As Susan Rubin Suleiman notes in her essay in this volume, historians and artists working on the Holocaust have recently been giving more attention to the difficult task of comprehending the psychology of the perpetrators. When undertaken by novelists, as Suleiman shows in her insightful analysis of Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes*, this effort inevitably raises significant ethical and aesthetic issues. How can the novelist plausibly render the psychology of the perpetrator? How does history constrain the fictional representation of perpetrators, and how does fiction provide some freedom from the constraints of history? What are the ethical and aesthetic consequences of narrative techniques that put the reader in the position of sharing the perpetrator’s perspective, even if the novelist marks that perspective as unreliable? These challenging questions are for now best addressed not at the level of general theory but rather at the level of theoretically informed interpretation of individual cases such as we find in Suleiman’s analysis of Littell’s novel through the lens of performance. Once scholars have examined a wide range of representations from a variety of theoretical perspectives, we will be in a better position to draw broader conclusions. Consequently, in this essay, I propose to contribute to the same general project as Suleiman’s by using principles and concepts of a rhetorical approach to narrative to analyze the ethics and aesthetics of one of the earlier attempts to capture the psychology of the perpetrator: Martin Amis’s representation of a Nazi doctor in his 1991 novel *Time’s Arrow*. 

Time’s Arrow is an especially intriguing case because Amis foregrounds the psychological state of Odilo Unverdorben (the last name is German for “uncorrupted” or “innocent”) by emphasizing his dissociation of personality and using one side of that personality, a figure I shall, following Seymour Chatman, call Soul, to narrate the action. What’s more, Soul experiences time backwards, and thus he recounts Unverdorben’s life from the moment just before his death to the moments of his earliest consciousness. In my analysis, I will begin with a sketch of my rhetorical approach to narrative, then move to consider some general reasons for—and consequences of—Amis’s technique, and then, for the bulk of the essay, undertake a more specific examination of its workings. This examination will include a detailed account of how Amis manages the relation between reliability and unreliability and how he treats Unverdorben’s behavior at Auschwitz. My goal is to demonstrate that Amis’s technique is not just a clever conceit but part and parcel of an artistic response to the Holocaust that is at once aesthetically innovative and ethically valuable.

A Rhetorical Approach to Narrative

Some Key Concepts

This approach conceives of narrative as a multi-leveled purposeful communication from an implied author to an authorial and ultimately an actual audience. This conception leads to my interest in the cognitive, affective, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of reading (the main levels in the multi-leveled communication), dimensions that I analyze through attention to narrative judgments and narrative progressions. Judgments open up the different levels of communication, and progression governs the arc of the authorial audience’s experience of these various dimensions from a narrative’s beginning through its ending. More specifically, I define narrative as somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened, and I define narrative progression as the synthesis of textual dynamics and readerly dynamics.

Textual dynamics are the workings of the mechanisms in the story (instabilities between, among, or within characters) or in the discourse (tensions of belief, value, or knowledge among authors, narrators, and audiences) that generate, sustain, and bring to resolution (however partial) a narrative’s movement. Readerly dynamics are (1) the audience’s experiences of different kinds of narrative interest and of the different levels of communication (cognitive, affective, ethical, and aesthetic) and (2) the trajectory of those
experiences over the course of the narrative. I identify three main kinds of narrative interest: mimetic, thematic, and synthetic. The mimetic involves our interest in the characters and events as what Aristotle called imitations. The thematic involves our interest in the characters and events as a means to explore ideas or beliefs about the world. The synthetic involves our interest in characters and events as artificial constructions of an authorial design. The rhetorical approach does not posit any particular relation among these interests as optimal but instead emphasizes that different successful narratives can establish different relations among these three components as they pursue their different purposes.

Narratives with surprise endings provide a good illustration of the mutual influence of textual and readerly dynamics and of the reason that I regard progression as the synthesis of these two sets of dynamics. In these narratives, authors manage the movement of instabilities and tensions so that readers will experience the surprise, and readers who follow that movement are surprised or not according to the effectiveness of that management.

Narrative judgments are the bridge between textual dynamics and readerly dynamics because they are encoded into narrative texts and decoded by readers; in addition, the anticipation of readerly judgments and their consequences influences authorial choices about the textual dynamics. Three types of readerly judgment are central to the rhetorical experience of narrative:

A. Interpretive judgments about the nature of events and other elements of the narrative.
B. Ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions.
C. Aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts.

Rhetorical theory seeks to identify the judgments that readers are guided to make, the consequences of those judgments for the ongoing interaction of the textual and readerly dynamics, and the ways in which those judgments and their interactions point toward the larger purposes of the narrative.

The What and (Some of) the Why of Amis’s Technique

Apart from its detailed workings, Amis’s technique of backward narration has two significant and interrelated general effects: (1) It implicitly comments on the backward logic of National Socialism, the reversal of values that
led to the systematic extermination of millions of people. This massive genocide is such a crime against nature, Amis suggests, that it leads to the reversal of a fundamental natural process, the forward movement of time. To enter the orbit of National Socialism is to enter a world of inverted logic, or in the words of Primo Levi, which Amis uses as the title for chapter 5 detailing the experience of Auschwitz, a world in which one can say with justice “here there is no why” (hier ist kein warum).\(^2\) (2) The technique defamiliarizes our perceptions and our understandings of every event it describes, from the most mundane (shopping in a grocery store, hailing a taxicab) to the most horrific (the killings at Auschwitz). It requires us to correct all the reversals of order and the concomitant misunderstandings of cause and effect, and as we make these corrections, we see things afresh. In this respect, Amis’s project entails not only rendering the psychology of the perpetrator but also refreshing his audience’s perceptions of the Holocaust. To be sure, Amis’s technique does yield some diminishing returns—once readers get used to inverting temporal order, the defamiliarization becomes less pronounced. But such a decline also helps to shift our attention from the technique itself to what it is representing. In addition, Amis retains the ability to tap into the defamiliarizing effects of the technique by varying other elements of it—including the situations in which Soul finds himself and his perspective on Odilo (sometimes Soul says “he” and “I,” and sometimes “we” and “us.”). I will return to this point when I consider the narration of the events at Auschwitz.

Even as the narration performs these general functions, Amis specifically motivates it through Unverdorben’s experience as a doctor in Auschwitz. As Amis explains in the novel’s afterword, he had been “considering the idea of telling the story of a man’s life backward in time” (167), but it was only after reading Robert Jay Lifton’s study *The Nazi Doctors* that he was able to execute the idea. Indeed, Amis notes that “my novel would not and could not have been written without” Lifton’s book (167). Lifton argues that the Nazi doctors managed to function in the camps only through a psychological doubling that allowed them to compartmentalize their behavior in such a way that they could both maintain some level of humanity and participate in systematic genocide. One compartment contained their technical skill and task orientation, while another contained the emotional and ethical dimensions of their being. The strong compartmentalization allowed them to function, but it also induced a significant dissociation of personality.

Amis’s innovation is to take Lifton’s findings and give them another turn of the screw by creating a protagonist with such an extremely dissociated personality that the side of himself tuned into emotions and ethics
experiences time backwards. More specifically, this narrator is aware that he is connected to Unverdorben because he is physically bound to him and because he has access to Unverdorben’s feelings and dreams. But he also feels separate from Unverdorben because he does not have access to his host’s conscious thoughts and does not have any control over his actions. Furthermore, Unverdorben, who is initially called Tod Friendly (friendly death), and then John Young and Hamilton de Souza before we discover his given name, remains wholly unaware of the narrator’s presence.

These features of the technique give rise to a progression that moves simultaneously along two different but interrelated tracks: the first involves the instabilities and tensions surrounding Soul’s quest to make sense of the life he is suddenly thrown into, a quest that includes his interest in discovering the ethical nature of his host and such things as the closely guarded secret of his host’s life. This first track includes the tensions resulting from the global and local unreliability of the backward narration. With respect to readerly dynamics, this track orients Amis’s audience in one temporal direction, that of the reverse chronology. The second track of the progression involves the set of instabilities in Unverdorben’s life as it follows the usual direction of time’s arrow. With respect to readerly dynamics, following this track means not only re-orienting our temporal direction but also properly configuring the events of Odilo’s life as he lives it forward. Thus, what functions for Soul as forward movement in time and an advancing understanding of Unverdorben’s developing life simultaneously functions for Amis’s audience as backward movement and backstory. Furthermore, as Soul moves in his forward direction, we continually seek to configure the unfolding elements of backstory into a larger coherent narrative of Unverdorben’s life. Following the two tracks simultaneously puts a heavy cognitive load on us, one that requires extensive and often complex interpretive judgments, and, as we shall see, similarly extensive and complex ethical judgments. Our aesthetic judgments will depend to a great extent on whether we find the intense cognitive labor of following the progression to be appropriately rewarded.

Because Soul has access to Unverdorben’s feelings, he is not exactly on the outside looking in. Instead it would be more accurate to say that he is on the inside looking in, but doing so by looking from the wrong temporal direction. Furthermore, as I noted above, within this basic setup, Amis varies the relationship between Soul and Unverdorben. Sometimes Soul treats Unverdorben as a wholly other being, but at other times as the larger part of himself, and on a few occasions as someone with whom he has just about fully merged. In addition, as the discussion so far suggests, Amis constructs a doubled experiencing-I: first, Soul as the experiencer who seeks to make
sense of Unverdorben and his actions, and, second, Unverdorben as an expe-
riencer containing but also distinct from Soul.

Describing the what and the why of the technique also entails analyz-
ing the relation between the mimetic and the synthetic components of the
narrative. At first glance, Amis’s technique, which Brian Richardson would
regard as an example of “unnatural narration,” suggests that Amis wants
to plant his stake firmly in the territory of the synthetic. But a closer look
reveals that in all other respects, Amis follows the conventions of standard
mimesis. The characters in the storyworld, including Odilo, are bound by
all the other rules and restrictions on human powers of action, and they all
have recognizable human psychologies. In addition, the novel’s storyworld
has a familiar and documentable history and geography that includes the
Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, and such historical figures as Josef Mengele
and Eduard Wirths. Consequently, our readerly interest in the synthetic
becomes subordinated to our interest in the mimetic and the thematic. We
can better understand what Amis does with those interests after a look at the
detailed workings of Amis’s narration.

The How and (More of) the Why of the Technique

Addressing the how of the technique entails (1) identifying the logic under-
lying Amis’s decision to divide the narration into eight chapters that coin-
cide with the eight different temporal points from which Soul offers his
retrospective narration; and (2) unpacking the relation between reliable and
unreliable narration. It’s worth noting that Amis further divides his eight
installments of Soul’s narration into the three distinct parts of his novel. Part
I, which consists of chapters 1–3, follows Unverdorben’s life in the eastern
United States after World War II. The first chapter starts at the moment of his
death and goes backward approximately six years to recount his time in Well-
port, a suburb of Boston. The second focuses on his work as a doctor in Well-
port and his series of unsatisfying love affairs. The third gives Soul’s account
of Unverdorben’s time in New York, where he is a successful doctor and an
active womanizer. Part II consists of Unverdorben’s experiences in Europe
as an adult. Chapter 4 traces his movements (backward) from the journey
by boat across the Atlantic to various stops that bring him to the edge of
the experience of Auschwitz. Chapter 5 focuses on Auschwitz. Chapters 6
and 7 focus on the highlights of Unverdorben’s pre-Auschwitz life, especially
his training as a doctor at Schloss Hartheim, the place where the Nazis first
experimented with different modes of mass extermination, and his marriage
to a woman named Herta. Part III consists only of the short, final chapter 8, which is split between Unverdorben’s visit to Auschwitz at age thirteen and his early experiences at age three.

We can understand the logic of Amis’s choice to have Soul narrate from discrete temporal moments by considering its effect on the first track of the progression. As Soul observes Unverdorben early in the narration, he notes that Unverdorben frequently feels shame and fear, that he is unable to have a relationship with a woman that is both durable and satisfying, and that he gets annual letters from “some guy in New York” (16) that report only on the weather. In short, the narration by installment allows Amis to introduce significant tensions about Unverdorben’s past and to resolve those tensions very slowly, even as the resolutions of the tensions—as, for example, when we find out that Unverdorben has indeed been a Nazi doctor—increase our understanding of the instabilities along the second track of the progression, the one concerned with Unverdorben’s life as lived forward. If Amis were to adopt the alternative approach of having Soul narrate retrospectively from a single point in time, he would need to choose a point near the beginning of Unverdorben’s life—perhaps in his adolescence—so that he could give a full account of his experiences from the moment of death back to that temporal point. But then Soul’s narration would necessarily be informed by the knowledge he had acquired throughout his adult years, including from his experiences in Auschwitz, and that would effectively eliminate the first track of the progression and its resulting readerly dynamics. Amis’s choice of narration by installment allows him to combine Soul’s retrospection and his gradual discoveries, which he nevertheless often misinterprets, in an especially compelling way.

As I turn to analyze the unreliability of the narration itself, I draw on my previous work on the rhetoric and ethics of unreliable narration (see Living to Tell about It and “Estranging Unreliability”). In fictional narrative, there are at least two tellers: the narrator who communicates to an explicit or implied narratee and the author who communicates to his or her authorial and actual audience by means of the narrator’s communication to the narratee. Furthermore, narrators perform three main tasks, and these tasks can be located along three distinct axes of communication. (1) Narrators report on settings, characters, and events (who did what where when) along the axis of events and existents. (2) Narrators read or interpret what they report (this action had this meaning) along the axis of perception and interpretation. (3) They ethically evaluate (or regard) characters and their actions (e.g., Huck Finn judging himself as condemned to hell for deciding not to tell Miss Watson where Jim is) along the axis of ethical values. Consequently, narrators
can be unreliable in three main ways: they can misreport (by, for example, distorting what happened, getting the order of events wrong, or even outright lying); they can misread or misinterpret (naïve narrators demonstrate their naïveté by misreading); and they can misregard or misevaluate (judging evil characters to be good, and vice versa). We can add another layer of precision to this taxonomy by noting that sometimes a narrator’s report, reading, or regarding is reliable as far as it goes, though it clearly does not go far enough. This observation yields three other kinds of unreliability: under-reporting, under-reading, and under-regarding.

By reversing time’s arrow, Amis makes unreliability the default condition of the narration, because Soul is reporting events in the wrong order and compounding that misreporting with a misreading of the relations between cause and effect. Soul of course believes that his reports and readings are on target—the unreliability is unintentional on his part—and Amis relies on his audience to recognize that Soul has things backwards. Our interpretive judgments are further complicated because within this dominant fabric of unreliability, Amis inserts what I will call pockets of reliability, and so we must frequently negotiate the shifts between the two modes.

A passage from early in the novel allows us to see the weave of the fabric of unreliability: “A child’s breathless wailing calmed by the firm slap of the father’s hand, a dead ant revived by the careless press of a passing sole, a wounded finger healed and sealed by the knife’s blade: anything like that made me flinch and veer” (26). The passage has an initially—and deliberately—disorienting effect as Soul attributes positive outcomes to small acts of violence. And although we can readily invert the order of events and reassign cause and effect (the slap causes rather than calms the wailing), Amis also gives us pause by concluding the passage with Soul’s response to the violence, a response that is more in line with the one we have to our revised understanding of his report. Indeed, the last phrase of the passage helps illustrate the point that misreporting and misreading may or may not be closely linked with misregarding. In this passage, Soul’s flinching at violence is a sign of his reliable regarding.

But now consider Soul’s description of Tod Friendly’s motivation for going to church on Sunday, where his backward experience of time leads him simultaneously to misreport, misread, and misregard.

The forgiving look you get from everybody on the way in—Tod seems to need it, the social reassurance. We sit in lines and worship a corpse. But it’s clear what Tod’s really after. Christ, he’s so shameless. He always takes a really big bill from the bowl. (15)
The difference between the two passages is instructive: in the first, Soul is directly reporting his own response, and it is not at all surprising that his narration is reliable on the axis of values. In the second, Soul is judging the experiencing-Unverdorben after having misreported and misread his behavior, and, again, it is not surprising that he misregards Tod as selfish rather than generous.

In addition to distinguishing among kinds of unreliability, we also need to distinguish among their affective and ethical effects. While most work on unreliability, since Wayne C. Booth coined the term in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961, has assumed that unreliability creates affective and ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, some unreliable narration actually closes such distance. To capture these different effects, I have proposed a distinction between “estranging unreliability,” which increases or reinforces distance and “bonding unreliability,” which closes distance. The six types of unreliability—misreporting, misreading, and misregarding; underreporting, underreading, and underregarding—can each have either estranging or bonding effects. Furthermore, I suggest that we think not of an either/or binary between estranging and bonding unreliability but rather of a spectrum going from extreme estrangement at one end to up close and personal bonding at the other end.

Not surprisingly, Amis often uses Soul’s unreliability for bonding effects on the ethical axis. That is, even when he is misregarding, as in his judgments of Tod’s motives for going to church, he employs a set of values that the authorial audience shares. Or to take another example, consider this passage about Soul’s experience in New York City:

> This business with the yellow cabs, it surely looks like an unimprovable 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 fi e service. The streets are full of people with their arms raised, drenched and weary, thanking the yellow cabs. Just one hitch: they’re always taking me places where I don’t want to go. (65–66)

Here too Soul misreports and misreads: his inability to recognize the actual order of events leads to his misattributing the relations between cause and effect. His generous praise for the enterprise indicates that he is also misregarding. But all this unreliability makes the passage—and the self who narrates it—endearingly funny. Amis uses Soul’s reversal of time as the basis
for what we regard as essentially naïve narration: the narration captures the
events but is clueless about interpreting them. Soul’s naïveté defamiliarizes
the whole business of using taxicabs in New York, highlighting its difficulties and annoyances (“we stand for hours on end,” trying to flag one down)
as well as its compensations (the cabs do take their users where they want to
go). But most significantly, Soul’s enthusiastic misregarding demonstrates a
generosity of spirit that is ethically appealing. Consequently, the passage as a
whole has a bonding effect, one that increases our sympathy for him and his
quest to have his life make sense.

Just as important as these passages that are dominated by unreliability
are those containing what I call pockets of reliability. I use the term “poc-
ets” in order to emphasize the point that these instances of reliability are
almost always surrounded by the larger fabric of unreliability. Examining
these pockets along the three axes of communication will take us deeper into
the how of Amis’s technique.

A. The Axis of Ethics

Along this axis, we find numerous such pockets, often occurring when Soul
offers ethical judgments that distinguish him from what he understands as
the ethically deficient Unverdorben. The following passage from chapter
1 provides the larger context for the one in which Soul comments on his
responses to small acts of violence.

Surprisingly, Tod is known and mocked and otherwise celebrated for his
squeamishness. I say surprisingly because I happen to know that Tod isn’t
squeamish. I’m squeamish. I’m the squeamish one. Oh, Tod can hack it.
His feeling tone—aweless, distant—is quite secure against the daily round
in here, the stares of vigil, the smell of altered human flesh. Tod can take all
this—whereas I’m harrowed by it. From my point of view, work is an eight-
hour panic attack. You can imagine me curled up within, feebly gagging,
and trying to avert my eyes. . . . I’m taking on the question of violence, this
most difficult question. Intellectually, I can just about accept that violence
is salutary, violence is good. But I can find nothing in me that assents to
its ugliness. (26)

The pocket of reliable regarding can be found in Soul’s underlying ethi-
cal and aesthetic judgment that there’s something wrong with the pain and
corresponding ugliness of violence. Not surprisingly, that reliable regard-
ing creates a bonding effect: Amis, his audience, and the narrating self all share the same values. But Amis complicates this bonding by juxtaposing this reliability with the unreliable report that Tod is not squeamish. If the report were reliable, then Tod would not be celebrated among his coworkers for his squeamishness. The consequence of this unreliability reverberates throughout the whole narrative because it complicates our view of the relations between Soul and Tod/Unverdorben. We realize that the neatness of Soul’s frequent dichotomy between those two selves cannot be sustained, since the “other” narrated self actually shares traits and responses that Soul does not acknowledge, either because he cannot recognize them or because doing so would mean that he cannot claim ethical superiority over Tod/Unverdorben. But the larger effect is that we come to see that Unverdorben, the larger being who contains both the narrating self and the narrated self, is neither simply an unfeeling monster nor a sensitive soul who has been corrupted against his will. Instead, we come to see him as someone capable of both an ethical and an aesthetic objection to violence and pain and of being wholly indifferent to them.

The ending of the passage reinforces this point. Soul’s view of violence as salutary stems immediately—and forgivably—from the reversal of time’s arrow, since from that perspective, violent acts seem to heal people. In addition, his view of violence as ugly stems from an apparently inherent sense of the aesthetic. But having now seen that Soul and Tod are not as distinct as Soul believes, we can also see that Tod shares these attitudes. The underlying ethic of the Holocaust, according to Nazi doctrine, was that violence against the Jews was salutary and good, and we eventually learn that Tod/Unverdorben acted in accord with that belief even though he is someone who has an aversion to the ugliness of violence. The larger effect is to humanize Tod/Unverdorben and, in that way, to make his behavior more horrific.

B. The Axis of Facts and Events

Along this axis, there are two recurring pockets of reliability. (1) While the narrating self consistently misreports the order of events, he reliably reports the events themselves. Indeed, our ability to recognize his misreporting and misreading and our ability to reconstruct the chronological sequence of events in Unverdorben’s life depend on this substrate of reliable reporting. In addition, this reliable reporting allows Amis to establish brief pockets of reli-
ability even within passages of strong misreading and misregarding. (2) Soul reliably reports on his own inner life as well as on the dreams and feelings of Unverdorben. Consider this passage from the end of chapter 3, a point in the story during which Unverdorben, then known as John Young, is working as a doctor in New York:

Is it a war we are fighting, a war against health, against life and love? My condition is a torn condition. Every day, the dispensing of existence. I see the face of suffering. Its face is fierce and distant and ancient.

There’s probably a straightforward explanation for the improbable weariness I feel. A perfectly straightforward explanation. It is a mortal weariness. Maybe I’m tired of being human, if human is what I am. I’m tired of being human. (93)

The immediate impetus for Soul’s initial question is his misreading of a doctor’s work: with time’s arrow reversed, he sees that medical treatment almost always makes people worse—patients who are initially healthy become sick or injured. But his report of his incredible weariness is totally reliable, and that, in turn, leads us to take seriously his hypothesis that he is tired of being human. Since that hypothesis goes beyond the specific condition of being a doctor, our taking it seriously also means generalizing that condition. And here Amis’s use of the first-person plural pronoun before switching to the singular becomes especially significant. The pronoun usage, combined with the absence of any “I–he” comparison such as we have seen in the passage about squeamishness, signals that Soul’s weariness is shared by Unverdorben, even if Soul does not understand why. And when we ask why Unverdorben should feel this weariness, we can infer that the answer is to be found in something beyond these experiences in New York, that is, experiences from Unverdorben’s yet-to-be-narrated past. He has likely seen the face of worse suffering and perhaps been more responsible for it. That Soul can now register the suffering of others in Unverdorben’s apparent campaign against life and love also suggests that at some level Unverdorben registered such suffering in the past. But we also infer that his registering the suffering had no consequences for his behavior. The interaction between reliable and unreliable narration here aids Amis in his larger nuanced treatment of the ethical being of the perpetrator: he portrays Unverdorben as a fellow human, highlights the cost of his actions in his dissociation of self, and simultaneously suggests that his weariness now pales beside the actual destruction that he participated in.
C. The Axis of Perception and Interpretation

The reversal of time’s arrow means that Soul’s unreliability is greatest on this axis, but even here there are two recurring pockets of reliability. The first involves Soul’s ability to analyze reliably once he steps back from his assumptions about the direction of time’s arrow. Consider this passage from the end of chapter 2. Unverdorben is riding on a train away from one city and toward another, and Soul in his usual fashion gets the direction wrong. But within that framework of misreading, Amis creates a remarkable pocket of reliable reading:

It must be New York. That’s where we’re going: to New York and its stormy weather.

He is traveling toward his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am traveling with him. 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. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time. (63)

Because, as we learn on the very next page, his inference about New York is correct, the passage initially establishes his reliability as a reader of the situation. This reliability leads us in turn to take the other interpretations—that the secret has to do with trash and shit and that it is wrong in time—as equally reliable. But this reliability exists alongside the standard misreporting of the distinct separation between the two narrated selves, between the experiencing Soul and the experiencing Unverdorben, a separation that seems even less warranted here where the narration has shifted to the present tense. Once we focus on that unreliability, we realize that Unverdorben is aware of how bad the secret is—and that in traveling away from New York he is vainly trying to escape it. Indeed, once we reset time’s arrow this way, we can see that the passage is informing us that Unverdorben lives with the consciousness of what Primo Levi referred to as “the nature of the offense” (quoted by Amis 168). This passage has even more weight because Amis uses that phrase as the alternate title for the book (the title page reads Time’s Arrow or The Nature of the Offense).

The realization that Unverdorben lives with this consciousness, in turn, sheds a retrospective light on the second track of the progression to this point, that is, the part of Unverdorben’s life that has already been narrated—his postwar life in America—because it shows that he does not deal with
that consciousness very well at all. Although the outer trappings of his life are fine, his inner life is ruled by fear and shame and by various unsuccessful efforts to forget, deny, or overcome these emotions, including his endless pursuit of sexual conquest and his inability to sustain a serious relationship with a woman.

Once again, then, the overall effect of the passage is to lead us to a series of complex ethical judgments that initially have both bonding and estranging effects. On the one hand, we can endorse not only Soul’s reliable reading but also his willingness to face the secret and learn how bad it is. But on the other hand, we infer both that Unverdorben is himself an active agent in what is terrible about the secret (indeed, his agency is connected to its being terrible) and that he has not managed to deal with his behavior in an ethically productive way. The best he can do, it seems, is to dissociate.

The second pocket of reliable narration along the axis of perception and interpretation involves Amis giving Soul the intermittent recognition that his temporal orientation is backward. For example, during a passage when Soul is employing the first-person singular as he describes his doctoring in America, he suddenly remarks:

But wait a minute. The baby is crawling, only one or two panting inches at a time—but crawling forward. And the mother with the magazine, the glossy pages ticking past her face: she’s reading forward. Hey! Christ, how long has it been since I...? Anyhow, it’s soon over, this lucid interval. (82)

This intermittent recognition functions as a strong reminder that the split between the two narrated selves requires a huge effort to maintain and is therefore subject to breaking down at just about any point. That Unverdorben is nevertheless able to maintain the split self points, first, to the depth of his guilt and shame and, second and more powerfully, to the horrible actions that are the source of those feelings.

The Narration of Unverdorben’s Experience at Auschwitz

Amis’s use of Soul’s consistent misreading of the relation of cause and effect for bonding effects complicates his task in chapter 5, the central chapter of the novel, because it deals with Unverdorben’s experience at Auschwitz. Because Soul experiences time backwards, he must (mis)interpret Unverdorben’s diligent participation in the extermination of the Jews as his heroic efforts toward what Soul calls the “preternatural purpose” of creating a race.
Indeed, because of these views, Soul feels that in Auschwitz, life suddenly makes more sense than it has before. If Amis were to narrate the chapter using primarily unreliable narration with bonding effects, he would run the risk of undermining his own ethical authority, and, in so doing, seriously mar the quality of the novel. But he varies the narration in significant ways: sometimes he uses the unreliability for estranging effects, and sometimes he employs pockets of reliability to convey his own strongly negative ethical judgments. A closer look at both variations shows how his handling of Soul’s narration both defamiliarizes our perceptions of the Holocaust and effectively uses aesthetics in the service of ethics.

Consider how Soul’s naïveté works in this passage:

. . . to prevent needless suffering, the dental work was usually completed while the patients were not yet alive. The Kapos would go at it, crudely but effectively, with knives and chisels or any tool that came to hand. Most of the gold we used, of course, came direct from the Reichsbank. But every German present, even the humblest, gave willingly of his own store—I more than any other office save “Uncle Pepi” himself. I knew my gold had a sacred efficacy. All those years I amassed it, and polished it with my mind for the Jews’ teeth. (121)

Once again we have misreporting, misreading, and misregarding for defamiliarizing effects. As Soul praises the generosity of the German executioners, Amis underlines their greed and their brutality, especially Unverdorben’s. Soul’s host, we recognize, has distinguished himself among the group by hoarding more of the victims’ gold fillings than anyone else. Furthermore, Amis uses the first-person singular here, thus eliminating much of the distance between the narrating-Soul and both narrated selves (experiencing-Soul and experiencing-Unverdorben). Consequently, Amis matches Soul’s enthusiasm for this work with Unverdorben’s even as he underlines the sharp ethical contrast between their respective reasons for their enthusiasm. In addition, the technique reminds us that Soul and Unverdorben are ultimately part of the same person. The larger result is to estrange the authorial audience from Unverdorben by deepening the horror of his actions and underlining the depth of his dissociation of personality. This estranging effect is frequently repeated throughout chapter 5, where Amis frequently conflates Soul and Unverdorben by means of the first-person singular pronoun.

Amis also uses pockets of reliable reporting to influence our ethical judgments of Unverdorben and of Auschwitz. Consider the second sentence in the passage about the extraction of gold fillings from the victims’ teeth: “the
Kapos would go at it, crudely but effectively, with knives and chisel or any tool that came to hand.” Divorced from Soul’s understanding of sequence, and thus, his mistaken understanding that the knives and chisels are tools for filling cavities, the sentence is a very reliable report of the perpetrators’ behavior, and it functions to enhance the estranging effects of the surrounding unreliability.

Within chapter 5, Amis also uses the pockets of reliability to make a remarkable link between ethics and aesthetics, one that extends the link in the earlier passage about squeamishness. Consider these two passages that occur within just a few pages of each other in the beginning of chapter 5.

Ordure, ordure everywhere. Even on my return through the ward, past ulcer and edema, past sleepwalker and sleeptalker, I could feel the hungry suck of it on the soles of my black boots. Outside: everywhere. Ths stuff, this human stuff, at normal times (and in civilized locales) tastefully confined to the tubes and tunnels, subterranean, unseen—this stuff had burst its banks, surging outward and upward onto the floor, the walls, the very ceiling of life. Naturally, I didn’t immediately see the natural logic and justice of it. (117)

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-Birkenau-Monowitz was good to look at. Or to listen to, or to smell, or to taste, or to touch. There was, among my colleagues there, a general though desultory quest for greater elegance. I can understand that word, and all its yearning: elegant. Not for its elegance did I come to love the evening sky above the Vistula, hellish red with the gathering souls. Creation is easy. Also ugly. (119–20)

In the first passage, Amis gives us reliable reporting and juxtaposes it with underreading and underregarding. Auschwitz in its last days—albeit the first days from Soul’s perspective—has become overtaken with human excrement, a development that we interpret as having a logic and justice entirely different from anything that Soul is able to assign. Indeed, in Amis’s audience, we interpret the aesthetic horror and ugliness of the camp as a sign of its ethical horror and ugliness, something that Soul is wholly unable to grasp and that Unverdorben is, at this point in his forward experience of time, still able to deny. In the second passage, the effects depend on Amis’s juxtaposition of reliable reading with misreading and misregarding. Soul reliably represents the aesthetic ugliness of Auschwitz, its assault on all five senses,
and the hellish quality of the sky above the crematorium, but his misplaced love of that sky underlines for us the horror of the destruction that Unverdorben, in his dissociated state, cannot face. Indeed, Soul's description of the sky underlines not only that dissociation but also Amis's close juxtaposition of reliability and unreliability for defamiliarizing effects. We readily endorse Soul's reading of the sky as “hellish red,” but then suddenly must reject his phrase “with gathering souls” and replace it with its opposite: “with people literally going up in smoke.”

**Two Final Pockets of Reliability**

Some significant additional effects of our ethical judgments in chapter 5 result from their influence on the readerly dynamics of two final pockets of reliability, one at the very end of chapter 7 and the other in the very last lines of the novel. The first pocket provides a partial resolution to one of the global tensions of the first track of the progression: Soul’s question about Unverdorben’s ethical being. After reflecting on whether Unverdorben could use violence (which from Soul’s perspective “mends and heals”) in his developing relationship with Herta, Soul says,

> I have come to the conclusion that 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, needing the sandy smiles of Rolf and Rudolph, of Rüdiger, of Reinhard. (157)

Amis has ensured the reliability of Soul’s conclusion not only by making it a culminating point of the progression but also by giving us evidence of how well Unverdorben has fit in at Auschwitz. This reliable conclusion in turn functions as Amis’s thematic generalization about the perpetrator. Amis has clearly been influenced by Lifton’s contention that the Nazi doctors were neither beasts nor demons but human beings who were “neither brilliant nor stupid, neither inherently evil nor particularly ethically sensitive” (4) and who had to engage in some kind of doubling to participate as they did in the genocide. But by using the resources of fictional narrative, and especially those of reliable and unreliable narration, Amis’s exploration gives us a perspective on the perpetrator that substantially complements Lifton’s. Amis defamiliarizes the horror of Auschwitz, enables us to view it, albeit indirectly (via Soul rather than Odilo), from the perpetrator’s perspective,
and ably guides our judgments so that we recognize the links among Unverdorben’s conformity, his dissociation, and his participation in the genocide. In this way, Amis also paves the way for us to move from our immersion in his fictional world back to our own with a deeper understanding of how the Holocaust could have happened—and, indeed, how such an event could happen again.

With the final pocket of reliability in the last lines of Soul’s narration, Amis gives the narrative one final, defamiliarizing twist. He has shifted to the present tense in order to capture the process of Odilo’s becoming ever younger.

Look! Beyond, before the slope of pine, the lady archers are gathering with their targets and bows. Above, a failing-vision kind of light, with the sky fighting down its nausea. When Odilo closes his eyes, I see an arrow fly—but wrongly. Point fi st. Oh no, then . . . . We’re away once more, over the fi ld. Odilo Unverdorben and his eager heart. And I within, who came at the wrong time—either too soon, or after it was all too late. (165, ellipsis in original)

Soul reliably reports that the archers shoot their arrows, but he has a moment of unreliable reading, when he interprets their first direction as the wrong one. He soon recovers, though, and reliably notes that time’s arrow has now reversed direction, propelling him not toward the oblivion of non-existence but toward experiencing everything he has just told us about in the opposite order. Unverdorben is not made whole by the reversal of time’s arrow, and that fact renders the ending both poignant and horrific. It is poignant because, as Soul says, he will remain within Unverdorben unable to do anything but observe and report as he has done throughout this narrative. He is too soon or too late, depending on where one stands in time, but in either case, he is powerless. This new reversal of time’s arrow is horrific, because Soul will no longer be able systematically to misread the relation between cause and effect in the events of Unverdorben’s life—and because Unverdorben will repeat his participation in the atrocity of the Holocaust. Furthermore, by reversing time’s arrow once more at the end of the narrative and implying an eventual return to Auschwitz, Amis suggests something about the continuing effects of the Holocaust as history marches on, about its living on in historical memory, and its lingering effects on all of us who are still trying to come to terms with it.

Looking back on the whole narrative, we can see that Amis, inspired by Lifton’s book on Nazi doctors, has found an effective way to confront the
ethical and aesthetic challenges of representing the perpetrator. To be sure, his approach is oblique—through Soul, not Odilo himself—and that approach involves significant trade-offs. We can bond with Soul in a way that we could not with Odilo, but that very bonding reinforces a certain distance from Odilo. That distance, in turn, heightens our negative ethical judgments of Odilo, but it also means that Amis will only partially get inside the psychology of the perpetrator. Consequently, as I hope this rhetorical analysis has shown, Amis is able to use what appears as a gimmick—the backwards narration—as a key building block in what becomes for his audience a rich ethical and aesthetic experience, even as we remain aware that this experience is ultimately just one partial glimpse into the complexity of the perpetrators.

Notes

1. Chatman’s essay does an excellent job of analyzing the basic mechanism of the backwards narration and discussing its relation to similar techniques. Vice offers another impressive analysis of Amis’s technique, one that effectively responds to the charge that Amis is more interested in his narrative technique than in the subject matter of the Holocaust. McGlothlin (“Theorizing the Perpetrator”) develops an instructive comparison between Time’s Arrow and another representation of a perpetrator, Bernhard Schlink’s Der Leser. Other insightful work on Amis’s novel has been done by Diedrick, Harris, Finney, Easterbrook, and McCarthy, but none of these critics focuses on the ethics and aesthetics of its technique to the extent that I do here.

2. For a fuller exposition and demonstration of this rhetorical approach, see my Living to Tell about It and Experiencing Fiction.

3. Levi’s phrase has become a useful shorthand for referring to the inverted logic of the camps, but here is the context in which it occurs:

Driven by thirst, I eyed a fi e icicle outside the window, within hand’s reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. ‘Warum?’ I asked in my poor German. ‘Hier ist kein warum’ (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.

The explanation is repugnant but simple: in this place everything is forbidden, not for hidden reasons, but because the camp has been created for that purpose. (35)

4. Like Mengele, Wirths was a Nazi doctor at Auschwitz. Lifton, who devotes a chapter to Wirths in The Nazi Doctors, succinctly summarizes his role: he “established the camp’s system of selections and medicalized killing and supervised the overall process during the two years in which most of the mass murder was accomplished” (384).

5. The retrospection is intermingled with narration from the time of the telling and occasionally with simultaneous present-tense narration such as at the end of section 2, when acting and telling coincide: “I am on a train now, heading south at evening” (62).
6. See Vice for an excellent discussion of Amis's re-appropriation of parts of Lifton's study in his representation of Auschwitz.
7. I am indebted to Brian Finney for calling my attention to Amis's move here. Finney describes its effect this way: “the narrative condemns [its readers] to share with the narrator an endless oscillation between past and present, incorporating the past into our sense of modernity” (111).

Works Cited
