Time Reversal in Fiction.

What does it do?

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Old Tongs of Sunset

note by the writer
carrying the world
backwards
in the work of art
could be expressed as follows: instead of 1-2-3
events are unfolding as 3-2-1
or 3-1-2. This is the way it is in my
poem.

(Kruchenykh in Firtich, 2004)

Introduction

The short poem on the foregoing page was written by the Russian Futurist Aleksei Kruchenykh and could have introduced any of the fictional narratives treated in this thesis. The Russian avant-garde of the early twentieth-century toyed with unusual time sequences as a part of their political expression. The artist was considered in position "to trace the world backwards [sledit' mir s kontsa]" (Kruchenykh in Firtich, 594), and thus free to discover new meanings and truths.[1] In his essay "Worldbackwards" Nikolai Firtich sums up the the Russian vanguard's use of temporal manipulation by explaining how it fills three important functions. Firstly, they use it to communicate what seems nonsensical, but which can present the reader with a completely new approach to the world. Secondly, they use the narrative strategy to explore the idea of other worlds and dimensions, and thirdly, as an "artistic épatage leveled against the dominant contemporary social and cultural institutions" (596). Unfortunately, I do not read Russian, but I have come across a few narratives, in languages that are more accessible to me, that represent extreme cases of temporal manipulation. I have therefore taken an interest in looking into what effect letting events be "unfolding as 3-2-1" has had on another set of stories.

I set out on this investigative journey to find out more about why an author would choose to let time run backwards in a narrative. My focus will be on what time reversal does or adds to the story where it is applied. Simply reading the stories will be my main source of information on this particular topic. I have not aimed to carry out systematic research on the reception of time reversal. I will merely use my own reading experience(s) (in necessary friction with the readings of my supervisor) as a basis for my discussion. It would, however, have been very

[1] *Mirskontsa* (world backwards) was also the name of a collection of paintings put together by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh in 1912. Khlebnikov also wrote a short play by the same title.

interesting to know more about how readers generally react to this example of *extreme narration*, as Brian Richardson calls this type of outre narrative experiment. My belief is that the immense cognitive load it sometimes puts on the reader could make narratives of this kind less accessible than most readers would prefer, but hopefully this will be investigated further in future studies.

The reactions generated in me by these narratives have lead me into some theoretical territory, but because so little has been written on time reversal as a narrative strategy, I took the liberty of maintaining a broad focus and writing about more than one aspect of what time reversal can achieve.

The question I initially put on my whiteboard: *Why has the author chosen this particular strategy in each text?* has proved not only impossible to answer once and for all, but irrelevant to the task I wanted to pursue. The intentions of an author are impossible to recover, even though Martin Amis in his Afterword in *Time's Arrow* explains that his reason for writing a narrative in which time was reversed was that he had wanted to do so for a long time and was curious as to what this would make possible. Therefore I find that it is ultimately better to try to answer: *how successful is time reversal as a narrative strategy in each story?* In answering this one has to make guesses as to the purpose of the narrative as a whole, but this supposition is made in any communicative situation. The success of the narrative strategy is thus directly linked to what time reversal *does* or *adds* to the story, which brings us back to the main question that has permeated my research.

The direction of time is one of life's expected constants and therefore easily taken for granted. Extremely few people ever feel that they experience an event as if it were happening

backwards, and thus few narratives exist where time moves in reverse, at least in the Western literary canon. The discourse (*sjuzet*) of a story often contains jumps, forward (*prolepsis*) and backwards (*analepsis*), in time, but the story (*fabula*) very rarely does. In January 2009 Seymour Chatman published an article in the journal *NARRATIVE* called "Backwards" where he systematically classifies backwards narration. He analyzes in detail the type of backwards narration in which the story moves as if it were a film played backwards, and examplifies this especially by analyzing Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*. This particular novel will also be the center of my discussion, but I also place much emphasis on the short stories "Viaje a la semilla" by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, as well as the Austrian writer Ilse Aichinger's "Spiegelgeschichte". A handful of other narratives are also mentioned, but the main discussion revolves around these three, as they are all examples of what Chatman classifies as *sustained backwards narration*[2] (I will continue to refer to the narrative strategy as *time reversal*). I, admittedly, also include some examples from narratives that are not of absolute time reversal, but focus on the parts of the stories where time is reversed.

Erika Greber has written an article on backwards narration, or *Retronarration*, where she theorizes the structure of these stories. She includes examples from various types of retro narrated texts, not all of sustained time reversal, but all share some common traits starting with being *retroactive*, not simply retrospective (474). Her goal is to sketch out a structural model for all retro narrated stories, and thus maintains a wider scope for her discussion than I do.

Chatman's discussion focuses on the linguistic context which facilitates antonymizing, or the direct reversal of all actions. He argues, for instance, that punctual verbs are preferred to

[2] Chatman differenciates between the more common flashbacked narratives, where each event plays out according to normal chronology, and sustained backwards narratives where each event is reversed as well as to be placed in reversed order.

durative verbs because they express the direction of the action more clearly, thus *consume* is preferred to *chew,* and that this

> (…) 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. (38)

This use of cognitive-poetic analysis has inspired me to look into the linguistic context of specific emotive effects that are facilitated by time reversal. I will close-read sequences of inverted time where emotions are created, and in this I will draw on the theoretic work of other scholars within the field such as Meir Sternberg, Lisa Zunshine and Jeroen Vandaele. But I also wish to investigate what time reversal does to the different narratives on a macro level. The ethical dimension is of special interest to me in the study of these stories, and I will link time reversal to the ethical and political stance that the stories represent.

James Phelan has written a forthcoming book chapter, which I have had the fortune of having read in draft, called "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Backward Narration in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*". He analyzes the unreliability inherent in the narration and follows the tradition of scholars currently interested in "the ethical and aesthetic consequences of narrative techniques that put the reader in the position of sharing the perpetrator's perspective" (1). He hopes that "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" (ibid.). I wish to contribute in much the same way, juggling more textual examples and , to some extent, other variables of interpretation.

The first chapter explores the effect time reversal can have on the ethical and political dimension of a narrative. The subject of ethics will permeate all the chapters of the discussion. The second chapter is a cognitive poetic analysis of the emotive effects that are facilitated by time reversal, such as the use of humor, the creation of suspense, and even the effectuation of horror. The third chapter explores time reversal in representations of psychological processes. Here I consider the texts in light of real-life experiences of time reversal.

Time's Arrow features most prominently in my discussion because it is the longest of the narratives of sustained time reversal that I have found, and I will follow Chatman's example and refer to the narrator of the novel as "Soul". The short story "Viaje a la semilla", or "Journey Back to the Source", forms part of Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier's innovative short story collection *Guerra del tiempo* (1958), *War of Time*. The collection is marked by various daring narrative experiments, including that of the story treated here, where time is reversed. Carpentier's temporal creativity is displayed in much of his work and has been linked to his expertise as a musicologist (González Echevarría). He has also been said to have fathered the movement of magical realism, or *lo real maravilloso*, with his 1949 novel *The Kingdom of this World,* a story about the Haitian revolution in which fantastical elements highlight the novel's political message. The typically magical realist link between the fantastical and the political, is treated in my discussion, as time reversal arguably is an example of a fantastical element which I wish to show has great political and ethical potential.

The short story "Spiegelgeschichte" is an award-winning short story which I wanted to include as much because of its esthetic as its political quality. The story should be read in German as the use of very poetic language in a setting of reversed time creates a strongly evocative sentiment in the reader.

In the following I hope to show how time reversal can affect a variety of aspects of the stories in question, and that even though examples of narratives of sustained time reversal are few, they contribute with an interesting perspective. Relatively little has been written on the subject, even though it has received some attention very recently. Greber's article was published in 2007, Chatman published his article "Backwards" in January 2009, and Phelan's book chapter has not yet been published. My thesis ties in with the work of all three, but I have chosen a different set of stories ("Viaje a la Semilla" is only treated here), and I maintain a cognitive poetic as well as receptive focus throughout my discussion.

Chapter 1

Writing With an Ethical and Political Force.

The ethical dimension of narratives has been subject to much scholarly scrutiny in the last few decades. Both philosophers and literary critics have shown a strong interest in the subject, to the extent that a "double turn" towards literary ethics has been identified (Eskin). Not only has the ethical force of narratives been studied more closely, but the general importance and effect of literature on ethics has been given much emphasis. Reversing the direction of time makes a narrative start with the consequences and move towards the underlying events. The direction of the narrative immediately places the focus on cause and there is no escaping the cause and effect relationship. This allows for a portrayal of events that demands full responsibility from those who have caused them, and thus an effective starting point for social and political critique. The three narratives of Carpentier, Aichinger and Amis all more or less openly treat the subject of unethical conduct, but I will mainly focus on Amis' *Time's Arrow* as this novel also spurred a debate on the ethical responsibilities of authors in portraying historical events. I wish to start this chapter with a fairly short interpretative description of the function of time reversal in "Viaje a la semilla" to comment on what this narrative strategy can do to the ethical dimension of a text and then move on to treat *Time's Arrow* in a similar, but more in-depth, fashion.

The Ethical Function of Time Reversal in "Viaje a la semilla".

As opposed to *Time's Arrow* and "Spiegelgeschichte"[3], "Viaje a la semilla" is in fact not told entirely in reverse. In the beginning and end of the story, time moves in its normal direction.

[3] There are some clues in both stories of a return to normal chronology as the story ends, but the structure of the stories differs markedly from that of "Viaje a la semilla" where two different stories are presented and only one in reversed time.

There is a story within the story, like a Chinese box, where the outer shell follows the normal direction of time and the story within is subject to a fantastical effect where time moves in reverse. The fact that the narrative moves back to the world of the outer shell suggests that the interlude of time reversal was a digression, an anomaly that is included to shed light on the world as we know it. This use of the fantastical as a means to a political end is central to the magical realist genre that Carpentier pinned down with his descriptive noun-phrase "lo real maravilloso". I want to argue that time reversal is used both for political purposes in a classical magical realist manner, as well as to place the actions of one individual under ethical scrutiny.

Both the ethical and political messages of the narrative are strengthened by the circumstances under which the shift of temporal direction takes place. There are signs that indicate that the old man, who is adressed in the story's first line, is the one who invokes time reversal in the story: "Entonces el negro viejo, que no se había movido, hizo gestos extraños, volteando su cayado sobre un cementerio de baldosas." (56) ("Then the old Negro, who had not stirred, began making strange movements with his stick, whirling it around above a graveyard of paving stones." (222)). Here there are strong indications of supernatural volition causing time to turn.[4] This sentence directly preceeds the first inversion of chronology in the narrative, and therefore represents the shift to time reversal:

> Los cuadrados de mármol, blancos y negros volaron a los pisos, vistiendo la tierra. Las piedras con saltos certeros, fueron a cerrar los boquetes de las murallas. Hojas de nogal claveteadas se encajaron en sus marcos, mientras los tornillos de las charnelas volvían a hundirse en sus hoyos, con rápida rotación. (56-57) The white and black marble squares flew to the floors and covered them. Stones leaped up and unerringly filled the gaps in the walls. The nailstudded walnut doors fitted themselves into their frames, while the screws rapidly twisted back into the holes in the hinges. (222)

[4] A noteworthy fact as the other two narratives, that are written in a purely European context, lack an explicit instigator of time reversal. Aichinger and Amis' stories seem to suggest a psychological phenomenon causes the inversion of time.

The effect of the old man's magic is close to that of pressing rewind on an old movie projector. The house is soon restored to its past glory and the old man resumes his tasks as some sort of housekeeper, and opens the door with his keys before he opens all the windows. This act is symbolic of the movement the narrator makes in telling the story of the dead man's life. Nothing shall remain in the shadow, all shall be exposed.

"and the earth reclaimed everything that was its own."

The story begins with the demolition of a huge estate and the focus of the narrator is mainly on details of the building and its surroundings. Humans are only indirectly present through the marks and devastation they have inflicted on their surroundings, and their absence is emphasized by the statue that focalizes the demolition:

> Presenciando la demolición, una Ceres con la nariz rota y el peplo desvaído, veteado de negro el tocado de mieses, se erguía en el traspatio, sobre su fuente de mascarones borrosos. (55) Witnessing the demolition, a Ceres with a broken nose and discolored peplum, her headdress of corn veined with black, stood in the back yard above her fountain of crumbling grotesques. (222)

The decay of the house is the result of the death of the owner of the house, Don Marcial - Marqés de Capellanías – a man of social grandeur and power. Time seems to be reversed in order to relive his life and reveal what has yet to be uncovered. The focus on nature and scenery in the narrative's first part contrasts with the focus placed on the protagonist and his relationships with the people around him in the temporally reversed part of the story. This and the choice of title, which literally means "journey to the seed", centralizes the importance of nature and its laws, and correspondingly downplays the importance of human beings and their culturally biased laws. The final paragraphs of the story of the life of Don Marcial strengthen

this message. After he has returned to the womb, the narrative returns to focus on nature as to underline the origins of life:

> Las aves volvieron al huevo en torbellino de plumas. Los peces cuajaron la hueva, dejando una nevada de escamas en el fondo del estanque. Las palmas doblaron las pencas, desapareciendo en la tierra como abanicos cerrados. Los tallos sorbían sus hojas y el suelo tiraba de todo lo que le perteneciera. (71) Birds returned to their eggs in a whirlwind of feathers. Fish congealed into roe, leaving a snowfall of scales at the bottom of their pond. The palm trees folded their fronds and disappeared into the earth like shut fans. Stems were reabsorbing their leaves, and the earth reclaimed everything that was its own. (232)

When the life of the once mighty Marqués has moved all the way to its beginning his social status and political power means nothing. This parallels the unimportance of his character after his death and emphasizes the superiority of nature over the individual. The political and ethical force of the narrative lies in letting the life of a socially powerful man be reversed to show how unimportant he is in the bigger picture. It is not without political force either that it is a dark-skinned who man is the instigator of this process, as the cultures of non-European origin in Latin-America represent the weaker political voices of the region.

Material and Spiritual Decay

If the first part of the story is marked by an emphasis on the house and its physical surroundings, the body of the story focuses on the spirit of the protagonist Don Marcial. The reader is ensnared by the provocation of curiosity about his past: “De franca, detallada, poblada de pecados, la confesión se hizo reticente, penosa, llena de escondrijos. ¿Y qué derecho tenía, en el fondo, aquel carmelita, a entrometerse en su vida?” (58) “What had begun as a candid, detailed confession of his many sins grew gradually more reticent, painful, and full of evasions. After all what right had the Carmelite to interfere in his life?” (223)). The use of “aquel” (that) signals a distance that is not rendered in the English translation. Even though

he finally succumbs and candidly confesses “his many sins”, the spiritual intrusion of the priest bothers Don Marcial. The reference to the order of the Carmelite indicates strong contrasts between the protagonist and the ideals of the order, such as their vow of poverty or practice of contemplative prayer (Zimmermann). The next passage confirms this by showing that the cause of his death was rooted in a sexual activity that probably strained his heart into a coronary thrombosis. A view of Don Marcial’s life as marked by much power and resources, and little gratitude or humility, is emerging. But there is no doubt that his material life is in a state of deterioration. His finances are clearly not in impeccable condition as his house is to be auctioned off even before his death. His wife seems to have disappeared because her first appearance in the story describes her returning “una tarde, de su paseo a las orillas del Almendares.” (59) (“one afternoon from a drive along the banks of the Almendares” (224)). The material and personal grandeur of Don Marcial is slowly restored in the story, reflecting the gradual decay it suffers in reality:

> Reaparecieron muchos parientes. Volvieron muchos amigos. Ya brillaban, muy claras, las arañas del gran salón. Las grietas de la fachada se iban cerrando. (60) Many relatives reappeared. Many friends came back. The chandeliers in the great drawing room glittered with brilliant lights. The cracks in the façade were closing up, one by one. (224)

Time reversal lets the author present Don Marcial’s cracked façade by describing its restoration. This allows for a dual focus in the mind of the reader. On the one hand they can contemplate the terrible fate of Don Marcial that results from his ethically reproachable conduct, and on the other hand the narrative places emphasis on the time before he commits his sins when he had the choice of acting differently.

Return to Innocence

It seems clear that Don Marcial has committed a crime, or taken "a path disapproved of by the Law" as it is euphemistically phrased in the story. Whether this crime is of financial or sexual insult is not said. The story's point of departure includes a death in disrepute and material deficit as well as a forced confession of a multitude of sins. But as the story progresses the crimes committed decrease. This produces the story's emphasis on innocence. Childhood represents a purity that is forever lost in the adult, and Don Marcial is never closer to the story's ethical center than in his childhood contemplations from the marble floor:

> Afectas al terciopelo de los cojines, las personas mayores sudan demasiado.(…) - por no conocer, con el cuerpo echado, la frialdad del mármol en todo tiempo. Sólo desde el suelo pueden abarcarse totalmente los ángulos y perspectivas de una habitación. (66) Grown-up people had a passion for velvety cushions, which made them sweat too much. (…) - because they had not discovered how cool it was to lie at full length on a marble floor at all seasons of the year. Only from the floor could all the angles and perspectives of a room be grasped properly. (228)

A political message could be interpreted from this as the lowest perspective in society is also shared by those who have the least. This is the view from which "all the angles and perspectives" of society "be grasped properly", and they represent the opposite of Don Marcial, the adult, who is both socially and materially powerful. As a child he shared this perspective of the world, but it is lost as a result of adulthood, and arguably also bad choices.

It is important to point out that running Don Marcial's life in reverse does not free him from his sins. The story does not end as Don Marcial climbs back into the womb. Only the story within the story, where time is reversed, ends here. The final paragraph of the text describes the workers on the demolition site. One of them tries to tell the others of a rumor that he has heard, and in this he provides the reader with the last clue to the fall of Don Marcial. He reveals that the Marquesa de Capellanías, Don Marcial's wife, was drowned in the river

Almendares. This is the last information given to the reader about the life of Don Marcial and an important *signal of closure,* in other words an indication of interpretation and communicative intention from the implicit author to the reader of the short story. Don Marcial's social and material power masked his unethical conduct while he was alive in much the same way as time reversal does in the retelling of his life. If we see past these blinding factors his true nature becomes evident.

The over-all effect of time reversal as a narrative strategy in this story is slightly harder to pin down compared to the other texts I treat in this thesis. But a recurring impression seems to be that time reversal is strongly linked to the theme of sin, guilt, and redemption. There is no real escape from time's direction. Only temporarily and hypothetically can deeds be considered undone like a knot. Carpentier toys with the idea of shattered tiles flying back up on the roof in perfect condition because he has a point to prove by letting them do this. And in my view, the main reason the author has to let what cannot happen take place, is merely to underline its impossibility. Thus the ethical dimension of this story contains a warning: what is done cannot be undone, a theme which is repeated throughout the stories examined in this thesis. This message is even stronger in the novel *Time's Arrow* where a defining part of our historical past is revived and reversed in a horrific revelation of cruelty.

The Ethical Function of Time Reversal in *Times Arrow*.

As mentioned earlier, an important effect of time reversal in a narrative is the focus it places on cause. The consequences of an act lie furthest into the future while the cause is to be found in the conjunction of all the moments leading up to the effects. With time reversal the consequences are usually known, while the suspense lies in the revealing of the grounds that have caused them. In *Times Arrow* the exile and change of name are some of the

consequences of the protagonist's past misdeeds, but the nature of his crime is not explicitly presented to the reader and thus makes for a source of curiosity in the story. What caused him to act in the first place is perhaps less important and only touched upon very lightly. The focus of the story is on the protagonist's life *after* having committed ethically reproachable acts. From the beginning we are presented with many hints about what these might be, and it is made clear that the protagonist lives with the knowledge of having done something wrong, but he shows few signs of regret. However, the temporal structure of the narrative makes catching up with his past inevitable, thus the ethical function of time reversal is exposed. Greber says that time's normal direction is ever present in retronarrated stories (478, 481), and all that is happening in reverse is simultaneously considered following normal chronology (ibid.).

The story moves from the death-bed of Dr. Tod Friendly to the early childhood of Odilo Unverdorben, the same person who has repeatedly changed his name in order to escape taking responsibility for his actions. The reader is introduced to the doctor when he lives in the US. His past has a nightmarish grip on him and dreamlike visions of a male shape in a white coat wearing big, black boots terrorize him even in the last moments of his life. The reader is compelled to get to the revelation of the identity of this figure, and will towards the end of the book see that the figure is the doctor himself. This reinforces the ethical message of having to own up to all the identities a person represents, and that a person is nothing less than the sum of all past actions.

Martin Amis says the writing of *Time's Arrow* was prompted by reading a book called *The Nazi Doctors* by Robert Jay Lifton. He had toyed with the idea of telling "the story of a man's life backwards in time" (Amis, "Afterword" 175). The theme of a fledgling Nazi doctor

suddenly presented him with a reason to pursue the idea. Most war criminals go back home to enjoy a normal life for many years and are never put on trial to face responsibility for their actions. The life story of a Nazi doctor told backwards would force the story to focus on the absurdity of leading a normal life carrying the memories of crimes against humanity. To emphasize the lack of awareness shown by the doctor, a second mind has been placed in his body. This voice can also be interpreted as the doctor's long suppressed conscience. The narrator could be referring to this when he advises the reader: "If you ever close a deal with the devil, and he wants to take something from you in return - don't let him take your mirror. Not your mirror, which is your reflection, which is your double, which is your secret sharer" [5] (17). The fact that the story is told backwards also emphasizes the importance of our conscience as a tool for ethical conduct. The revision of the doctor's life done by the voice might not benefit the doctor, who is dying, but it helps the reader to learn about the scaring efficacy of suppressing unwanted memories.

Perspective

> He is travelling towards his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am travelling there 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 offence. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and it is wrong in time. (72-73)

The story is told by the voice of a mind that lives inside the head of the doctor. The narrator is as ignorant as the reader about the doctor's thoughts and memories, but can perceive what the

[5] Here Amis alludes to the short story "The Secret Sharer" by Joseph Conrad. The Captain in the story hides a criminal on his ship. The title is ambiguous as the word *secret* can be a noun *or* an adjective that modifies the following noun *sharer*. Thus the sharer is both a co-sharer of a secret, the Captain and the criminal know about the latter character's misdeeds, and a unavowed passenger. The character Tod Friendly contains both the criminal; the doctor, and the Captain; Soul. They both share the secret of the doctor's misdeeds, and both the criminal part of the doctor's personality and the arguably more innocent Soul are unawoved passengers.

doctor perceives and has access to his emotions. The narrator's ignorance reflects the reader's untaintedness and represents a huge contrast to the perpetrator whose actions they both contemplate. The narrator seems to appear in Tod Friendly's head at his death bed surrounded by doctors. This is when and where the story starts, and the narrator cannot explain the existence he finds himself in. He reports from a dream preceding his waking up in the hospital:

> (…)presiding over the darkness out of which I had loomed there was a figure, a male shape, with an entirely unmanageable aura, containing such things as beauty, terror, love, filth, and above all power. This male shape or essence seemed to be wearing a white coat (a medic's stark white smock). And black boots. And a certain kind of smile. (12)

The connection between this mysterious man and the additional mind inside the doctor's head has been hinted at. And the narrator describes having "the sense of starting out on a terrible journey, towards a terrible secret. What did the secret have to do with him? Him, with him: the worst man in the worst place at the worst time" (12). To unravel the identity of the threatening figure in white the narrator is taken on a journey backwards in time. It does not seem Tod Friendly is aware of his life being lived backwards, but the function of it is clear; to unmask the figure in the white coat and as the reader understands further on: to expose Tod Friendly's real identity.

The narrator is allowed to get to know Tod Friendly from the weakened days of old age through the peak of his manhood to childhood. Through him we see Tod Friendly's character change from a psychopathic lack of emotional connectedness to a perhaps more normal range of emotional expression. He is a hidden passenger much like the reader, but he sees causality backwards from our perspective. Thus our ethical conclusions are at times very different from

his. Any use of violence, for example, is interpreted by the narrator as a consolatory process, and any process of healing is viewed as mutilation. This makes the role of doctors especially interesting as I will explore more deeply further on. The narrator identifies a feeling of hatred towards doctors. And this is perhaps not strange based on his inverted reading of what they do to people, but definitely odd considering that already on the very first page he expresses his hatred: "And the thought came to me, surprising in its fluency and confidence, fully formed, fully settled: How I hate doctors. Any doctors. All doctors." (11). It seems as though he is drawing on empirical information from past experiences. Experiences he supposedly has not had since he has just come to life. Below I will show that there are more clues like this throughout the novel as to the origins of the narrator.

Even though the existence of the narrator presents a mystery to the reader, he is also an invaluable intermediary between the reader and the doctor. Just as the doctor is the filter between the narrator and the narrator's experiences, the narrator filters our experience and is absolutely necessary for our journey back to discover the doctor's past. One the one hand, he is an unreliable narrator[6], because he describes everything backwards. But once we understand the framework within which he narrates we can follow the real logic of the actions by reversing them. He does not seem to grasp that he interprets the world backwards, and thus our ethical conclusions are often at odds with this. Nevertheless, the narrator states his opinions every once in a while and it is clear that his conclusions often are very commendable despite inhabiting the body of a morally reproachable man and having a slant perspective on his surroundings.

> What can you categorically *not* do to someone else's body? I won't claim ignorance. Pretty much the same sort of shit was coming down at AMS, if we'd gone looking for it, and of course it was happening all over town at well-

[6] Cf. Phelan ,"The Ethics and Aesthetics" 10-20

> known locations: St Mary's, St Andrew's, St Anne's. It is general. It is general hospital. Nobody can pretend for a minute that they don't know what's going on. (84)

This shows the narrator's inverted perspective *as well as* his instinct to protect human life and respect for the "gentleness of human flesh" (120). Even though some of the incidents the narrator interprets wrongly are the actions of doctors in Auschwitz, he is indirectly commenting on them here by pointing out that people should not profess ignorance of what is going on in their own society. The German people were criticized in much the same way for not protesting the actions of their military and political leaders. Another criticism of war crimes is visible as the narrator says: "The devil has something to be said for him: he acts on his own initiative and isn't just following orders." (17). In Phelan's terms, Soul is often an unreliable narrator who *misreports* and *misevaluates*[7]*,* but at times his evaluations are untainted by his thwarted perspective. Through these (in)direct judgements[8] passed by the narrator the overall purpose or message of the novel is pointed out to the reader.

The perspective of the narrator is uncommon and demands a lot from the reader. In some instances we feel close to him and that we share a common goal: "I can't tell – and I need to know – whether Tod is kind. Or how unkind. He takes toys from children, (…)" (22). But in other moments it seems obvious that the narrator is no closer to the novel's ethical center than the doctor himself: "Birkenau, where I was in harmony with the engine of nature." (170). And it is hard to know whether his moral incompatibility with the reader is only a product of his backward interpretation of time. But towards the very end of the novel there are signs that the narrator knows that his interpretations have been backwards. Here the narrator and the doctor share memories and relate to them by using the pronouns *I* and *we*. They are thus as closely united as they will be in the novel. The doctor-narrator acknowledges the pain and injuries

[7] Cf. Phelan, "The Ethics and Aesthetics" 11
[8] Cf. Phelan ,"The Ethics and Aesthetics" 4

caused by himself and the other doctors in Auschwitz. He mixes his childhood mistakes of conjugation with the most severe actions of his manhood:

> Wait. Mistake there. Mistake. Category… We brang. We putten. We brang, we putten, their own selves we tooken all away. Why so many children and babies? What got into us. Why so many? We were cruel: the children weren't even going to be here for very long. I choiced it, did I? (171)

To admit to a wrong doing as enormous as that of having been a doctor in a Nazi concentration camp is not easily done, and the narrator seems to need the shield of childhood mistakes in order to do so. In the course of the novel the narrator moves closer to the person whose mind he perceives the world through, and as in the previous quotation he regards himself as an inherent part of Odilo Unverdorben. The use of *we* is ambiguous. It refers to Odilo and the narrator, and the collegiate of Nazi doctors in Auschwitz, and perhaps also the rest of mankind that produced this tragedy and let it happen. In the following section I will explore the subject of the ethical scrutiny that *Time's Arrow*'s unusual perspective allows for. Even though the theme of Amis' novel is closely intertwined with WWII, the critique it represents goes far beyond these historical events. I wish to show that the subject of ethical exploration is multi-layered and far reaching.

What is the Subject of Ethical Scrutiny?

Doctors

The theme of doctors is repeated throughout the story. Their profession represents some of the most bizarre examples of reversed causality as they are society's main mutilators instead of healers. This also underlines the cruelty of Nazi doctors whose infamous experiments; with twins, homosexuals, and other ethnic groups besides Jews, represent one of Nazi Germany's most grotesque chapters. The reversal of time also allows for a vivid illustration of their

abhorrent breach with the Hippocratic oath. Doctors usually enjoy a position of trustworthiness and social recognition, but the narrator's distorted picture of reality underlines the dangers of placing blind faith in authority: "But why the pride in these *doctor* children? (Why not shame, why not incredulous dread?)" (11). The sceptical attitude towards doctors is very understandable when considering the doctors in Auschwitz. What character enjoys more power, more absolute and terrifyingly scaring power, than a male, Aryan doctor in Auschwitz? He represents not only the most beastly of war criminals, but also the world's largest concentration of power in symbolic terms. He has knowledge most people do not possess, he is male as opposed to the physically weaker female, he is Aryan as opposed to the politically weaker non-Aryan and enjoys a position of high social status as well as to have military backing. Clearly, a critique of this character transcends the walls of Auschwitz.

The doctor should perhaps be criticized for the way he practices medicine in the US as well. He uses his position of authority and intimacy with patients to pick up women. He has also worked as an abortionist, and the procedure is made even more grotesque by being reversed: "A rectangular placenta and a baby about half an inch long with a heart but no face are implanted with the aid of forceps and speculum." (101). The women who enter his office for an abortion are referred to as "prospective ladyfriends" (ibid.). This and the description of the end of the consultation: "They say goodbye. He'll be seeing them. In about eight weeks, on average." (ibid.), are comments that emphasize the likelihood of the doctor being the father. He is removing fetuses that he himself has placed there, and time reversal highlights his responsibility by forcing him to place them there instead of removing them.

While the narrator's misreading of normal doctors' work can be seen a source of humor (as I will show further on) the horror of his renderings of the work of the doctors in Auschwitz is only increased by the reversed causality.

> Thence to the Chamber, where the bodies were stacked carefully and, in my view, counter-intuitively, with babies and children at the base of the pile, then the women and the elderly, and then the men. It was my stubborn belief that it would be better the other way round, because the little ones surely risked injury under the press of naked weight. But it worked. (…)There was usually a long wait while the gas was invisibly introduced by the ventilation grilles. (…) I always felt a gorgeous relief at the moment of the first stirring. (129)

Mass extermination is turned into a creationistic process where life mysteriously is breathed into thousands of skinny and naked bodies, they are *given* clothes and "Hair for the Jews came courtesy of Filzfabrik A.G. of Roth, near Nuremberg." (130). The naivety of the narrator is almost unbearable for the reader who knows the true chronology and intentions behind these events. The humoristic effect of inverted time is completely gone, and the narrator's open fascination and awe for their achievements makes the reader shiver with a disgust that other renderings of these infamous misdeeds might not accomplish.

The narrator never feels further from sharing the reader's point of view than in these scenes. His misinterpretations are not uncritically accepted by the reader because he has established himself as someone who shares much of the reader's knowledge about the world: "I'm not a complete innocent. For instance, I find I am equipped with a fair amount of value-free information or general knowledge, if you prefer." (16). He even reacts with surprise to the fact that people move backwards (14) and finds it "counterintuitive" that people get younger instead of older (15). The word *innocent* stems from the Latin *nocere*, to harm, and is an adjective that describes one that has caused no harm. As the narrator describes what the reader recognizes as the gassing of thousands of people in a Nazi concentration camp, he is

definitely not innocent. It is also interesting that the character of the doctor and the narrator seem to blur exponentially as the story moves towards its end, or as the case may be, its beginning. Mr. Friendly Death, *Tod Friendly*, now goes by the first name *Odilo*, which means fortunate or prosperous in battle, and last name *Unverdorben*, unspoilt. *Odilo* could also allude to Odile, the malignant black version of swan princess Odette in *Swan Lake*, the two ballet figures look alike, but have two opposite personalities, much like the doctor's personality splits into the innocent Soul and criminal Odilo Unverdorben. The irony of the last name is self-spoken. He carries this name as he works in Schloss Hartheim and Auschwitz even though this is where his character is being spoilt. And there is no doubt that this is the "terrible secret" towards which this journey has been steering.

If being responsible for the gassing process in Auschwitz was not bad enough, we learn that Odilo Unverdorben exercised his medical profession as a Nazi doctor in other ways as well. He starts out at Schloss Hartheim, the Nazi medical center for euthanasia of the physically and mentally disabled, and advances to Auschwitz where he works with Auschwitz' perhaps most dreaded figure, Dr. Joseph Mengele. He has been given a role in the novel as the "godlike (…) Uncle Pepi" (128) . This was Dr. Mengele's actual nick name (Lifton) and he is described as the personification of the Nazi obsession with power and grandiose authority: "We needed magic, to resolve significance from what surrounded us, which scarcely permitted contemplation: we needed someone godlike – someone who could turn this world around. And in due course he came…" (ibid.). The doctor, whose life we follow backwards, is Uncle Pepi's assistant in the novel and as the narrator says: "He led. We followed." (137). Thus he is an accomplice in some of the world's most appalling war crimes:

> As to the so-called 'experimental' operations of 'Uncle Pepi': *he* had a success rate that approached - and quite possibly attained – 100 per cent. A shockingly inflamed eyeball at once rectified by a single injection. Innumerable ovaries and testes seamlessly grafted into place. Women went out of that lab looking twenty years younger. (143)

Having been involved in this is the main charge in the reader's prosecution of the doctor and his beyond naïve interpretation also makes it impossible to absolve the narrator of responsibility for their actions. It is crucial for the ultimate ethical stance of the novel that no one, not even the narrator who lives the events backwards, can be absolved of these crimes even though they suffer the delusion of it being good and the right thing to do.

Nazi Ideology

Perhaps the most unfathomable part of the war crimes of the National Socialists was committed by doctors, but they were a part of a larger ideological picture. Time reversal in *Time's Arrow* allows the core of the Nazi ideology to be revealed in all its megalomaniacal horror: "Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire." (128). The narrator supposedly talks about the Jews here, but the historical facts are so well known that the dream of the Aryan race is what enters the mind of the reader no matter what the narrator claims to think. Amis uses time reversal to tell the story of Nazi war crimes during WWII in an original way. By playing with the framework within which a well known tale is told, he grabs the reader's attention as well as gaining access to the reader's emotional register in a very efficient manner. By shifting the temporal structure of the story so that the reader is expected to object to the rendering of events, he makes the readers rearrange the events to fit the real chronology. As I read the story I would stop to read dialogs backwards and reassemble what was being done in reverse. To trick the receiver into molding the information being communicated in one particular way is a very effective strategy of argumentation and

persuasion. The author's effort is in my view ethically commendable because he sets out to communicate something about Europe's greatest atrocities of the twentieth-century, towards which many have developed a shield of protection that counteracts most efforts of emotional impact.

The Nazi Ideology seems extraneous to most people today, and the majority of us intuitively feel that we could never participate in such inhumane practices as many Germans did during the reign of the National Socialists. And this is perhaps the novel's most important ethical stance: no man should automatically feel above being subject to this type of brainwashing and committing these atrocities. Perhaps man is in fact drawn towards these actions and we need to use our conscience or soul actively in order to ward off this part of our nature. The narrator represents the criminal on one hand, but also the innocent reader, because he does not realize what he is susceptible to take part in. The question *How are these acts possible to commit?* is always raised in relation to the subject of war crimes. But because the doctor represents most people, a follower, we are forced to see that we could easily be committing similar crimes unless we take complete responsibility for the consequences of our actions. As a result of having lost, or ignored, his soul, the doctor experiences a split in his personality, of which the narrator is an inherent part. To explore this further I will focus on the relationship between the narrator and the doctor in the following section.

"something of its horror is removed"

Amis and many other writers who deal with the theme of the Holocaust in their fiction, have been fiercely criticized for attempting to depict the unfathomable fates of the victims of Nazi war crimes. Adorno's famous phrase "after Auschwitz, you could no longer write poems" (Adorno 362) has been (mis)quoted by many critics harboring negative attitudes towards what

can be called entertainment on the subject of the Holocaust (Martin). It is true that Adorno wanted to express the impossibility of describing the heinous crimes against humanity that were executed by the Nazis. He writes "The aesthetic principle of stylisation (…) make an unthinkable fate appear to have some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims (…)" (Adorno 313). But he continues to underline the utmost importance of attempting to communicate these atrocities through poetic projects. I believe his 'dictum' has been frequently misquoted because the mere placing of the words *poetry* and *Auschwitz* in the same sentence seems intuitively wrong. It is as if by reading fiction about the Holocaust we use the victims pain for our entertainment. Some critics would follow this line of argument and describe Amis' time reversal in *Time's Arrow* as "a tricksy post-modernist game in the worst of all possible taste." (Parry 3) Amis himself claims personally to be deeply interested in and affected by the subject of the Holocaust:

> I think I'm obsessed by this subject (…) Do you know about all the different permutations of response, when you have to read this stuff? You start off incredulous – how could the Germans do such things? Then you swear a lot, then tearfulness, coldness, vengefulness, then a dull acceptance – and that's just the mind. The body is different – your sleep is completely destroyed (qtd. in Wood, "The Literary lip" 5)

In a literary debate in The Jewish Quarterly between Amis, Lucy Ellman, Joseph Skibell, and the critic Bryan Cheyette called "Writing the Unwritable", the latter argued a fear of that these fictional narratives would "betray the dead" (Cheyette in Parry 2). Author Joseph Skibell responded:

'Rather than looking at fiction as competing' with survivor testimony we should recognize in it evidence of an ongoing engagement with the caesura that was the Holocaust.(…) It is an effort to 're-imagine' it, which, in a world now removed from it in time, provides the assurance 'that we are still dealing with it', in doing so such work testifies to the occurrence and continued recognition of the caesura. (Skibell in Parry 3.).

This is clearly also Amis' intention when describing twentieth-century Europe's perhaps most defining phenomenon and not a "tricksy post-modernist game". But reading the Afterword of *Time's Arrow* leaves no doubt that Amis was already intrigued by the narrative strategy of letting time run in reverse when choosing this subject.

Another aspect of Amis' novel that has been much criticized is the lack of focus on the victims. Philosopher J.F. Lyotard is cited in Parry's essay saying that the Jews are always "offstage" and thus "missing from their own tragedy" (3). This is true of Amis' novel in the sense that we are only allowed to see the Jews through the eyes of the narrator, or Odilo - if a difference between the two should be made - describing them disrespectfully as "coathangers and violin bows" (125). But it is no more a challenge for the reader to handle this slanted perspective than that which affects the rendering of time as backwards in the novel. The victims are, paradoxically, given importance through their unimportance when viewed through the eyes of the protagonist. Amis, however, is extremely focused on the victims and takes pain to make it clear that the victims of the Holocaust are represented by more groups than the Jews: "His feeling tone jolts into specialized attitudes and readinesses: one for Hispanics, one for Asians, one for Arabs, one for Amerindians, one for blacks, one for Jews. And he has a secondary repertoire of alerted hostility towards pimps, hookers, junkies, the insane, the clubfooted, the hare-lipped, the homosexual male, and the very old." (50). There is also made a point out of Odilo having worked at Schloss Hartheim, a killing center that specialized in putting to death the mentally and physically disabled. The inclusion of several groups of victims when referring to the Holocaust is not uncontroversial, as exemplified by the fact that most historians only use the word about the genocide of European Jews, and should not be interpreted as an effort to lessen the importance of the Shoah, but an effort to emphasize the importance of victims that history might easily forget. This could in fact be

fiction's most important task in relation to historical events that represent crimes against humanity such as the Nazi genocides, to focus on the statistically less prominent individuals and strike an emotional chord in the coming generations. Nevertheless, the amount of background information necessary for interpreting *Time's Arrow* as it arguably was intended to be understood, is enormous. Greber emphasizes "die enorme Relevanz der Wissensverhältnisse" (479) (the enormous relevance of the knowledge conditions) in relation to retronarrations. The author depends, perhaps more strongly than usual, on the reader's general knowledge when employing time reversal. But this is true in the use of other inverted strategies of communication, such as irony or sarcasm, as well.

Based on my exploration of the various functions of time reversal in *Time's Arrow* I believe the ethical dimension of commenting on the crimes committed by a Nazi doctor is given more impact by letting time run in reverse. As a reader I have not put my guard up to protect myself from, what by many standards is, yet another description of these atrocities. Amis prepares his reader for what is to come in the sense that he makes it clear that the reader must reassemble the events according to correct chronology, but it is impossible to be mentally prepared for the impact of Auschwitz' atrocities in reverse. This is the novel's stroke of genius. As journalist James Wood writes in his review of the novel: "By reversing the narrative, Amis not only moves us with a vision of what might have been in some benign world, but hints also at the very moral delusion of the Nazis. Did not these evil men believe precisely that they were doing good, dreaming a race, turning back history and time?" (Wood, "Slouching" 2). And as the generation of people who survived the Holocaust are dying, narratives on the subject (fictional as well as historical) represent our only access to these historical events. If fiction should be banned from treating the subject a most valuable aspect of the stories of the individuals' sufferings would be lost. Academic and historical texts on the subject share a

scientific distance that, compared to what poetic works can achieve, might challenge the text's access to the emotional register of its readers.

In the next chapter I will treat the subject of how the use of time reversal can facilitate the creation of some emotive effects that can effectively help endorse the narratives' overall purpose.

Chapter 2

Writing to Entertain.

A Cognitive Poetic[9] Analysis of Emotive Effects And Time Reversal.

> 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

Through the study of time reversal in various texts it has become clear to me that this particular narrative strategy opens up many possibilities for emotive effects. These are most notably seen in the use of humor and in the creation of a feeling of unease or uncanniness through the disruption of the established experience of the world. This chapter represents a cognitive poetic analysis of some of the emotive effects that can result from time reversal based on the stories studied.

In *Time's Arrow* all emotive effects can be said to support the conveyance of a social critique, but some critics have argued that instead they trivialize the serious subject of the Holocaust. I

[9] Cognitive Poetics is the study of the interaction between properties of the human mind and properties of literary texts. Thus a cognitive poetic analysis links psychologic processes to linguistic constructs. "Cognitive poetics (…) sees literature (…) as a specific form of everyday human experience and especially cognition that is grounded in our general cognitive capacities for making sense of the world" (Gavins and Steen 1)

will consider how these effects, and especially the use of humor, affect and can be seen as compromising to the novel's theme.

Humor

Humor is used in *Time's Arrow,* among other means, to introduce the reader to the narrator's strange perception of time. Everyday events become laden with humoristic energy as they are depicted in reverse: "At the end of the day, before my coffee, in I go. And there it is already: that humiliating *warm* smell. I lower my pants and make with the magic handle. Suddenly it's all there, complete with toilet paper, which you use up and deftly wind back on to the roll." (18-19). The taboo act of going to the bathroom is suddenly a source of humor, due to the absurdity of depicting it in reverse. The reader can enjoy the gratification of seeing what is really going on and solving the puzzle by applying the condition of time reversal to the process. According to Jeroen Vandaele the two necessary ingredients for comedy, *incongruity* and *superiority,* are thus present. The reader perceives an incongruousness in observing that the smell of defecation precedes the act. They then explain this incongruity by taking time reversal into account, as the context of this particular novel requires. As a result of having cracked the code of the message, a feeling of superiority[10] arises and might make the reader laugh. Similarly, a dialogue between doctor and patient is suddenly an absurdity of incongruous replies and questions:

> 'I'm now going to ask you some questions.'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'Sleeping okay? Any digestive problems?'

[10] The superiority that Vandaele, among others, deems necessary for humoristic effect could be directed towards a character in the context of the joke (here Soul who does not understand that time is reversed) or the decoder's own past as they have transgressed from bewilderment to intelligence. Thomas Hobbes theoretized this already in the seventeenth-century by claiming that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (Roeckelein 43).

> ‘I’ll be eighty-one in January.’
>
> ‘And you’re …what?’
>
> ‘I don’t feel myself.’
>
> ‘Well, what seems to be the problem?’ (35)

Reading the dialogue from top to bottom is the expected way of interpreting it. But this results incommunicative and absurd. Reading the dialogue from bottom to top would normally seem absurd, but here proves communicative. The first reading could produce laughter merely due to its absurdity, but recognizing the dialogue as incongruous does not in itself guarantee a humorous response. On the other hand, when read within the framework of reversed time, the incongruity is solved and a feeling of superiority is added which ensures some humoring of the reader. Superiority therefore also arises from feeling included in the author’s playful experiment of letting time run in reverse. As opposed to the reader, Soul is simply confused by most of what he experiences through Tod Friendly. This adds to the comedy through a feeling of superiority over the narrator, as the reader has knowledge that Soul lacks. And it is based on this that the reader can recognize that which the narrator infers incorrectly. This opens a gap between representations and reality which allows for a humoristic emotional effect.

> He takes toys from children, on the street. He does. The kid will be standing there, with flustered mother, with big dad. Tod’ll come up. The toy, the squeaky duck or whatever, will be offered to him by the smiling child. Tod takes it. And backs away, with what I believe is called a shiteating grin. The child’s face turns blank, or closes. Both toy and smile are gone: he takes both toy and smile. Then he heads for the store, to cash it in. For what? A couple of bucks. Can you believe this guy? He’ll take candy from a baby, if there’s fifty cents in it for him. (22-23)

Amis builds up his joke almost like a stand-up comedian would. The language is very oral, characterized by short sentences and utterances designed to convince the reader: “He does”, and by the use of personal commentary made in a confidential tone: “Can you believe this

guy?". I am tempted to call these comments emotive signals. They both signal that the narrator expects the reader to sympathize with his frustration, and at the same time that the implied author wishes to create a humoristic effect.

Amis pedagogically allows the readers to familiarize with his narrative strategy by letting them decode the meaning behind these humoristic paragraphs. The experience of being humored is a positive reinforcement that stimulates continued reading, and Amis needs the reader's full attention as well as emotional involvement to convey his message. The overall purpose of the book is certainly not to amuse the reader, but rather to convey a very serious message of how crimes such as those committed by Nazi doctors could take place. And Amis uses, among other emotive effects, humor in his depiction of evil. At a first glance this may seem twisted, but it is also reminiscent of the novel's thwarted chronology which can interact with humor in bitter sarcasm and piercing social critique. Thus time reversal *and* the use of humor both serve to emphasize the perversion of Nazi ideology.

Even though *Time's Arrow* for the most part directs its ethical scrutiny towards Nazi war crimes, aspects of everyday human interaction are also criticized, and the critique is at times made through the use of humor. The social hierarchy of early twentieth-century Germany that facilitated the Nazi persecution of people from lower social strata, represents a horrific example of the outcome of unequal distribution of power between groups of people. The same hegemonic power structure is to be found in other social relations, such as those between doctors and patients, parents and their children as well as husbands and wives. The different relationships between men and women are given much emphasis in the novel, and Amis is at times measured in his critically laden comments through the voice of the narrator. Tod's relationships start with the break up and end with the courtship, a reality which confuses Soul

when contemplating interaction between the sexes: ”I have noticed, in the past, of course, that most conversations would make much better sense if you ran them backwards. But with this man-woman stuff, you could run them any way you liked – and still get no further forward.” (60). Here the humor lies in the commentary Soul unintentionally makes on the real relationship between men and women. But Soul’s meditations on *his* reality are usually not immediately applicable to *our* reality, a fact which at times makes his statements bitterly ironic. Early in the novel Soul is appalled by the doctor’s relationship to patients who are prostitutes as they end up in worse physical condition after the doctor’s visit than they were before. But when they meet with their pimps, all beaten up and pennyless, they become restituted. Soul comments without being aware of the absurdity of his remark: “Where would the poor girls be without their pimps, who shower money on them and ask for nothing in return?” (39). The implied author sarcastically comments on the imbalance of power in a real world relationship through Soul’s voice. At the same time both examples of commentary are sincerely stated by Soul as negative remarks in situations where he disapproves of Tod’s behavior. But they reach a new level of social criticism when communicated to a reader who knows that time is reversed and who can therefore fully appreciate the irony. The implied author can use Soul’s incorrect perception of the world to communicate a social critique to the reader as an additional layer of the narrative. Thus time reversal allows for a new twist to comment on important aspects of society. And even though these imbalanced relationships have been pointed out innumerable times before, Amis’ use of time reversal represents an emotionally effective way to describe the subaltern.

As shown in the examples above, humor depends on a feeling in the recipient of sharing intelligence with the emitter, and this bond can be strengthened by the presence of a figure that does not. In *Time’s Arrow* the author and the reader share common ground that the

narrator is not aware of, and his reiterated status as the bewildered endears him to the reader[11]. We recognize this as a typical feature of the narrator, and this recognition can also serve as a basis for humoristic effect. Exaggeration can also easily produce humor, and Amis explores both strategies as he ties a closer bond between the narrator and the reader early in the novel:

> I puzzle a lot, if the truth be known. In fact I've had to conclude that I am generally rather slow on the uptake. Possibly even subnormal, or mildly autistic. It may very well be that I'm not playing with a full deck. The cards won't add up for me; the world won't start making sense. (37)

The ridicule is effective because it is self-inflicted on the narrator's part and because it is hyperbolic. He repeatedly makes the same statement in different choices of words. Souls says that he *puzzles* and is "slow on the uptake", "subnormal", "mildly autistic", "not playing with a full deck" and that "the cards won't add up" for him and "the world won't start making sense". The metaphors he uses to express his odd perception of the world start out as one word metaphors that are widely used, such as *puzzle*, but end up exploring the realm of card play in whole phrases that are less commonly used like describing himself as *someone for whom the cards will not add up*. The further we get into the joke the less readily available is the decoding of the utterances. In this it resembles the famous monologue of John Cleese in the Monty Python sketch "The Pet Shop" (Cleese and Chapman), where the possible ways of expressing that a parrot has died are explored. James Wood says this is very British as well typical of Amis' writing and links it to his Dickensian inspiration:

> Amis uses exaggeration and repetition, as Dickens does, like a rhyme, like a beat. His American influences have not affected this very English style – this debating room, browbeating, almost parliamentary rhetoric (…) So he begins sentences with the same opening words, he repeats phrases, he squeezes a subject for its pungent comic essences.("The Literary lip" 3)

[11] Cf. Phelan's term *bonding unreliability*, "The Ethics and Aesthetics" 13

Even though the playfulness of exaggeration is intuitively comprehensible, it is interesting from a cognitive point of view that developing simple semantic constructs into more complicated ones, both in lexical density and syntactical complexity, can effect humor in itself. The illocutionary force[12] stays the same, so the reader knows the result of decoding the messages, but nevertheless seems to draw pleasure from the act of complicated semantic decipherment. The reader is provided with information within a defined framework which leads them to interpretations that would be much less accessible outside this context. They feel a shared knowledge with the implied author and superior to their former self. The pleasure of reading a novel where time, one of reality's most fixed features, is reversed can perhaps be accounted for in a similar manner. The reader is cognitively triggered by having to process the information given by reversing the order of events in order to understand all levels of the narrative.

Amis is well known for his linguistic skills. James Wood writes in his review of *Time's Arrow* that "Martin Amis is a better writer than he is a novelist. He paddles in character, splashes in the world, but immerses himself in waves of language. Language is his real energiser, his distraction, his fatal Cleopatra" (Wood, "Slouching" 1). And it is perhaps passages such as the above that complicate the reading of *Time's Arrow.* Some critics have felt that the story's purpose is to entertain and not to depict the darkest parts of human history and psyche. My view, however, is that most of the humor in *Time's Arrow* is justified. As a pedagogical strategy to introduce time reversal to the reader early in the book, it is as appropriate as it is later in the novel where it is used more bitingly to highlight ethically reproachable relations between people. The incongruity with the real world that results from

[12] J. L. Austin distinguishes between three senses of any utterance. An utterance's illocutionary force is the intention behind the words. Thus two utterances consisting of different words might have the same illocutionary force or intended meaning.

Soul's perspective turns from producing laughter to producing strong unease and sickness in the reader when Odilo's past as a Nazi doctor is revealed. From my first reading of *Time's Arrow* I have never been unsure of how to react to this development, and below I will show how following the recipe for humor to produce terror in the reader, is both advantageous to his motive and courageous of Amis.

Suspense and Curiosity

The pleasure of humor and amusement is easily grasped and accepted as a reason to enjoy works of art. The pleasure of unease and suspense, however, seems counterintuitive. Nevertheless, all fiction toys with the reader's anticipation of what is to come and curiosity about the past to a greater or lesser degree. Within a controlled setting readers happily allow the provocation of emotions like terror, repugnance and suspense. Meir Sternberg writes about how the author can withhold information and create gaps in the reader's knowledge about the fictional future and fictional past. This would produce *suspense* and *curiosity*, respectively, in the reader; emotive effects designed to ensure continued reading. In narratives of absolute time reversal the real-time chronology is inverted and the events chronologically further into the future are told before those of the chronological past. In other words, the temporal movement of the tale is counter to the direction of real-time. The creation of suspense can thus be said to relate to events belonging in the chronological past, while curiosity can be said to concern information gaps relating to the future *and* the past. Sternberg's terminology is in my view very useful, but can easily become confusing when dealing with narratives of reversed time. Nevertheless, I will attempt to show how an author of a narrative where time is reversed makes use of these two narratological strategies as examples of emotive effects.

In *Time's Arrow* the great mystery that makes most readers want to continue reading, is the information gap shared by the narrator and the readers about the doctor's past misdeeds. This information gap is hinted at in the following:

> Time now passed untrackably, for it was given over to struggle, with the bed like a trap or a pit, covered in nets, and the sense of starting out on a terrible journey, towards a terrible secret. What did the secret have to do with? Him, with him: the worst man in the worst place at the worst time. (12)

Initially the doctor's crime is only hinted at and lurks in the background materialized in the form of scary male figures in white frocks and black boots, or babies as in this passage: "Rather as I feared they would, babies have started showing up in Tod's dreams. They've shown up. Or, at least, one of them has. Nothing gruesome happens, and I am coping fine with it so far." (53-54) The final words "so far" are smaller units that signal a warning to the reader and trigger a feeling of suspense about what might come further on in the narrative. Dreams typically mirror these past actions in the novel and create what I feel I must define as *suspense*, even though it relates to actions in the character's past, because they belong later in the narrative.

Curiosity is the term which is usually linked to the past of a character, the time which precedes the narrative and that the narrative does not cover directly. Learning about a character's past is a way to modify the reader's reactions to the character's actions because past experiences motivate and explain later behavior. The narrator presents the reader with clues to complete their picture of the character, and based on the building impression they have of the character they make their judgement. Phelan writes: "Judgements are the means by which the different levels of communication get opened up, and progression governs the arc of the authorial audience's experience of these various dimensions from a narrative's

beginning through its ending." ("Ethics and Aesthetics" 3) Curiosity is the driving force behind the gathering of information on the basis of which the reader makes her judgements, and concomitantly represents a type of *narrative progression.*[13] In the case of *Time's Arrow* curiosity could be identified in the relationship the reader has to the dying Tod Friendly. He is the first impression we get of the complex identity of the protagonist, a character that is frequently altered throughout the tale due to his changing names and surroundings as well as his reversed aging. As the reader starts forming a hypothesis about the doctor having been part of Nazi medical experiments, the question immediately presents itself of how he can live with the knowledge of what he has done? What type of conscience does the doctor have? We get some clues through Soul about the doctor's feelings towards his past:

> He certainly couldn't give two shits about the Vietnam War. (…) There is another war coming. Oh, yes, we do know that. A big war, a world war, which will roll through villages. (…) There's exactly twenty-five years to go before it starts. (…) For Tod is highly sensitive to this material. It affects him like a smell, like a chime. Too late… There is the same kind of trigger when he hears that other language.(…) A third thing makes the trigger slip: nail-clipping. It's the odour the sallow rinds give off, as they cook and crackle in the fire…(…) (58).

The reader and Soul both have an urge to know how to judge the dying doctor, but they are hindered in this quest by having his life's tale told backwards: "I can't tell – and I need to know – whether Tod is kind. Or how unkind." (22). The question is, how unkind is Tod? And is he ultimately fully responsible for his horrendous actions? But as the narrative advances we are given clues about the protagonist's past, and as our curiosity is moving closer to being satisfied we feel more confident about our emotional and intellectual assessment of his character.

[13] Cf. Phelan's book chapter "Narrative progression" in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on time, plot, closure, and frames*.

Unease and Horror

> Did his eyes deceive him, or had his hair turned in the dozen years of his life from white to iron-gray under its concealing dye? Was the network of wrinkles on his face becoming less pronounced? Was his skin healthier and firmer, with even a touch of ruddy winter color? He could not tell. He knew that he no longer stooped and that his physical condition had improved since the early days of his life. 'Can it be- ?' he thought to himself, or, rather, scarcely dared to think.
>
> (Fitzgerald, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" 11)

> 'Good Lord!' he said aloud. The process was continuing. There was no doubt of it – he looked now like a man of thirty. Instead of being delighted, he was uneasy – he was growing younger. (19)

Unease and horror are emotive effects that are related to the creation of curiosity and suspense. Not knowing the outcome or motivational force behind a situation and vacilating between possible results can be nerve wrecking, also when experienced through fiction. The gothic genre has made frequent use of this, and the short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is an example of a narrative, that arguably belongs to the genre, where time reversal produces a strong sense of unease. Time is only reversed in the physical aging of the protagonist, Benjamin Button, who is born as an old man and dies a new born baby some seventy years later. Having to live one's life in the opposite direction of the rest of mankind is a fate few would be envious of, and this plot understandably allows for the creation of much emotive effect. *Time's Arrow* does not belong to the gothic genre, but the reversal of time fantastically alters a fundamental factor in our existence which is unsettling in much the same way. The thwarted view on reality that is caused by time reversal and that obstructs the narrator's understanding of the world, seizes at a point in the novel to be a source of humor. What starts as a slight unease ends up causing utter horror, an emotive effect that plays a very important part in the conveyance of the novel's leitmotif.

Little experience with horror in narratives is needed to know that nothing creates the feeling as effectively as the turning of an assumed positive force into a negative and threatening one. Soul's once untainted perspective, that was a source of humor and recognition, turns into a perverse world view that demonstrates the poverty of Nazi ideology remarkably well. Part two and three of the novel are full of Soul's misinterpretations of events. But the humor that in part one would frequently result from this turns to unease when the reader's feeling of superiority (resulting from solving an incongruity) disappears. The reader is provided with examples of such illogical reasoning that no real solution is possible, and the monstrosities are of such proportions that no feeling of superiority can arise. The doctor is back in Europe and his role as an accomplice in the Holocaust is described in detail.

> Thence to the Chamber, where the bodies were stacked carefully and, in my view, counter-intuitively, with babies and children at the base of the pile, then the women and the elderly, and then the men. It was my stubborn belief that it would be better the other way round, because the little ones surely risked injury under the press of naked weight. But it worked. (…)There was usually a long wait while the gas was invisibly introduced by the ventilation grilles. (…) I always felt a gorgeous relief at the moment of the first stirring. (129)

The reader is used to time reversal as part of the conditions of reading the story by the time the doctor's atrocious crimes are revealed. We also know the real history, the reality behind the fiction, but are still shocked by the paragraphs that dare reverse the truth. Incongruity is very present in the reader when processing this information. The feeling that arises when we consider the implications of Soul contemplating historical facts in reverse can be described as nothing less than utter horror. The narrator openly admits his participation in the gassing of prisoners and even reveals his immediate intellectual reaction by calling the positioning of the youngest at the bottom of the pile of corpses *counter-intuitive*. His concern for the babies and children who "risked injury" is so incongruous with the true nature of his crime that the reader is left gasping for air. The paragraph is so audaciously compiled, forcing the reader to be

emotionally involved by describing the perpetrator's feelings and logical reasoning while committing an act of immense cruelty. The cherry on the sundae is of course the last sentence where the narrator describes his physical reaction to the process. His "gorgeous relief" indicates that he considers the misdeed heroic and beautiful, and could not be more unfitting and incongruous with the reader's feeling of repugnance and condemnation.

In the "Afterword" of *Time's Arrow*, Amis mentions a passage from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* as a source of great inspiration. The paragraph in question occurs at a point where the protagonist Billy Pilgrim, after having celebrated his daughter's wedding, once again becomes unstuck in time.[14] But in this particular scene the sequence of time is reversed and he watches "a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them" (53). Just as Amis aims to shock the reader by describing a tragedy as a miracle, Vonnegut tones down the cruelty of war in his passage by signaling control and harmony. He calls the fighting men "gallant" and thus prepares the reader for comfortable war glamour in the upcoming sequence.

> The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. (53)

The absurd irony of narrating a bombing as controlled mending climaxes as the sequence ends with German fighters saving the day: "But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new" (53-54). The repeated *though* signals

[14] The protagonist of *Slaughterhouse 5* involuntarily jumps between the moments of time which constitute his life, he "has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941" (Vonnegut 17), and this condition is described in the novel as being "unstuck in time". Time does, however, move in a chronological direction when a jump has been made, *except* in the scene discussed above.

to the reader to disarm if they were to have any objections, and the whole problem of warfare is put to rest by explaining how the elements that had gone into making the bombs are put back into the ground as minerals "so they would never hurt anybody ever again" (ibid.). If the ridicule was not made clear by this, the protagonist's reaction serves as a reminder of irony:

> The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn't in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed. (54)

Vonnegut's use of time reversal is marked by horror as well as humor and both emotive effects are utilized in order to convey a more complex message. Whether that message is simply a manifestation of anti-war sentiments or something more sophisticated is not so relevant to this discussion of emotive effects and time reversal. The main argument to be deduced from this discussion is that emotive effects can be made very interesting and cognitively appealing within the framework of reversed time. And considered together they can produce new and creative strategies of communication.

A Focus on Ethics

Sternberg's two ways of withholding information seem harder to tell apart when considered in relation to *Time's Arrow*. Both are linked to the protagonist's past because the narrative moves from death to birth. But what marks their difference is that suspense seems to be related to action and the outcome of situations, whereas curiosity seems more closely linked to the reader's attitude towards the character's nature (character). Lisa Zunshine writes in "Why We Read Fiction" about the cognitive thrill of explaining " people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (6). I have already commented on how revelations about a character's past will contribute to the explanation of actions and choices

made later in life, and form a basis for the reader's judgement of the character. Thus the ethical dimension of the story is largely affected by the creation of curiosity, as past events explain the character's motives or reasons to act as they do.

Zunshine's main postulation is that we read fiction to give our cognitive abilities a good work out. The exercise consists of cognitive challenges that our brains get a kick out of taking on. She argues that an important cognitive challenge presented to the reader is to read the fictional characters' minds (ibid.). Mind-reading is a tool used to predict the character's future actions as well as a basis for assumptions made about motivations that underlie actions. Zunshine says this information seems cognitively attractive because it has a value in real life and can be used when the reader engages in social activities (ibid.). We read to learn about social interaction to predict other people's future actions, and to better understand their motivation for these actions.[15] A related assumption is of course that we read to better understand our own patterns of behavior. In fictional narratives we are presented with a great deal of information about the characters through direct descriptions as well as indirectly in descriptions of actions, speech and thought. All this information is devoured by the reader, and used in a process of hypothesis formation. The author will be prone to take advantage of this naturally formed interest in the reader and tease her with information and tempt her into making hypotheses that she later will be lead to modify by new information. I will not treat the subject of the reading process and its motivational factors to a greater extent than the discussion in this paragraph. But I need this theoretic background when describing the emotive effects that are facilitated by time reversal because they are examples of the cognitive challenges that the reader is likely to accept and thus react to emotionally.

[15] Cf. Phelan's three kinds of narrative interest,"The Ethics and Aesthetics" 3

It is not difficult to see the pleasure a reader derives from reading a humoristic fictional fragment. It can even be physically visible, but I hope to have touched on the complicated mental processes that underlie the conveyance of humor. The cognitive challenge is taken on with greater ease because the reader expects the reward of laughter, so to use humor early on in a work of fiction strengthens the motivation to keep on reading. *Time's Arrow* contains humorous passages at an early stage and manages to motivate the readers and educate them in the curious world where time is reversed - at the same time. The creation of suspense is similarly easily grasped. The writer withholds some information which makes the readers feel that something is at stake, and thus want to continue the read to know the outcome.

In *Time's Arrow*, the consequences are, to a great extent, known. It is the past and the causes for the outcome that are explored. Some suspense is created by not stating directly what the protagonist has done to deserve a life in exile, but when this has been fully revealed the focus of the reader is on the protagonist's character. The emotional liason to the characters of a work of fiction will also ensure the continued read because the reader wants to know what the future holds for the characters they have formed a bond with. The reading of *Time's Arrow* is perhaps also unattractive to some because the bond formed with the character is not one of increased sympathy but rather of increased antipathy. At the same time, the narrative moves into the past, and there is no future for the character, whom we meet at his death bed as an old man. This makes the main cognitive challenge of reading *Time's Arrow* an ethical one; the assessment of the protagonist's character.

If all the emotive effects described in this chapter are cognitive challenges that create motivation to read, I believe I have shown that the more complex mental processes are involved in the ethical judgements that *Time's Arrow* especially demands from the reader.

This makes the greatest cognitive challenge the interpretation of the novel's ethical force. Amis wants his readers to think about what constitutes good and bad human behavior. The creation of horror is used provocatively to achieve this. And the nurturing of the reader's curiosity about the protagonist's conscience and mental condition, as well as to feed the natural need to read characters' minds, is also related to the ethical judgements they are intended to make. It seems terrible, on one level, that a very real and horrendous historical event such as the Holocaust should be treated in a work of fiction for intellectual entertainment, and time reversal is the novel's most protruding feature. Sue Vice implies in her book "Holocaust Fiction" that this narrative strategy actually liberates the story from the expected positive focus that most narratives suffer under. She says that unlike other types of fiction on the Holocaust, such as Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List, Time's Arrow* does not try to find "a crumb of comfort in universal destruction" (Vice 3), it is consequently free to depict the atrocities without the traditional expectations of fiction as emotionally comforting entertainment: "it [time reversal] entails the loss of such novelistic staples as suspense, choosing one's ending, constructing characters with the power to alter their fate, allowing good to triumph over evil, or even the clear identification of such moral categories." (Vice 3) Amis can be accused of using humor to lure the reader into his fictional environment, to vivify the horrors of atrocious war crimes, and showing off his narrative skills by modifying what is deemed one of reality's constants. But by showing that ethical judgement and insight into human behavior is also entertainment to the brain, and that Amis' narrative somersaults serve the purpose of describing human unethical behavior at its worst, I hope this chapter has underlined the important role of fiction in keeping history alive.

Chapter 3:

Writing to expand the boundaries of normality

> In the parallel universe the laws of physics are suspended.
> What goes up does not necessarily come down; a body at rest does not tend to stay at rest;
> and not every action can be counted on to provoke an equal and opposite reaction.
> Time, too, is different. It may run in circles flow backward, skip about from now to then.
> The very arrangement of molecules is fluid: Tables can be clocks, faces, flowers. (Kaysen 6)

As this short excerpt from the inaugurating pages of Susanna Kaysen's *Girl Interrupted* suggest, mental illness or imbalance can cause great distortions in the patient's world view. After having been forced to spend years of her youth in a mental hospital herself, Kaysen published her memoirs of the time in the form of a novel called *Girl Interrupted.* Even though the narrative strategy of letting time run in reverse is not utilized in the novel, the protagonist claims to experience life backwards at times, and links the irregular experience of time to mental imbalance. This chapter explores the psychological function of time reversal. In short: I wish to show how stories where time is reversed can be used to show that the world can be experienced in ways radically different from what is perceived as normal, and in showing this expand our view of normality. The stories under scrutiny in my thesis demonstrate alternative world views in different ways. They can all be said to suggest a pathological origin of alternate world views, and it seems temporal distortion tends to arise from traumatic experiences, but it is also implicit that they can be said to belong within a range of normality. This gives the ethical implications of representing minds that experience time backwards more importance, because the stories serve as fair warnings, and reminders, of the fragility of the human mind as well as the ethical responsibility that lies implicit in our interaction with

others. Time reversal can thus ultimately be linked to the greater literary project of understanding the experience of others in order to deepen our experience of ourselves.

The discussion of the function of time reversal in depicting the damaged human psyche will move from *Time's Arrow* to a story that has yet to be described in detail: "Spiegelgeschichte" by Ilse Aichinger. I shall offer a fairly short interpretative presentation of the short story in order to contextualize the present discussion.

The Psychological Function of Time Reversal in *Time's Arrow*.

The important ethical implications of the use of time reversal in *Time's Arrow* has been a recurrent concern of this thesis. My conclusion in Chapter 1, that centered on this theme, was that by running time backwards the focus is placed on the horror of the crimes and the absurdity of leading a close to normal life after having committed such atrocities. Following this argument the structure of reversed time is a choice made to make a point, and thus the narrator, who perceives life in reverse through Tod Friendly's body, is just a tool used to tell the story in this manner. This argumentative and almost political use of the fantastic closely resembles that of Latin American magical realists. But the description of a mind within another mind who experiences life in reverse may be interpreted more literally than this. In fact, Odilo Unverdorben may be considered a case of what psychologists call Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), a rare diagnose where a traumatic event in the patient's life leads him, or her, to form new identities that do not share the traumatic memories of the past in order to cope with the experience (Seligman, Walker, Rosenhan.). Such a perception of reality may well include time distortions similar to that which Tod Friendly's inner voice is documenting.

It would be extremely uncommon to suffer from the delusion that time and so all actions are physically running backwards, but it is not impossible. The narrator who experiences life this way also seems surprised by the fact that movements happen backwards. “Wait a minute. Why am I walking *backwards* into the house? Wait. Is it dusk coming, or is it dawn?” (14). His expectations of both his body and the sun’s motion show that the narrator has some experience with the physical laws of the world as the reader knows it. This may be one of the first clues to unveiling the identity of the narrator and the fact that he is a product of the body he thinks of as his host.

The changing use of personal pronouns throughout the novel to refer to the narrator and the body he is in suggests that the disorder is the result of the crimes the doctor committed in Auschwitz. Also, the name *Unverdorben* alludes to a change about to take place in the doctor’s personality. It is after the trauma of having “been to hell” (121) as the doctor carrying the temporary name of Hamilton de Souza expresses it, that his identity changes. It is because of this sin that he changes his name over and over again and flees instead of facing the real consequences of his actions, a choice which leads him into an unreal state, where time is lost, and where another voice appears in his head. It should also be noticed that in the body of Odilo Unverdorben, the narrator does not so often speak of Odilo’s actions or feelings as separate from his own. He often uses the pronoun *I* instead of *he* and reveals knowledge of their habits: “I always felt a gorgeous relief at the moment of the first stirring.” (129). This suggests a shared memory base and a much closer tie between the narrator and his host than before.

Perhaps the reverse order of the narrator’s experience of life should not be interpreted too literally. There are even examples of time running forwards (or as most people perceive it)

towards the end of the novel. This is seen in a speech rendering where all the sentences follow each other in normal order: "'Mummy? Chickens are alive. We catch them and burn them – and they're dead! But you can't eat chicks. Not little good chicks. Because chicks are good. You can just stroke them and everything. But you *can* eat ducks. Because ducks are fat'" (171). The differentiation made by Odilo – the child – between two types of birds, one of which is subordinate to the other and can therefore be dispraised and even eaten, clearly forebodes his Nazi views as an adult. The ducks represent the people Nazi ideology considered superfluous and disposable in an ideal society such as Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and the physically impaired. The fact that this conversation is rendered in its correct direction is yet another emphasis in the novel of the backwardness of Nazi beliefs. It would also seem that the normal chronology implies that the doctor's mind is more strictly backwards at the beginning of the novel and that this condition is loosened up towards the end. Speech is initially rendered completely backwards, as are actions: "'Dug. Dug,' says the lady in the pharmacy" (14), but in the mid part, which constitutes most of the novel, the sentences are rendered correctly though in reversed order. This could be done to ensure the communication of sensible utterances to the reader. The loosened rigidity of time reversal when exploring the years prior to Auschwitz and Schloss Hartheim might also suggest that the novel is a description of a dying man who never came to terms with his past actions, and tries to admit to everything he has done. But the experience proves too traumatic to be relived in its true direction, thus an additional mind is created who misinterprets the life of the doctor by reliving it in reverse. It is only shielded by childhoods innocence that reality, as exemplified by a normal chronology in said dialogue, can occasionally appear.

This interpretation is perhaps not as readily assumed by the reader, because a pathologization of the doctor could be considered an absolution from his sins. I wish to argue that even though

Amis most likely *meant* to pathologize the doctor's mind, the purpose of writing the novel was definitely not to give Nazi doctors a remission of sins. Let us, for the sake of the argument, say that the narrator represents an alternative identity who appears in the mind of Tod Friendly when he is close to dying. This identity does not immediately share Tod's memories, but has the function of forcing Tod to relive his life backwards. If the doctor has created an additional character within his own mind, it is possible that this is an expression of regret and an attempt at a final catharsis. One's interpretation of the end of the book is crucial to determine whether the process of reliving life backwards can in fact prove cathartic.

> I must make one last effort to be lucid, to be clear. What finally concerns me are questions of time: certain durations. (…) There are no larger units of time. He has to act while childhood is still here, while everything is his playmate- including his ca-ca. He has to act while childhood is still here before somebody comes and takes it away. (…) And I within, who came at the wrong time – either too soon, or after it was all too late. (172-173)

This passage seems to indicate that when Soul and Odilo have crossed the most dangerous straits of Tod's memories, represented by his time as a Nazi doctor in Auschwitz, the alternative identity dares to move closer to the real Tod in the comfort of being *unverdorben*, or unspoilt, by the actions that at this point lie in a fictional future. But in bringing the two personalities together the guilty conscience can reach the traumatized conscience, which allows him, even as a three year old, to bitterly regret his future actions as a grown man in Auschwitz. In my view, the act the narrator prompts him to do "while childhood is still here" is to fully accept and own up to his misdeeds. His life has been relived backwards, thus the inevitable ending is birth, but the threat that lingers, which is represented metaphorically by birth, is actually his death. The narrator attempts to cleanse the mind of the doctor much in the same way as would a Catholic confession. This interpretation could have an impact on the reader's relationship to the doctor. He is now not only an abuser, but the victim of his own abuse, which results from the circumstances he finds himself in combined with his personal

choices. He is "the worst man in the worst place at the worst time" (12), and has not lived a happy and sorrowless life in America, but has lived with mental bruises that have continuously injured him. It is possible that the doctor is reliving his own life as a survival mechanism. He could be pushing the limits of his own mind when he is about to die, in order to reunite the pieces of a shattered identity. The psychological function of time reversal, if in fact a description of a mental survival strategy resembling DID, thus reduces the real story time in which the whole novel takes place to the last few moments that Tod Friendly spends on his death bed. None of this absolves the doctor of taking responsibility for his actions, on the contrary, a part of him is trying to force him to admit what he has been part of.

Another important aspect of the novel's ending is that there are indications that Odilo's life is bound to be lived forward, or in the right direction. "When Odilo closes his eyes I see an arrow fly – but wrongly. Point-first. Oh, no, but then… We're away once more, over the field." (173). This could mean that the mental process of recapitulating one's life must be done in the right direction for the causality to be correct and thus the catharsis to be complete. It could also be interpreted as a sign of the ever hovering danger of mankind committing the type of horrors that Odilo ended up doing. This is how Ann Parry interprets the end in her essay "The Caesura of the Holocaust in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* and Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*": "Time resumes its forward direction, the tragedy is about to unfold once more. The caesura as it is articulated in Time's Arrow is forever imminent and the trajectory of European history is the possibility of its recurrence." (6)

The possibility and danger of the recurrence of such beastliness as that which Odilo Unverdorben committed is perhaps the main reason for treating the subject of Nazi war crimes in fiction. As mentioned previously, Martin Amis has named reading the book "The

Nazi Doctors" by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton the main reason why he wrote *Time's Arrow*. Dr. Lifton writes in an article adaptation of the book:

> an ordinary person is capable of extreme evil. But over the course of committing evil acts, an ordinary person becomes something different. In a process called "doubling", a new self takes shape that adapts to the evil environment, and the evil acts become part of that self. At this point, the person and his behavior are anything but banal.[16]

Odilo Unverdorben is not particularly nice before "committing evil acts", but he is not particularly malicious either and could without a doubt be called "ordinary". This is very important to keep in mind when considering the ethical impact of the psychological function of time reversal in the novel. Even though Soul's existence might be seen as a sign of mental imbalance in the doctor, he does by no means prove the doctor special or abnormal. I believe Amis needed to let the doctor represent anybody who, by not taking heed, has let their cruel and unempathetic side take over. Soul helps the reader get to know the doctor, not understand or agree with his actions. He gives the reader the role of a therapist or investigator, and together they try to help unravel the real identity of the doctor. The following discussion focuses on what the reader learns of the doctor's psyche in respect to women and sexuality, and how this relates to his misdeeds and attitudes in general.

Women

We are told that Tod Friendly treats women as disposable objects, and we hear his women complain about his lack of ability to connect emotionally. Odilo Unverdorben however, is married and we are told that he, unlike the other Nazis in the concentration camp, does not touch the girls there:

[16] A reference to Hannah Arendt's controversial book title "Banality of Evil". She wrote about the trial of Adolf Eichmann and chose the title to emphasize that the atrocities commited by German War criminals did not spring from an extrordinary source of evil in a few men, but a lingering danger in all of humanity (Fieser and Dowden).

> I don't want to touch the girls' bodies. As is well known, I frown on such harassment. I don't even want to look at them. The bald girls with their enormous eyes.(…) I get on like a house on fire with the girls in the officers' bordello. No, I think it must have something to do with my wife. (130-131)

However, there are also clear signals of Odilo exploiting the girls in the camp: "The bald whores give us no money. We ask no questions. Because here there is no why." (134). This incongruence indicates that the narrator is either reporting a change in Odilo's behavior or signaling a split in his identity here as well. In other words, he may be touching the girls and not wanting to admit it to himself. He is also reportedly surprised by Herta's reaction towards his job: "I also got the distinct impression that Herta disapproves of the work I am doing here. (…) Has someone been telling her what I did to the bald whores?" (140-141). His choice of words "got the distinct impression" makes Herta's reaction seem irrational and confounding to him. The reference to what he has done to "the bald whores" can as easily point back at the medical experiments or gassing as at his infidelity. This is another ambiguity that hints at a mental distortion, as if his mind is processing events separately. The doctor's dreams later in life also indicate that he carries a guilty conscience for incidents that have to do with the imprisoned women in the camp:

> Tod features another kind of dream in which he is a woman. I'm the woman too: in his dream I am participant as well as onlooker. A man is near us with his face averted, his slablike back half turned. He can harm us, of course. But he can protect us, if he likes. On his protection we gingerly rely. We have no choice but to love him, nervously. We also have no hair, which is unusual, for a woman. (67)

The slavelike relationship, with a hint of the Stockholm Syndrome, between the prisoner and her guard is representative for many of the relationships Mengele had with his patients. He treated both women and children with loving care until he would suddenly inflict serious harm on them or kill them in some medical experiment. Mengele was arguably more mentally

deranged than Odilo, and a novel portraying his mind from within would not send out the same warning to humanity as one portraying the perversion of an ordinary doctor who does not altogether lack empathy, but shows signs of uncomfortableness about his misdeeds. Impotency also marks Odilo's early period as a Nazi doctor and it would not be impossible to picture that his initial response to the job as a Nazi doctor could manifest itself psychosomatically in impotency. He is not equally at ease with both caring for and mutilating his patients as Mengele seemed to be.

What is more, Odilo's power, and the power of National Socialism in Germany, is clearly symbolized through his sexual performance. And as time moves backwards and his sexual relationship with Herta vanishes, the disempowering of Odilo as a white, Aryan, male doctor is paralleled by the restoration of the Jews as citizens:

> With step after step the Jews move blinking into the sunlight. While I am gradually declassed: mocked and spurned by all the liberties of love. For example. Blind and deaf Jews can now wear armbands identifying their condition in traffic. I no longer have a lower body, an external heart, in Herta's scheme of things. I am cut off at the waist for ever. (163-164)

His sexual relationship to Herta also bears a criticism of the relationship between men and women in general, exemplified by a revolting depiction of the, sometimes, stark differences between courtship and marriage. "It's very sweet. Now that the wedding nears, Odilo is altogether gentler. He has stopped having tantrums. No longer is his chimpanzee required to do the housework naked, and on all fours." (159) The use of the word "tantrum" brings associations of a spoilt child, and a strong criticism of his abuse of the power that lies in belonging to the physically stronger sex is arguably inherent in this.

There is no doubt that the reader's understanding of the nature of the time reversal in *Time's Arrow* is inextricably linked to the relationship the narrator and the man through whom he sees the world. This immediately brings the interpretative work of the reader to a psychological level. The function of Soul is dual in that he both allows for a creation of suspense, and that he deepens the psychological experience of entering the mind of a war criminal. The narrator may very well be a product of the doctor's mind and an inherent part of his identity that has difficulties accepting what he has done in the past, or he could just be a narrative tool that should not be inserted literally into the story. The question is actually whether the conclusion each reader might reach in regard to this affects the ethical implications of the novel. This question is indirectly raised by the critics of Holocaust fiction and ties in with the literary post-modernist interest in, and focus on, the minds of the perpetrators as opposed to the victims. I will leave the further investigation of this topic to someone else, but my reading leads me to believe that the repugnance of the war crimes described in the novel is not mildened by indicating that the perpetrator might, on some deep psychological level, regret his actions.

This function of time reversal, as describing a state of mental imbalance, is not uncommonly used. Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse 5* is considered mentally deranged, so is Susanna Kaysen in *Girl Interrupted*. And both the protagonist of "Spiegelgeschichte" and "Viaje a la Semilla" have suffered mental trauma, which could easily tip the scale towards insanity on some level. Ethically however, there is a difference between the first and second group. Billy Pilgrim and Susanna Kaysen are not accused of murder in their stories, even though Billy used to be a soldier and Susanna Kaysen attempted to kill herself. But the protagonists of "Spiegelgeschichte", "Viaje a la Semilla" and *Time's Arrow* have all taken the life of (at least) one other human being. This is the reason why time is being reversed. Their crimes must be

revealed. The story I shall now examine, "Spiegelgeschichte", differs markedly from "Viaje a la Semilla" and *Time's Arrow* in that the protagonist, guilty of taking a life, is placed curiously close to the ethical center of the story. Where the rerun of the life of Don Marcial is instigated by an old black man with supernatural powers in "Viaje a la Semilla", and the protagonist himself is portrayed as a cruel and dominant male leader who only shows regret for his actions at his deathbed, the protagonist of Spiegelgeschichte seems herself to have turned the arrow of time in order to correct her mistakes.

Time reversal in Ilse Aichinger's "Spiegelgeschichte"

The Austrian writer Ilse Aichinger became famous with her story "Spiegelgeschichte" [1949] in 1952 as it won her the acclaimed "Gruppe 47" award. "Gruppe 47" was a group of distinguished modern German writers who chose a writer each year to be decorated with this award for innovative writing of literature in the German language. Aichinger's short story represented the vanguard as it follows the life of a young woman from her burial to her birth and is told in the voice of a second person singular narrator. This story is treated extensively in this chapter because, in my view, the main reason for reversing time in the story is to add a psychological depth to it. The reader is stuck with the protagonist in a self-loathing, mental Canossa Walk. The use of "du"[17], *you*, and the backwards chronology heightens the story's feel of personal unease; an uncanny and angst-ridden tone permeates, and persists throughout, the story.

> Wenn einer dein Bett aus dem Saal schiebt, wenn du siehst, dass der Himmel grün wird, und wenn du dem Vikar die Leichenrede ersparen willst, so ist es Zeit für dich, aufzustehen, leise, wie Kinder aufstehen, wenn am Morgen Licht durch die Läden schimmert, heimlich, dass es die Schwester nicht sieht – und schnell! (Aichinger, 63)

[17] Cf. Greber, 482.

> When someone pushes your bed out of the ward, when you see that the sky becomes green, and when you would spare the curate the funeral sermon, then it is time for you to get up, gently, as children get up, when the morning light shimmers through the curtains, secretly, so that the sister does not see it - and quickly! ([18])

The green color of the sky signals the altered version of reality that we are presented with in this story of a life in reverse. The early introduction of children as symbols of harmony and innocence prepares the reader for what is to come; the downfall of the protagonist as a result of an illegal abortion. The procedure is not performed under sanitary conditions and what kills her seems to be an infection she gets as a result of this. But what does not let her rest in peace is the fact that she has killed her child. The recurring symbol of a "Krans", a garland or a wreath, and other references to Catholicism seem to aggravate the protagonist's crime.

The story's title means *mirror story* and signals that the story reflects another reality. The reader is thus prepared to process information metaphorically. This asks a lot of the reader, but it is not immediately clear that what complicates the reading is that the chronology of events is inverted. As in *Time's Arrow* and "Viaje a la Semilla", Aichinger uses physiological processes in reverse to signal her alternative and daring narrative mode:

> Bis Morgen sind die welken Blüten frisch und schlieβen sich zu Knospen. Die Nacht über bleibst du allein, das Kreuz zwischen den Händen, und auch den Tag über wirst du viel Ruhe haben. (65)
> By morning the faded blooms are fresh and close themselves in buds. Overnight you remain alone, the cross between your hands, and through the day too you will have much peace.

The flowers are first withered, then fresh and finally turn into buds. This chronology has no parallel in the real world and irrevocably alters the conditions under which the story is told.

[18] I have found an English translation of "Spiegelgeschichte" from Amanda Wynn, a private person's homepage and used this, but in some contexts I prefer my own translation.

The story also moves from morning to night and then approaches daytime. Time reversal can hardly be made any clearer than by reversing these natural processes.

The Main Effects of Time Reversal

The protagonist is an unmarried woman who dies as a result of having undergone an illegal abortion. The narrator is addressing the protagonist and thus narrates in the second person. This makes the reader feel as if the narrator is addressing them as well as the protagonist. Similar to the way the doctor in *Time's Arrow* is mechanically moving backwards through his own life without the ability to change his actions or question the inverted chronology, the people who appear in "Spiegelgeschichte" seem to play their roles involuntarily in the rewinding of the film that is the protagonist's life. A fact that is emphasized by the narrator in the sub-clause of the following sentence: "Und ein wenig später werden sie dir das Tuch vom Kopf nehmen müssen, ob sie es wollen oder nicht." (66) ("And a little later they will have to take the cloth from your head, whether they would like to or not"). There is no free will when the film of life, already recorded, is simply played in reverse. A sense of inevitable tragedy seeps through the lines of the story, and metaphoric images that relate to children are notably frequent such as in the following examples: "Bevor es dunkel wird und alle Kinder von den Straβenrändern verschwunden sind (...)" (64) ("Before it becomes dark and all the children have vanished from the street side"), and "Der Wind ist kühl und verspielt, ein unmündiges Kind." (65) ("The wind is cool and tired from playing, a romping child."). These visualizations of the world as pantheistically filled with the spirit of children represent the protagonist's reason to relive her life. She is so haunted by her own actions that she haunts her own life in reverse. The narrator is explicit about the protagonist having a reason to turn back from death:

> Zwei kleine Jungen am Straßenrand wetten um ihre Ehre. Aber der auf die Trambahn gesetzt hat, wird verlieren. Du hättest ihn warnen können, aber um dieser Ehre willen ist noch keiner aus dem Sarg gestiegen.(64) Two young boys at the street side wager on their honor. But the one who has bet on the tram will lose. You could have warned him, but no one would have yet climbed out of the coffin for this honor.

Something important has brought the woman "out of the coffin" and it is "der blinde Spiegel", the blind mirror, that allows for this journey and the impossible to be made possible:

> Die unschuldigen Kinder wagen's nicht, sie bei den Heiligen zu verklagen, und die schuldigen wagen's auch nicht. Aber du - du wagst es! 'Mach mir mein Kind wieder lebendig!' Das hat noch keine von der Alten verlangt. Aber du verlangst es. Der Spiegel gibt dir Kraft. Der blinde Spiegel mit den Fliegenflecken lässt dich verlangen, was noch keine verlangt hat. (…) in dem blinden Spiegel erfüllt sie deine Bitte. (68) The innocent children dare not complain of it to the holy ones, and the guilty ones dare not either. But you - you dare it! "Make my child alive again!" That no one has demanded of the old woman before. But you demand it. The mirror gives you strength. The blind mirror with the fly dirt lets you demand, what no one has demanded. (…) in the blind mirror, she grants your request.

The mirror from the old woman's house has been burnt into the protagonists mind and serves as her transportation back in time and also the only way to attempt to undo her misdeeds. It is blind, or broken, as her mind is broken, and it allows for the impossible, to undo the abortion, in the same way as the protagonist's mental imbalance allows for time to be reversed.

The abortion in itself is not the only object of the protagonist's regret. The young boy who was the child's father is also to blame for the tragedy and she regrets having a sexual relationship with him. In the part of the story where the couple enters a house near the beach through a window the narrator says: "Du hast genug geweint. Nimm deinen Kranz zurück. Jetzt wirst du auch die Zöpfe bald wieder lösen dürfen. Alles ist im Spiegel" (70) ("You have cried enough. Take your wreath back. Soon now, you will be allowed to loosen your braids. All is in the mirror".) Again the wreath, or garland, is a symbol of her innocence and her

virginity. So are the braids. The wreath appears in the early scenes of the story as it is placed on her coffin by the young man. The narrator says that now she can take it back, take back the innocence she gave him. The narrator is also very honest about the fact that this is all possible solely because of the mirroring of events.

But what has been done cannot really be undone, and nothing can be changed as she relives her life. The uselessness of reliving past actions is blatant in that the causality of all actions is reversed. This is made especially clear as Aichinger effectively underlines the focus the story simultaneously places on both directions of time through the use of oxymoronic sentences: "Am Anfang nimmt man Abschied" (69) ("In the beginning you say goodbye") and as soon as the protagonist tells her boyfriend that she is carrying his child, he has forgotten it:

> Aber kaum hat er's gesagt, hat er es auch vergessen. Im Spiegel sagt man alles, dass es vergessen sei. Und kaum hast du gesagt, dass du das Kind erwartest, hast du es auch verschwiegen. Der Spiegel spiegelt alles. (69) But scarcely has he said it before he has forgotten it. In the mirror one says all, that it may be forgotten. And scarcely have you said, that you expect a child, before you have kept it a secret. The mirror reflects all.

This is the tragedy of the story. The rules of the game have changed and real life's agents are puppets without volition when contemplated through the mirror. This is the main effect of time reversal on the theme, it highlights that actions cannot be undone. The mental reliving of episodes can also be interpreted as an example of rumination, or "recurring thoughts about (…) trauma" (Seligman, Walker, Rosenhan. 190), thus the author describes a mental strategy of coping that can never remove the unwanted thoughts.

Most physicists draw an inseparable link between space and time, and also in this story is the passing of time linked to a movement in space. The protagonist is on a journey from burial to

birth, and this journey from downfall to innocence is reflected in her movements in space. The old woman who performed the abortion lives by the harbor. The closer the protagonist is to the harbor, the closer she is to her trauma. So, as she moves towards the moment in time which haunts her, the moments of the abortion, she also approaches the harbor. But after the procedure, or really before, she moves away from the harbor, the city and finally also away from the sea. The city represents the uncleanliness of the old woman's hands and house. This is what caused the infection. The road that took her to the old woman's house and the dirt goes by the sea "Es gibt da einen Weg, der an den Kohlenlagern vorbei zur See führt." (69) ("There is a path there, that leads past the coal-yards to the sea.") The house in which she got pregnant is close to the sea, and the beach is where she fell in love and thus a place of danger and carelessness: "Schnell, eh ihr an der See seid, die unvorsichtig macht!" (69) ("Quickly, before you are at the sea that makes careless!") This journey, backwards in time, from death to birth, from the city to the countryside and from sea to land represents a road to innocence; to the undoing of what is done. But as the end of the journey is getting closer, it is clear that she will have to live it forwards again. She cannot escape her destiny by living her life in reverse. Interestingly enough, this ending is very similar to the ending of *Time's Arrow*. Why does time have to go forwards again? It is difficult for the reader to know how to interpret the inverted chronology of the story, but it seems as though the author wants us to question the chronology of events, or time as we know it: "Vom Hafen heulen die Schiffe. Zur Abfahrt oder zur Ankunft? Wer soll das wissen?" (66) ("From the harbor the ships wail. To arrive or to depart? Who should know?")

The Protagonist's Experience of Life in Reverse

An important question is whether the protagonist is conscious of her fate, or future, as she moves backwards in time. Does she escape the traumatizing memories as she moves past the

time of the abortion? On the one hand, the protagonist's guilty conscience seems to be permanent throughout the story. On the other hand, all the information we get is filtered through the near omniscient narrator. An important link to the memory of the abortion is the sound of the ships from the harbor. The ships' howling is a symbol of the protagonist's sorrow and they remind her of her sin:

> Und die Schiffe heulen, wohin du immer gehst, die heulen überall. Und die Schmerzen schütteln dich, aber du darfst nicht schreien. Die Schiffe dürfen heulen, aber du darfst nicht schreien. (67)
> And the ships wail, wherever you go, they wail everywhere. And the pain shakes you, but you may not cry out. The ships may howl, but you may not cry out.

Here the narrator says that the sounds of the ships follow her wherever she goes and this is a reference to the story's future, a time which the discourse has already covered. This fits as a reference to the time after she has had the baby removed, but the ships seemingly haunt the protagonist even as she moves *past* the abortion. Just like Odilo Unverdorben can feel regret about his future actions when he is a child, the protagonist of "Spiegelgeschichte" is haunted by her guilt into the days of supposed innocence:

> da seid ihr an der See und sieht die weiβen Boote wie Fragen an der Grenze eures Blicks, (…) Was flüstern die in ihren hellen Hauben? 'Das ist der Todeskampf'! Die lasst nur reden. (69)
> there you both are by the sea and you see the white boats like questions on the edge of your gaze, (…)What do they whisper in their bright hoods? 'This is the death-throes.' Just talk.

The voices of the boats could be seen as references to what she will do in the future but still carries as part of a guilty conscience on her journey back in time. They could also point to an unknown future as warnings. They are perhaps the warning signals that the young woman did not pay attention to, and thus the reason for her downfall. But there are other signs that the protagonist carries her memories from the future into her past: "Sei ruhig! Er weiβ nicht, dass

du bei der Alten schon gewesen bist, er kann es auch nicht wissen, er weiβ nichts von dem Spiegel" (69) ("Be quiet! He knows not, that you have already been to the old woman, he cannot know it, he knows nothing of the mirror.") It is hard to say, however, if it is the protagonist who moves backwards in time and still remembers the future, or if she, like all the other people in the mirrored world, moves backwards in time forgetting all that the story has already told. It is possible that the reader is given all the information based only on the narrator's knowledge. This opens up a melancholic perspective on life as all that is lived is lost because it lies in a future from which the protagonist moves further and further away.

The Pathos of Tragedy and Time Reversal

What all the stories of reversed time to some extent show is that time reversal opens up an emotionally unique possibility to look at all that is beautiful and gained in life by portraying it as being lost. The love the young man harbors for the female protagonist seems genuine enough as his sorrow by her deathbed is evident. Their first encounter, following the story's discourse, is their farewell, a moment of little emotional involvement: "Am Anfang nimmt man Abschied. Ehe man miteinander weitergeht, muss man sich an den Planken um den leeren Bauplatz für immer trennen" (69) ("At the beginning one takes leave. Before you go ahead with one another, you must part for ever at the fence by the empty building site.") This is the time of complications in their relationship as well as in the reading of the story. But the complications draw the reader emotionally into their love story and its tragedy, so when the couple has moved from their final goodbye through their unreflective love making and moments of early infatuation, the reader is entangled in such a way that when the discourse depicts the last meeting between the two, which really is their first encounter in the story, a lot is at stake. "Die Zukunft ist vorbei" (71) ("The future has passed") And all the future they

now move away from as if it never happened is lost, just as their love really is lost, because of the termination of an unwanted pregnancy, in the story's real time.

> Drei Tage später wagt er nicht mehr, den Arm um deine Schultern zu legen. Wieder drei Tage später fragt er dich, wie du heiβt, und du fragst ihn. Nun wisst ihr voneinander nicht einmal mehr die Namen. Und ihr fragt auch nicht mehr. Es ist schöner so. Seid ihr nicht zum Geheimnis geworden? (71) Three days later he dares no more to put his arm around your shoulders. Three days after this he asks you what your name is, and you ask him. Now you don't even know each other's names. And you ask nothing more. It is better so. Have you not become a secret?

The effect is poetic and saddening while complying with the expected unhappy end of tragedy; there is manifestly no escaping their separation as it is really their meeting:

> Ein Tag wird kommen, da siehst du ihn zum ersten mal. Und er sieht dich. Zum erstenmal, das heiβt: Nie wieder. Aber erschreckt nicht! Ihr müsst nicht voneinander Abschied nehmen, das habt ihr längst getan. Wie gut es ist, dass ihr es schon getan habt!
>
> Es wird ein Herbsttag sein, voller Erwartung darauf, dass alle Früchte wieder Blüten werden, wie er schon ist, der Herbst, mit diesem hellen Rauch und mit dem Schatten, die wie Splitter zwischen den Schritten liegen, dass du die Füße daran zerschneiden könntest, dass du darüber fällst, wenn du um Äpfel auf den Markt geschickt bist, du fällst vor Hoffnung und vor Fröhlichkeit. Ein junger Mann kommt dir zu Hilfe. Er hat die Jacke nur lose umgeworfen und lächelt und dreht die Mütze und weiß kein Wort zu sagen. Aber ihr seid sehr fröhlich in diesem letzten Licht. Du dankst ihm und wirfst ein wenig den Kopf zurück, und da lösen sich die aufgesteckten Zöpfe und fallen herab. „Ach", sagt er, „gehst du nicht noch zur Schule?" Er dreht sich um und geht und pfeift ein Lied. So trennt ihr euch, ohne einander nur noch einmal anzuschauen, ganz ohne Schmerz und ohne es zu wissen, dass ihr euch trennt. (71-72)
>
> A day will come when you see him for the first time. And he sees you. For the first time, that is to say: never again. But fear not. You must not take leave of one another, that you have done long ago. How good it is, that you have already done it.
>
> It will be an autumn day, full of expectation, that all the fruits will again become blooms, like it always is, the fall, with this bright smoke and with the shadows that like splinters lie between one's steps, so that you could cut your feet on them, that you could fall over then, when you are sent for apples to the market, you fall for hope and for happiness. A young man comes to your aid. He has thrown his jacket loosely around him and smiles and twists his cap and knows not a word to say. But you are very happy in this last light. You thank him and throw your head

> back a little, and then the pinned-up braids loosen and fall down. "Ah," he says, "aren't you still in school?" He turns himself around and goes and whistles a tune. So you part from each other, without even another look at each other, entirely without pain and without knowing that you are parting from each other.

Thus reversing the chronology of the love story, showing the story in a mirror, allows for a new perspective on an old tragedy that surprises the reader and makes the story come alive.

The ethical emphasis that time reversal represents in Spiegelgeschichte is as important as in *Time's Arrow*. Both protagonists have committed some type of crime, but it is much clearer that the protagonist in "Spiegelgeschichte" regrets her actions and that this is the reason why she is reliving her life in reverse:

> Mach mir mein Kind wieder lebendig!(…) Und da erschrickt die Alte. Und in dem groβen Schrecken, in dem blinden Spiegel erfüllt sie deine Bitte. Sie weiβt nicht, was sie tut, doch in dem blinden Spiegel gelingt es ihr. (68) Make my child alive again! (…)And that terrifies the old woman. And in her great terror, in the blind mirror, she grants your request. She knows not, what she does, but in the blind mirror it succeeds.

By making the old woman insert the child and not remove it, take away the infection and not cause it, the true chronology of these events have a greater impact. It is much like the use of time reversal in similar situations in *Time's Arrow*. The reader knows that this is not what really happened and also knows that the protagonist is fleeing in vain. But for the story to end in tragedy, as its message is a tragic one on more than one level, time must turn towards the end. The dead woman cannot escape her actions by being granted refuge in the reversal of time and the warm embrace of never having existed. She must walk her chosen path again.

> Es ist der Tag deiner Geburt. Du kommst zur Welt und schlägst die Augen auf und schlieβt sie wieder vor dem starken Licht. Das Licht wärmt dir die Glieder, du regst dich in der Sonne, du bist da, du lebst. (74) It is the day of

> your birth. You come into the world and open your eyes and shut them again because of the strong light. The light warms your limbs, you stretch yourself in the sun, you are there, you live.

The tone in this paragraph is positive and full of hope. The reader is invited to believe some sort of closure has been achieved. The false comfort of the illusion is similar to that which mental strategies of suppression, such as DID, create in the protagonists, and both the reader and the protagonist must be awakened to skies that are not *green*. The author sets a trap for the reader's emotions and the final sentences of the story feel like a cold shower of confusion and unease: "Dein Vater beugt sich uber dich. 'Es ist zu Ende' sagen die hinter dir , 'sie ist tot' Still! Lass sie reden!" (74) ("Your father bends over you. 'It is the end,' they say behind you, 'She is dead.' Quiet! Let them [/her] talk!") But the translation could be misleading, as the final sentence is ambiguous in German. The personal pronoun *sie* could refer to *her* as well as *them*. If the final sentence and demand is translated into "Quiet! Let *her* talk!" (my emphasis) the importance is placed on hearing what the protagonist has to say. We are invited to hear her thoughts and feelings and to know her story. The ethical dimension could, from this point of departure, be explored even further and I also believe a feminist reading of the story could be fruitful. Catholicism makes the protagonist unable to accept her actions, and her actions are necessary because the society she lives in will not accept the birth of an illegitimate child. In addition to this, the young man whom she loves, insists on their relationship being sexual:"Von da ab drängt er dich, mit ihm hineinzugehen" (70) ("From then on he urges you to go with him inside.") and is thus the ultimate cause of her downfall.

In "Spiegelgeschichte" time reversal allows for the reflection of a young girl's troubled and repentant mind. It is a narrative tool to bring her back to life and relive her story within the distorted framework which serves as a metaphor for her mentally agitated condition. She can thus haunt herself and retrace the origins of her downfall to indicate between whom the blame

would be divided. Both the society that will not accept her pregnancy, the dirty old woman who goes through with the abortion under unsanitary conditions, and the young man who ushers her into bed are under attack, and time reversal lets them be criticized while the protagonist retraces her own steps in repentance. This is what pushes her so close to the ethical center of the story. And as opposed to Odilo Unverdorben or Don Marcial, she does not have the same possibility of choosing whether to take the fetus' life.

An obvious effect of time reversal, also in this story, is the painstaking effort it demands of the reader. By tilting the world slightly the reader has to focus on repositioning the image they decode at all times. In her 1946 essay "Aufruf zum Misstrauen" Aichinger writes:

> Uns selbst müssen wir misstrauen. Der Klarheit unserer Absichten, der Tiefe unserer Gedanken, der Güte unserer Taten! Unserer eigenen Wahrhaftigkeit müssen wir misstrauen! (Hermann and Thums 28) We have to disbelieve ourselves. The clarity of our motives, the depth of our thoughts, the goodness of our deeds! We have to disbelieve our own veracity! (Haushofer 1)

The recently overthrown Nazi Germany lurks in the background of this comment. How could we trust ourselves as human beings after having created (or to some extent accepted the creation of) such an abomination? Time is one of life's supposed constants that we take for granted, but Aichinger says we should not trust our perceptions or the conclusions we base on them. By breaking one of narratives', and nature's, unspoken agreements, that time is unidirectional, in the story if not in the discourse, Aichinger forces us to disbelieve ourselves. She forces the reader to pay a lot more attention to their perceptions and be more critical towards them.

Robert Desjarlais' work on the concept of experience among the homeless mentally ill in Boston also suggests that we should not take what we perceive to be the only way of filtering

the world. He criticizes the extensive use of the concept of *experience* as the mold in which human beings shape the episodes of their lives. He argues that a lot of structure is needed in order to store what you live through as experiences, which actually share many common traits with what we define as narratives. And according to Desjarlais even time can be severely distorted by living outside the normal boundaries of society: "The episodic quality of shelter life, where you need to live one day at a time and not get ahead of yourself and where nobody does anything, fixes time as a diffuse and sporadic order." (895) He claims the harshness of reality ushers many of the homeless mentally ill out of sync with time as it is most commonly perceived: "Since one way to stop thinking about the cold or other distractions is to step out of the flow of time, the acme of this predilection is the pursuit of timelessness." (896) He refers to these people with distorted perceptions of time and succession of events not as experiencing individuals, but rather as people who are *struggling along*.

> The temporal order of experience, involving as it does a cumulative layering of events that builds to a whole greater than its parts, proceeds along narrative lines of an Aristotelian bent. The gist of experience is that it goes beyond the situation at hand. The temporal order of struggling along, in contrast, involves a succession of engagements, which can include a constant but purely episodic unfolding of events. (897)

Soul's perception of events is marked by being episodic in the sense that he is not especially apt at linking events into a greater narrative. Thus he does not fully experience, but is rather struggling along. The reader, on the other hand, is meant to experience based on the information Soul gives them, and experience is only possible because they can fully understand the implications of the information given based on their ability to mentally reverse the reversal of time.

It is a fascinating notion that a literary work can bring the sane into the minds of the insane, and not only portray distortion, but use distorted pictures to effect the restoration of an image

of the world more closely resembling that in the mind of the reader. But can narratives ever provide us with an experience that really resembles that of another human being? Desjarlais addresses this question, saying that "The interpenetration of narrative and experience has grown stronger in correlation with the predominance of literature in the lives of the educated." (889) So, the more we subject our minds to narratives, the more we interpret life as if consisting of narratives. Desjarlais confirms this "The present state of the art is that we can only grasp our lives through narrative" (Ibid.), but he adds to the idea by saying "though few question to what degree this inescapable fact applies outside the modern West" (Ibid.). He raises an interesting point here, because even though my narratives are drawn from both the European and American continents, the Western background on which they perform their shadow-play is unmistakable. The strongest non-Western impulse lies in the African and Indigenous aspects of Alejo Carpentier's cultural background. Therefore extensive research on fiction of time reversal from cultures beyond the scope of this thesis will hopefully be executed.

Conclusion

What does time reversal do?

The answer is that time reversal can do a number of things. In the course of this thesis, I have showed how such a change in the general framework of a story constitutes a cognitive challenge which enables the use of emotive effects, such as humor or terror, as well as to enrich the ethical and psychological dimensions of the story in a way normal chronology would not. But I also believe this strategy can add an infinite number of new ideas to a story. In this sense I believe I have only covered some of what time reversal can do. Admittedly, the restricted number of narratives that I have found where time reversal is employed limits the possibilities somewhat, but, in theory, an alteration in the established framework of narratives of this kind opens up countless possibilities. However, there might be a good reason as to why few authors have set out on such an endeavor. In the following I will explore those reasons as well as to sum up the main results of my investigation.

I have pointed out three main effects of time reversal in this study. On the macro level I have identified that the ethical dimension of a text is emphasized through time reversal because the change in the structural framework of the narrative directs the focus in the story onto cause and thus is active in placing guilt. As a technique for defamiliarization, time reversal is also an effective means to an ethical or political end. *Time's Arrow* is an excellent example of how time reversal renews the reader's feeling of repulsion from some of the horrific war crimes of Nazi Germany. Even though we have heard about these atrocities many times before, they are vivified through the narrative strategy of time reversal because the reader has to rearrange the pieces of the narrative puzzle to match reality through a heartbreaking cognitive challenge. The genius of this is that it succeeds in making an old story come alive again. Therefore it is

very interesting that precisely the ethical dimension of *Time's Arrow* has been debated to such an extent, and that the question has been raised as to whether fiction treating historical events should be allowed to distort reality in this way. Literary scholars should know better than to underestimate the monotonous effect of repetition, and the retelling of a historical benchmark as important as the Holocaust may fade in effect, terrifyingly enough, if new forms of description are not explored. Of course very traditional narrative forms can still have a great impact on an audience, but to ensure effect on as many people as possible I oppose the censoring of innovative fiction on historical events. Even though the reversal of time in *Time's Arrow* can be described as an effect meant to entertain its audience, the meaning of entertainment must here be widened to include any emotive effect, good or bad, pleasant or painful, and thus entertainment can have a strong ethical impact.

This brings us to the micro level of what time reversal can do to a story. The change in the interpretative framework, which the reversal of time entails, opens up new possibilities for affecting the reader emotionally. I have shown that the effect of humor, mostly related to the absurdness of reversed processes, is easily employed. Even though my discussion emphasizes the increased cognitive load that time reversal represents, I also postulate that the mind enjoys any cognitive challenge, so that even codes that might lead to more negative emotional responses are readily cracked. Examples of this would be the creation of suspense and even horror or repulsion. These "negative" emotive effects are found in all of the stories of this study, and are perhaps the most frequently used emotive effect in stories of reversed time.

The introductory quote to Chapter Two is Woody Allen's[19] short poetic narrative "My Next Life Backwards". He imagines this direction of life as highly preferable to life's actual

[19] Allen's text is based on Geroge Carlin's comedy where he also makes a point out of life being better if it was lived backwards.

chronology. Moving from old age into healthy adulthood, from the worries of an adult to the carefree days of childhood, "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!" (qtd. in Chatman, 31) This extremely positive view of life backwards is not prevalent in the stories I have studied. They seem more emotionally negatively inclined. This results perhaps from that living life from old age to birth can also represent a gruesome, but allusive, parallel to life's normal direction. The robbing of memory, as found in "Spiegelgeschichte", and the constant loss of companions, as experienced by Benjamin Button, reflects the tragedy of what many elderly experience in their last years of life. The horror that arises in the reader as Nazi war crimes in Auschwitz are reversed and narrated as glorious sessions of revivification have an immediate emotional and intellectually challenging impact. In this discussion it has been frequently visible how the ethical dimension and emotive effect of time reversal have proved to tie together on several levels.

The reader's attitude towards the protagonist clearly indicate his or her ethical assessment. For instance, the feeling of tragedy is greatest when the protagonist is close to the story's ethical center. Even though Don Marcial, of "Viaje a la semilla", loses all of his power as he regresses into adolescence and childhood, the feeling of tragedy is hindered by the clues of his unethical conduct. And more importantly (read with a Christian cultural background) he does not really regret the choices he has made. Thus sympathy must be considered a prerequisite for tragedy. We sympathize more readily with the protagonist of "Spiegelgeschichte", and therefore the tragedy of the narrative is deepened. The sympathy we feel is partly due to her feelings of strong regret concerning her behavior, which to some extent can be described as unethical. But it is also linked to the fact that she is portrayed as a victim of unfortunate circumstances, and this makes us judge her behavior less strictly. The ethical scrutiny of the

text is directed towards the society that causes the protagonist's misery. This reading of the story shows how the emotive effects of time reversal are used to highlight the text's ethical and political dimension.

A third aspect of what time reversal has proved itself able to add to a story, is the creation of an alternative perspective on the world. The psychological dimension of the stories is given much emphasis as the reader is forced to focus on how the protagonists can possibly experience time backwards. When I read these stories I spent a lot of energy modifying my hypothesis as to the origins of the thwarted temporal perspective of the protagonists, and I am still not necessarily set on one interpretation. I believe the strategy is used to show that the human psyche is malleable, and that all choices have consequences, on others as well as ourselves. One interpretation of "Spiegelgeschichte" and *Time's Arrow* is that both protagonists have trouble coping with the consequences of their choices, and thus create a mental escape route which consists of experiencing the world backwards. A recurring theme thus seems to be the subject of choice and free will. Soul is stripped of power over the body in which he resides as an underlining contrast to the main message of everyone having to own up to their actions. Only in a backwards world can anyone be excused of this responsibility. *Time's Arrow* is a clean cut example of time reversal's ability to place guilt irrevocably by letting a Nazi war criminal heal Jews in the gas chambers of a concentration camp. The reader brings the historical facts of the Holocaust into the read and the reader, even though the inversion of chronology has been emphasized repeatedly throughout the text, is shocked by the perversion of inverting mass murder. The placing of guilt in "Spiegelgeschichte" is more complex, as time reversal is used to underline how the protagonist blaims only herself and wishes her crime to be undone, but the story indicates that other figures are perhaps equally

guilty. All stories of reversed time share the trait that the reader has to consider both directions of time simultaneously while processing the narration[20].

The use of fantastical elements to communicate political or ethical ideas about the real world has proven to be very efficient, something which has been fully exploited in magical realism. Reader's are perhaps caught off guard by the link between the fantastical and the real, and can thus be more easily emotionally and intellectually involved in the story. Time reversal constitutes changing one of reality's constants and is immediately illogical and therefore fantastical. Physicist Stephen Hawking writes about the reversal of time's direction in a situation where the universe is contracting, not expanding. He toys with the idea that all movements must be done backwards in this scenario, and he admits that, at one point, even he thought that this would be true. All processes in physics can be reversed, but the concept of time is tricky because it only makes sense to talk of in a context of matter moving in space. And under these circumstances the laws of thermodynamics are also taking effect. The second law of thermodynamics destroys the possibility of time reversal as described in the novels under scrutiny here. This law states that "in any closed system disorder, or entropy, always increases with time" (Hawking, 161). This means that even if the universe were to contract the "backwards" movement of all the particles would not follow the same pattern as they did in the process of expansion. An image of illustration could be a glass of wine which shatters on the floor tiles. If gravity was to be reversed the broken pieces would not retract into a glass filled with wine, the broken glass and wine would simply rain upwards. I do not want to dwell on the impossibility of time moving backwards, but I want to point out that this makes it fair to assume that the reason to create this alternative view of the world is to comment on the world as we know it. And therefore a general conclusion that can be drawn from my discussion of the different aspects of what time reversal can add to a story, is that its different

[20] Cf. Greber 472.

functions all seem to be linked to the ethical dimension of the texts. All the stories treat misdeeds by the hands of the protagonists, and even though time reversal can create emotive effects and psychological depth, the main focus is on the ethical judgement which the implied author and reader pass on the characters. It may seem over simple, but the same leitmotif seems to permeate the body of texts that I have studied: what is done cannot be undone. Actions *cannot* be reversed, and this is ironically emphasized in the liberating context of fiction by doing precisely this.

Despite his positive review of *Time's Arrow,* Seymour Chatman is not altogether positive to the use of time reversal in fiction. He writes that "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." (52) This is certainly true in relation with *Time's Arrow* and "Spiegelgeschichte", that both have obvious reasons for choosing such a temporal disjunction. The lack of "strong thematic motivation" in "Viaje a la semilla", on the other hand, seems to indicate that this is not really a requirement for employing time reversal. In the magical context of Colonial Latin America time reversal sets the mood for the telling of a story to a greater extent than it prepares the reader for the conveyance of a particular message. Simply by not carrying as strict demands for logic and rationality as expressions of traditional Western culture do, this story allows for a weaker articulation of themes. The fact that it forms part of a Latin American context could be key to understand this difference, and the reason why the strategy is perhaps more easily used here could be that there is a strong influence of non-Western cultures that have a less restrictive view on the supernatural. An additional angle of further investigation of time reversal in fiction would thus be to compare

its usage in different cultural contexts a task perhaps equally interesting to anthropologists as narratologists.

As a contrast to Chatman's conclusion on the future of time reversal, Erika Greber believes we have only seen the beginning of the use of this narrative technique, as it lately has been experimented with in various spectacular movies "und werden sicherlich, nachdem die Idee nun in der Popkultur angekommen ist, weiter Furore machen."(471) ("-and will surely, now that the idea has reached Pop Culture, continue to cause furore" (my translation)). Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, Brian Richardson and Stefan Iversen have recently opened up a web resource, *Dictionary of Unnatural Narratology*, on the pages of the University of Aarhus where they list types of "fictional narratives that transcend or violate the boundaries of conventional realism. It affirms the distinctive nature of fiction, identifies nonmimetic aspects of ostensibly realistic texts, and gravitates toward unusual and experimental works that reject the conventions of mimetic and natural narrative". This would also suggest that the interest in alternative narrative strategies such as time reversal is on the rise. My discussion of what time reversal can do has lead me to believe that authors can and should employ this technique, because it constitutes tilting the reader's world slightly, and even though it undeniably entails a cognitive challenge, the challenge is what makes reading these stories particularly interesting. And this all lays the ground for maximum impact on the reader, which again can serve ethical and political purposes.

Appendix

Retronarrated fiction[21]

Betrayal, (Play) Harold Pinter, U.K., 1978

Counter-Clock World, (Novel) Philip K. Dick, USA, 1967

"How to Talk to Your Mother", (Short story) Lorrie Moore, USA, 1985

Memento, (Film) Christopher Nolan, USA, 2000

Memento Mori, (Short story) Christopher Nolan, USA,

"My Next Life Backwards", (Short text) Woody Allen, USA,

"Vozvraščenie Čorba" (The Return of Chorb), Vladimir Nabokov, Russia, 1925

"Slaughterhouse Five", (Novel) Kurt Vonnegut, USA, 1969

"Spiegelgeschichte" (Story in a mirror), (Short story) Ilse Aichinger, Austria, 1949

Stastny Konec (Happy End), (Film) Oldrich Lipsky, Czech Republic, 1968

Time's Arrow, (Novel) Martin Amis, U.K., 1991

The Confessions of Max Tivoli, (Novel) Andrew Sean Greer, USA, 2004

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button", (Short story) F. Scott Fitzgerald, USA, 1922

The Robber Bride, (Novel) Margaret Atwood, Canada, 1993

"Viaje a la semilla" (Journey Back to the Source), (Short story) Alejo Carpentier, Cuba, 1958

[21] This list contains all fictional narratives that I know of that could belong to the category retronarration as Erika Greber uses the term.

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