowing what we do, is all the more haunting." (Canby). "Lugubrious manner of an extended flashback" suggests that, independently of their contents, flashbacks are *intrinsically* lugubrious, which, of course, is nonsense. Narrative techniques have no particular meaning or quality independent of the content they organize. But "all the more haunting" is clearly a way of expressing thematic intensity. Canby implies that the novelty of *Betrayal*'s plot reversal preempts any recourse to the usual adultery cliché.

Intensification, of course, is a recognizable effect, and a good study of how it works would be most welcome. Like other narrative effects it should be a subject of detailed text analysis rather than of clichéd claims. Which aspects of a specific narrative are intensified? How would a text go if it were narrated in a different manner? Which topoi are invoked to help us understand the maneuvers of the discourse? Intensification depends very much on a narrative's particular intention. In the case of *Betrayal*, starting at the end insures that the audience will accept—as a function of primacy—that once the backwards/antonymizing method is recognized, prior events will become relatively predictable. Through sensing in advance what might happen, we feel a sense of inevitability, even of fatalism—heroic in the case of *Oedipus Rex*, comic in that of *Happy End*, tragic-comic in that of *Betrayal*. In the latter, the big question is not "what happened?" but "who betrayed whom? When? And in what sense?" Transferring discourse-beginning to story-ending focuses our attention on the particulars of the middle. Emma and Jerry betray Robert, the husband, but in what sense were the lovers betrayed by Robert, and what does "betrayal" mean when a husband doesn't reveal that he knows he's being cuckolded? The beginning and denouement of the film are book-ends framing that question.

Intensification is a motive for *defamiliarization*, as the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky named it (*ostranenie*), a practice well-defined by someone in *Wikipedia*: “the artistic technique of forcing the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way, in order to enhance perception of the familiar” (the Holocaust was not “common,” but it certainly is familiar to many people). This strangeness makes mundane subjects interesting once again by somehow recasting them so that the reader must work to understand them. Amis not only employed this effect but actually explained why he did so:

Why I spend so long before I get to Auschwitz is to try to familiarize the reader with a backward-in-time world. When time’s arrow is traveling the other way, we see the nonsensical, backward world, and it’s the kind that is redeemed by things like Auschwitz. You present it as a miracle, but the reader is supplying all the tragedy. . . . It was that kind of double-edged effect that I wanted. You’re meeting it as if for the first time, even though we know that this is all much-covered territory. (as quoted by DeCurtis 146)

Clearly, “meeting . . . as if for the first time . . . much-covered territory” is precisely the response that defamiliarization means to effect in the reader. Other critics joined in:

The sea change that chronological reversal has on causality and moral responsibility enables Amis to defamiliarize an event the shock value of which ha[d] become blunted by reiteration . . . the very playfulness with which he treats the horror of the death camp . . . makes it strange, both linguistically, in Shklovsky’s definition of *ostranenie*, and narratively. (Finney 1995)¹⁴

The third and most common justification mounted by critics is that reversal matches form to content. In the case of *Time’s Arrow*, this venerable theory works by slipping from one sense of “backwards” to another. The critics, whether consciously or not, moved easily between the sense “toward behind one or toward the past” and that of “primitively reactionary,” especially as “imbued with strong and irrational impulses” (*Webster’s Third International*). Here’s an example:

In attempting to interpret Nazi mentality from a non-Fascist conceptual framework, one would seemingly have to jolt into reversal one’s own moral assumptions, and thereby metaphorically screen the historical moment through film [that] is running backward . . . Through such intellectual reversals, one learns that Nazi rationalization of genocidal violence was once considered forward thinking. (Harris)

Another kind of reading sees Soul’s backward/antonymizing narration as quite the opposite, namely “a poetic undoing of the Holocaust, all the more poignant for the reader’s knowledge that it never *can* be undone” (Diedrick 134). “Reversal” is perhaps not the best word to describe the analogy between discourse-form and story-

content. Amis himself prefers “inversion”: “[h]ere was a psychotically inverted world, and if you did it backward in time, it would make sense” (as quoted by DeCurtis 146). Critics followed suit: “The novel’s inversions of causality and chronology seem perfectly in keeping with the Nazis’ inversion of morality” (Lehman 15).¹⁵

Soul recognizes that Odilo’s commitment to Nazi logic matches the eagerness of Germans to follow the vicious directives of their Führer. Like many of his countrymen, Odilo grew up at a time and place that sought the safety of the herd. At Auschwitz, being one of many enabled him to ignore guilty feelings about the evil he was doing. Recently discovered photos of the Auschwitz team’s moments of rest and relaxation—Dr. Mengele among pretty women and dapper officers just outside the camp—show how little they thought of themselves as murderers. “Eine gruppe von Mensche macht alles möglich [A group of people makes everything possible]” (In a shrewd moment before his arrival in Auschwitz, Soul offers an analysis that even Daniel Goldhagen might approve: “Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under the cover of numbers. He could never be an exception; he is dependent on the health of his society. . . .”)

Still, such insights do not keep Soul himself from falling under the general sway. By Nazi logic, the Jews had to be eliminated in an efficient and speedy manner to make a new race of “cleansed” Germans. This crazy theory addles Soul’s mind, as it did Odilo’s. Soul too comes to accept the slaughter of Jews as essential to the reconstruction of the nation. Destruction becomes creation: the tawdry mechanism—the edicts and laws which ultimately led to the final solution—are supposed to result, for Soul, no less than for the rest of the Fatherland, in a magical revival of the German spirit by mysterious primal means.¹⁶ Indeed, Soul takes the logic a step farther: even the Jews will end up happy after a short stay in Heaven, and come back to their normal lives on earth.¹⁷ His only qualms at Auschwitz are esthetic, not moral:

What tells me that this is right? What tells me that all the rest was wrong? Certainly not my aesthetic sense. I would never claim that Auschwitz-Berkenau-Monowitz was good to look at. Or to listen to, or to smell, or to taste, or to touch. . . . Creation is easy. Also ugly . . . Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with fire. (Amis 119–120)

The novel proposes that Nazi regression to social barbarism could corrupt not only physicians, but even innocent newborn souls. And it is a lifelong corruption: well before (after) Auschwitz, anxious to overcome his squeamishness about the “violence” (healing) done to Tod’s New York patients, Soul takes “on the question of violence, this most difficult question. Intellectually I can just about accept that violence is salutary, that violence is “good” (26). But it takes a struggle for the innocent to make such an adjustment: early on (later) at least, he can do so “intellectually” but apparently not quite emotionally.

The Nazis' maniacal reversal of values is evident in slogans like "Arbeit macht frei," a sign that hung above the Auschwitz gate. Perhaps we can excuse Soul a bit because he was drawn into the abyss not by choice but by how he came into being. He has no recourse but to follow Odilo, who follows *his* Leader. Of course, Odilo's earlier life was also relatively innocent, and he himself was duped by the regime. But he does not have Soul's excuse. He was not unnaturally dragged into the world and imprisoned in a corpse. He was born free, and lived as a full human being with all his parts intact, including his old soul. Though obviously at a heavy price, he could have refused to serve in Auschwitz or even rejected the New Order. Amis said in an interview that the narrator is "the soul [Odilo] should have had" (DeCurtis 146). But that must mean the being who comes innocently into the world at Tod's death, long before (after) Soul is corrupted by Auschwitz.

Like *Betrayal*, *Time's Arrow* eliminates suspense at both ends but reintroduces it in the middle, as Soul begins to fathom his host's true character. Once we understand that the ruling topos of the novel is the Holocaust, we can anticipate the plot's development all too well. Amis's principal resource was Robert Jay Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors*, which explains their evil deeds in terms of the German concept of the *doppelgänger*. A "second self" existing alongside the original self can, in extreme situations, become "the usurper from within and replace the original self until it 'speaks' for the entire person" (Lifton 420). The Nazi doctor struck a Faustian bargain with Hitler: "to do the killing, he offered an opposing self (the evolving Auschwitz self)—a self that, in violating his own prior moral standards, met with no effective resistance and in fact made use of his original skills." For instance, Auschwitz doctors claimed that they were "excising gangrenous organs to save the social body. The very position is built on a manifest absurdity—a vision and practice of killing to heal." In *Time's Arrow*, Soul's backward trip similarly splits his personality.

Like any technical device, backward/antonymizing narration has no independent meaning or value. By itself it can neither improve nor degrade a narrative's quality. A hypothesis of literary theory that may have weathered the storms of ideology is that literary value resides in a happy marriage of form and content. Neither "Spiegelgeschichte" nor *Happy End* are first-rate narrative art. Especially the latter: the gags are local, and tire rather quickly. Even if you know a bit of Czech history, *Happy End* is thin, evoking little but laughter at sight gags, milking a stereotypical farce plot about cuckolded husbands. A few critics rejected *Time's Arrow* on these grounds, but most thought it qualifies as art because its narrative style fit well with an important theme.

Even for narratologists, backwardism/antonymizing is doubtless a minor blip on the screen, an extreme kind of anachrony stretched to its logical conclusion. Clearly, strong thematic motivation is required to justify its use. In an interview, Amis said that the Holocaust seemed "the only story that would gain meaning backwards" (Trueheart B1). But, doubtless, future artists will achieve a successful integration with new kinds of content. Interest in the technique seems to be growing. In any case, Backwardism and Antonymism have already proven viable instruments of narrative structure.

ENDNOTES

1. The sequence from *Fantasia* can be seen on YouTube.
2. Adam Cadre writes *Time's Arrow* is "not the sort of backwards narrative employed in works such as *Betrayal* and *Memento*, in which the scenes are arranged in reverse chronological order but in which each scene is related from start to finish. This is the sort of backwards narrative that is like watching a movie unwind" (<http://adamcadre.ac/calendar/12132b.html>).
3. Elizabeth Jane Howard was Kingsley Amis's second wife; during their marriage she helped her stepson Martin acquire a taste for literature. See Corinna Honan's 2007 interview with Howard in the *Daily Mail*.
4. My thanks to Mark Berger, who saw this film at the San Francisco Film Festival in the late sixties. The DVD can be purchased at superhappyfun.com for \$13.
5. "Look at the Harlequins!" cited by Maya Slater.
6. A plot summary in "correct" order is supplied by James Diedrick in chapter 4 of his book (2004).
7. Sue Vice recognized the two different systems in backwardism in her book on Holocaust fiction (2000), and agrees with Maya Slater that many "antonyms" are only weakly opposite the word(s) they replace: "Not only are the actions themselves reversed, that is, run backwards, but the verbs describing them are too—they are morally as well as literally turned around. . . . The cruelty or destruction involved are formally disguised, but actually highlighted." Maya Slater has argued that Amis's choice of verb does not always accurately convey backwards motion; on the contrary, it seems that the narrator has particularly chosen verbs which will act as sites of the struggle for meaning . . ." (Vice 15).
8. Even Diedrick, the most comprehensive of Amis's interpreters, has difficulty with Soul's origin and relation to Odilo. The whole novel, he writes, is "an audacious variation on the folk wisdom that just before death individuals see their entire lives flash before them." But there is no evidence that Odilo remains conscious before he dies or recalls his own history in a flash. At the same time, Diedrick says Odilo "'gives birth' to a doppelganger (literally 'double-goer'), a childlike innocent who relives Unverdorben's life—in reverse." But the metaphor "gives birth" conceals more than it reveals. What does it mean? Giving birth seems to ascribe some kind of agency or at least awareness to Odilo. But in the very next sentence, Diedrick writes, "He [Soul] inhabits Unverdorben, who is unaware of his presence" (133). How did he give birth without being aware that he did? One alternative is that Unverdorben is unaware of Soul's presence because he's dead. The other is that somehow Soul incarnates Unverdorben and carries him back on his journey of inquiry into the doctor's past. But without Odilo's knowledge? Neither of these seems very satisfying.
9. And he continues: "Because the character narrator gets the temporal order wrong, he gets the relation between cause and event wrong. It's even arguable that in many cases the reversal of the temporal order means that he's unreliable on the axis of facts and events. And these unreliabilities have consequences for his un/reliability on the axis of ethics (though that issue is especially complicated, given the split between the character and the narrator). All of these things have consequences for the activity and experience of the implied reader/authorial audience that simply wouldn't be there if Amis told the story following the standard direction . . ." An amusing twist on "reliable" is offered by Richard Menke (1960) "this fictional soul is a supremely reliable narrator; he may be relied upon to get things diametrically, and often poignantly, wrong."
10. "I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing and harm . . ." (25).
11. For the terms "kernel" and "satellite" see Chatman 53–55.
12. Hitchcock disturbed a lot of audiences by killing the boy off in so peremptory a manner. See Osteen (2000).

13. I must say that I cannot figure out the force of “makes sense.”
14. <<http://www.csulb.edu/%7Ebhfinner/Amis1.html>>. In an interesting letter, Brian Richardson writes, “It seems to me that telling a story in reverse sequence is perhaps most of all a powerful tool for defamiliarization, and makes us see the most ordinary sequences in a fresh manner. When I taught freshman composition, I would always have my students do one such assignment; something as ordinary as taking a shower became quite compelling when the order was reversed. Also it gave students a better sense of causal connection between episodes.”
15. A milder version of the argument by analogy is this: “By progressing backwards, the narrative style in and of itself comments on the Nazi’s paradoxical version of ‘progress’—that is, the revitalization of archaic myths in the name of national renewal” (Harris).
16. In another twist of the “giving birth” metaphor, Greg Harris argues that Odilo’s “creation” of Jews should be interpreted this way: “Tod’s Nazi past has nevertheless taught him another way of affecting the laws of reproduction. He has mastered, in fact, an eerie means of male birthing, but his contact with creation comes by way of his control over what forms of life are permitted a right to life, and those forms of life that must be destroyed. Nazism’s patrilineal theme is reflected in the words of Joseph Goebbels, who served as the ‘Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda’ in charge of the ‘intellectual and cultural life of the State’ . . . With the conception of a militarized, National Womb that gives birth to a nation through war, the German soldier-male comes to perceive himself as playing an even more essential role in reproduction than the German woman” (Harris).
17. Soul’s reverse conceit—that the Jews were brought back from heaven to resume their previous lives—was ironically prefigured in a poem by the Israeli poet Dan Pagis called “Draft of a Reparations Agreement”: For the Israelis seeking reparations from Germany, “Everything will be returned to its place,/paragraph after paragraph./The scream back into the throat./The gold teeth back to the gums./The terror./The smoke back to the tin chimney and further on and inside/back to the hollow of the bones./and already you will be covered with skin and sinews and you will/live./look, you will have your lives back./sit in the living room./ read the evening paper.” I thank Robert Alter for this reference as well as to that of *Mr. Mani*.

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