Beyond Philology No. 22/4, 2025
ISSN 1732-1220, eISSN 2451-1498

https://doi.org/10.26881/bp.2025.4.08

Perpetrator trauma in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*[1]

MARINA RAGACHEWSKAYA

Received 13.06.2025,
received in revised form 7.07.2025,
accepted 10.07.2025.

Abstract

This paper addresses a fictional representation of the perpetrator trauma phenomenon, as distinct from moral injury and PTSD, in Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow*. It connects the notion of perpetrator trauma with the "ethics of violence" in the context of postmemory. The article identifies artistic techniques of trauma narrativization, such as "doubling" (re-enacted through recreation of historical prototypes, the internal and external perspectives in one narrative voice, character splitting, darkly ironic antitheses, and play on words reflecting the perversion of ethical norms); a reverse narrative structure mirroring moral inversion; the character's identity metamorphosis; psychosomatic details; and recurrent oneiric imagery. The paper also highlights the novel's purpose as a warning against historical amnesia and possible future atrocities, and outlines the social, psychological, and ideological conditions that enable genocide.

[1] This article has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union (Support to Advanced Learning and Training [EU4Belarus-SALT], reference number: NDICI-GEO-NEAR/2022/434-092). The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of M. Ragachewskaya and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

Key words

Martin Amis, perpetrator trauma, ethics of violence, postmemory, psychological “doubling”

Trauma sprawcy w powieści *Strzała czasu* autorstwa Martina Amisa

Abstrakt

W artykule tym omówiono fikcyjną reprezentację zjawiska traumy sprawcy, w odróżnieniu od urazu moralnego i PTSD, w powieści Martina Amisa *Strzała czasu*. Łączy on pojęcie traumy sprawcy z „etyką przemocy” w kontekście postpamięci. W artykule zidentyfikowano artystyczne techniki narracji traumy, takie jak „podwajanie” (odtwarzanie historycznych prototypów, perspektyw wewnętrznych i zewnętrznych w jednym głosie narracyjnym, rozszczepianie postaci, mrocznie ironiczne antytezy i grę słów odzwierciedlającą perwersję norm etycznych); odwróconą strukturę narracyjną odzwierciedlającą inwersję moralną; metamorfozę tożsamości postaci; szczegóły psychosomatyczne; i powtarzające się oniryczne obrazy. W artykule podkreślono również cel powieści jako ostrzeżenia przed historyczną amnezją i możliwymi przyszłymi okrucieństwami oraz opisano warunki społeczne, psychologiczne i ideologiczne, które umożliwiają ludobójstwo.

Słowa kluczowe

Martin Amis, trauma sprawcy, etyka przemocy, postpamięć, psychologiczne „podwojenie”

1. Introduction

The notion of perpetrator trauma has entered into a new context of studies in the 21st century. Due to its ethically controversial character and the evolving comprehension of the nature of military conflicts and society-induced traumatization of soldiers, Raya Morag (2018: 17) correctly points out the difference

between the "trauma suffered by victims, which is mostly a psychological trauma", and "that suffered by perpetrators, which is first and foremost an ethical trauma". In fiction, the perpetrator trauma phenomenon is most often associated with war crimes or Holocaust executioners, which can be exemplified by selected characters in such works as William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979), Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982), Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *The Zone of Interest* (2014), Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (1995), Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992), Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001) and Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006). This paper will address Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* to illuminate how fiction processes and conveys a deeper understanding of trauma experienced by perpetrators, with a focus on stylistic and narrative techniques, as well as references to the psychological and interdisciplinary studies.

2. Perpetrator trauma: Psychology, "ethics of violence" and postmemory

It is worthwhile to place the perpetrator trauma phenomenon into an interdisciplinary context. Perpetrator trauma, as a complex phenomenon, transcends the boundaries of any single discipline. It involves the psychological mechanisms of those who committed grave crimes (guilt, dissociation, psychic disturbances), the historical and cultural contexts of their actions (the Holocaust, wars and military conflicts), the literary and artistic representations of their experiences (fiction and films), and the ethical questions surrounding their accountability.

2.1. The psychological aspect of perpetrator trauma

Symptoms of perpetrator trauma may be compared to those of PTSD. As Harvey Langholtz (2002: viii) writes in the "Foreword" to an extensive thematic monograph on perpetrator trauma, "the perpetrator can develop clinical symptoms that are just as clear and just as real as the symptoms we have come to

recognize as PTSD". The author of the monograph, Rachel MacNair (2002: 1), states that the symptoms in those who committed crimes "could actually be more severe: active participation accentuates the trauma". In general, the identified symptoms include, inter alia, flashbacks and intrusive imagery from the crime scenes, efforts to avoid certain places or activities, sexually deviant/violent behaviour and sexual dysfunctions, unwanted thoughts, explosive outbursts of anger, concentration and memory problems, hypervigilance, a sense of alienation, disintegration, alcohol and drug abuse – all in various degrees of prominence or frequency (Kulka et al. 2013: 7, 34; MacNair 2002: 5, 135, 141). Besides, in spite of being similar in many ways to moral injury associated with "self-handicapping behaviors", "guilt, shame, rage" (Litz et al. 2016: 3), perpetrator trauma is nevertheless distinct from it, being a severe and aggravated form of psychic dysfunction, while moral injury is mostly focused on the psychological, cultural, and spiritual effects of violations comprehended by the criminals and leading to their sense of remorse.

To exemplify perpetrator trauma, MacNair (2002: 46) specifically looks into the case of the Einsatzgruppen – "groups of soldiers or police charged with the assignment of directly shooting and killing Jews who had been rounded up for the purpose". She points out that "these murder squads had major psychological difficulties", and reiterates Adolf Eichmann's descriptions: "Many members of the Einsatzkommandos, unable to endure wading through blood any longer, had committed suicide. Some had even gone mad. Most of the members of these Kommandos had to rely on alcohol when carrying out their horrible work" (quoted from MacNair 2002: 47). These symptoms, however, cannot be regarded as similar to PTSD, because they are contextualized by the so-called "ethics of violence".

2.2. "Ethics of violence"

The moral approach underlying the "ethics of violence" addresses a possibility to justify it. Moral inquiry centres on whether and when violence can be warranted. Reflecting on this and related issues, one of the key philosophers of the 20th century, Walter Benjamin, in his seminal work *Toward a Critique of Violence* (1921), argues that violence is intrinsic to the creation and preservation of law. He critiques the conventional justification of violence through the means-and-ends relationship, where violence is deemed acceptable if it achieves a just end (natural law) or if it conforms to legal norms (positive law). He asserts: "What would remain open is whether violence in general, as a principle, is moral, even as a means to just ends" (2021: 39).

Several other 20th-century philosophers explored the ethics of violence, offering unique perspectives on its nature and implications. Thus, Hannah Arendt in her work *On Violence* (1970: 35) argues that

> […] power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not. Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. And what needs justification by something else cannot be the essence of anything. […] Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate. Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future.

The issue appears to remain insoluble in philosophical terms, even within ethics itself. Any state or political system has monopoly on violence which becomes enshrined in its laws. Perhaps, it is the scales, the limits of it and the success if its indoctrination in mass consciousness that determine the consequences. The questions such as "What actions in particular may be deemed criminal enough to resort to violence?", or "Who is to measure the 'right' proportion of violence?" continue to plague

humanity. The Holocaust, one of the world's most gruesome mass exterminations of humans by humans, has universally been recognised as the violence of utmost brutality, and as extreme evil. No theory is needed here to prove the point. However, the central issues remain: Why did those people do what they did? Where are the roots of this evil? In order to try to understand it, *their* perspective is needed. Fiction writers, through imaginative reconstructions, have offered interpretations of such internal perspectives, particularly in exploring trauma and the psychological, moral, and societal roots of evil.

2.3. Martin Amis and postmemory

Martin Amis (1949–2023) was a highly influential English novelist, essayist and critic, recognized for his stylistic inventiveness and fearless social satire. The publication of the writer's works, along with those of such authors as Graham Swift, Will Self, J. G. Ballard, and Ian McEwan, gained him the reputation of an "enfant terrible" of English literature, because of the grotesque, perverse, psychologically dark and disturbing in most of his novels.

Time's Arrow (1991) and *The Zone of Interest* (2014), where Amis explored the Holocaust and moral decay, exemplify his darkly ironic view of evil and violence. *Time's Arrow* is often presented as an experimental postmodernist work (Finny 2006: 101–116; Vice 2000: 12). While grappling with the problem of the Holocaust through the inner perspective of a Nazi criminal, it employs a highly eccentric structure, a reverse narrative, which often diverts the attention of readers and scholars from its core messages, as the novel appeared during the heyday of postmodernism in Great Britain. *The Zone of Interest* is less experimental in terms of narrative structure; it is set at Auschwitz III and delves into the lives of those involved with the Buna-Werke synthetic rubber factory during WWII, exploring the moral dilemmas of a German officer and a Jewish Sonderkommando grappling with survival amidst unimaginable horrors.

The Zone of Interest, while also considered a type of "perpetrator fiction" (Camus 2024), is more concerned with showing how ordinary people can commit extraordinary atrocities, emphasizing the banality and ordinariness of evil. Although it does depict the psychological consequences and moments of doubt experienced by perpetrators, its primary focus is on exposing the mechanisms and everyday realities of the Holocaust.

Amis's two Holocaust novels were written long after the event of genocide, and the author was born after the war. This fact situates his work in the context of "postmemory" pivotal for preserving the knowledge of and relevant attitude to the horrors of the Holocaust. The term was first coined by Marianne Hirsch, and it refers to reconstructing historical trauma by showing how harrowing events are transmitted to later generations. Hirsch (2012) states that postmemory bearers are the "generation after" those who directly experienced personal, collective, and cultural trauma. They "remember" these experiences through stories, images, and behaviours they grew up with, which have been transmitted so deeply that they seem like memories in their own right. Hirsch (2012: 5) contends that

> Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. […] It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.

As an interdisciplinary studies area, postmemory helps clarify a number of troublesome issues related to the trauma of the Holocaust. Martin Amis can be considered a bearer of postmemory, and his novels are that very "imaginative investment, projection, and creation". Solène Camus (2024) who presented an analysis of *The Zone of Interest* asserts:

> Amis is not of Jewish heritage and therefore does not belong directly to what Hirsch designates as 'the generation after' […]. However, in coining the term 'affiliative postmemory', Hirsch opens a space for the creative production of 'those less proximate members of their generation or relational network who share a legacy of trauma and thus the curiosity, the urgency, the frustrated *need* to know about a traumatic past'.

Time's Arrow presents a reverse narration, reminding of film played backwards. In the reversed version of reality, not only is simple chronology reversed (people become younger, and eventually become children, then babies, and then re-enter their mothers' wombs, where they finally cease to exist) but so is morality. Blows heal injuries, doctors cause them. Theft becomes donation, and vice versa. When the protagonist reaches Auschwitz, however, the world starts to make sense for the narrator. A whole new race is created.

Brian Finny (2006: 104) in his comment on *Time's Arrow* says: "The narrative simultaneously embodies the pleasure of returning to a less appalling phase of modernity and the painful recollection of Western civilization's fall from innocence – a fall Lyotard attributes to those grand narratives of rationalist improvement that were invoked by Holocaust perpetrators". Thus, in the context of postmemory, the novel defamiliarizes history and forces readers to think the unthinkable.

3. Narrativization of perpetrator trauma in *Time's Arrow*

Time's Arrow enables the discussion of the psychological and ethical aspects of violence by providing the inner perspective of perpetrators of the Holocaust crimes and the rich material to analyse the psychological distress experienced by those who committed acts of violence or killing. The symptoms, revealed through the depiction of the main character's condition and the author's artistic techniques that expose the psychological makeup of the Nazi criminals, serve as a warning – reminding

us of the utter ordinariness and banality of evil. The perpetrator trauma that transpires through the narrative encompasses the phenomenon of psychological "doubling", psychosomatic details and identity metamorphosis.

3.1. "Doubling"

The novel not only illustrates the Holocaust as a tragic historical event, but also explores the ways an individual is shaped by their sociopolitical environment. The novel recounts the life of a German Holocaust doctor – the character heavily influenced by Robert Jay Lifton's book *The Nazi Doctors* (1986). This work explores how Dr. Josef Mengele, an ideological fanatic, known as the "Angel of Death" (Lifton 1986: 355) and other doctors involved in atrocities at Auschwitz could justify their actions through a process of psychological "doubling", compartmentalizing their identities to perform horrible tasks while maintaining a sense of normalcy outside those roles.

Amis's novel reworks this "doubling" in several ways. First, it recreates real-life prototypes through the fictional characters. The minor personage nicknamed Uncle Pepi is modelled after Josef Mengele (preserving only his moniker in the novel): "I see him at the wheel of his Mercedes-Benz, on the day the gypsy camp was established, personally ferrying the children from 'the central hospital.' The gypsy camp, its rosy pinks, its dirty prettiness. 'Uncle Pepi'! 'Uncle Pepi'!' the children cried" (Amis 1991: 102). Odilo Unverdorben, the protagonist who assists Uncle Pepi in the "experimental operations", is a generalized image of the Nazi doctors. While Uncle Pepi appears exactly as he is characterized by Lifton, Odilo Unverdorben represents the mass psychology of German physicians participating in or supporting the Nazi regime. This double perspective enables a multifaceted image of the Nazi psychology.

Lifton mentions that Mengele's role was more important than that of the others, and he "was seemingly ubiquitous": "'He was seen the most often – the others were less prominent –

which means he was the most active among them.' That quality of being 'everywhere,' and everywhere active, was at the heart of Mengele's impact in Auschwitz and of his mode of being in the camp" (1986: 341). Mengele's ubiquity may suggest an extreme immersion in his role, which required psychological dissociation to perform horrific acts without immediate collapse. This dissociation is a hallmark of perpetrator trauma, as it enables perpetrators to function while suppressing guilt or moral conflict. However, Lifton notes that such doubling can lead to psychological strain, as the perpetrator's psyche struggles to reconcile these fragmented identities. Mengele's relentless activity may reflect an unconscious need to reinforce this dissociation, masking potential trauma beneath his apparent zeal.

Uncle Pepi's utmost visibility amidst gruesome "experiments" in Amis's novel provides a definitive touch to the portrait, making it feel disturbingly real and complex, morally split (the second aspect of "doubling"), rather than stereotypical: "'Uncle Pepi' was everywhere. This being the thing that was most often said about him. For instance, 'It's as if he's everywhere,' or 'The man seems to be everywhere,' or, more simply, 'Uncle Pepi' is everywhere.' Omnipresence was only one of several attributes that tipped him over into the realm of the superhuman" (Amis 1991: 125). This side of "doubling" is sustained by the quality of an "alter ego." Thus, the real Mengele became

> a confusing combination of affection and violence [...]. The Polish woman survivor, for instance, described him as "impulsive… [with] a choleric temper", but "in his attitude to children [twins]… as gentle as a father… [who] talked to them… [and] patted them on the head in a loving way." He could be playful with them as well and "Jumped around" to please them. Twin children frequently called him "Uncle Pepi"; and other twins told how Mengele would bring them sweets and invite them for a ride in his car, which turned out to be "a little drive with Uncle Pepi, to the gas chamber." Simon J. put it most succinctly: "He could be friendly but kill." And two other twins described him as "like a dual personality, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, I think." (Lifton 1986: 355)

Amis also stresses the same "double" quality in Odilo, the main character: while he shows certain affection for children as person, in the reverse narration, he also takes toys from them. "And backs away, with what I believe is called a shit-eating grin. The child's face turns blank, or closes. Both toy and smile are gone: he takes both toy and smile" (Amis 1991: 14). The actual desire to treat kids to sweets or show other gestures of fondness seems to be a psychic method of appeasing the acute traumatic sense of what happened. The mode of the reverse narrative permanently inhibits any atonement, thus exacerbating the trauma.

Psychic splitting is also manifested in extreme cleanliness. Lifton (1986: 345) writes: "Mengele's passion for cleanliness and perfection carried over into a selections aesthetic: he would send people with skin blemishes to the gas chamber or those with small abscesses or even old appendectomy scars". The researcher refers to the former inmates' descriptions of Mengele as "an elegant figure", "handsome, well groomed, extremely upright in posture." "His attractiveness hid Auschwitz truths: he 'conveyed the impression of a gentle and cultured man who had nothing whatever to do with selections, phenol and Cyclon B'" (Lifton 1986: 342). Mengele's overall appearance thus presents a Jekyll/Hyde doppelgänger: "We may say that the doctor standing at the ramp represented a kind of omega point, a mythical gatekeeper between the worlds of the dead and the living, a final common pathway of the Nazi vision of therapy via mass murder" (Lifton 1986: 18).

The novel's character of Pepi also appears "fantastically clean, for Auschwitz […]. On the ramp he cut a frankly glamorous figure, where he moved like a series of elegant decisions. You felt that he was only playing the part of a human being" (Amis 1991: 127). It stands as a chilling juxtaposition to the grotesque atrocities he oversees. This psychological defence mechanism can be defined as reaction formation, which occurs when an individual transforms an unacceptable impulse or anxiety into its opposite. The horrors of Auschwitz, where Pepi

participates in mass murder and inhumane medical experiments, generate profound moral and existential guilt, even if repressed. His hyper-cleanliness and elegance serve as a counterpoint to the moral filth of his actions, an attempt to distance himself from the blood and death that define his work. It stands out as a salient and paradoxical antithesis, intensifying the reader's attitude to the crimes.

Another significant aspect in the "doubling" phenomenon, internalized by the Auschwitz employees, was the German policy of the so-called "'healing' claim of the regime" (Lifton 1986: xii). Lifton (1986: 14) writes: "[T]he medicalization of killing – the imagery of killing in the name of healing – was crucial to that terrible step. (At the heart of the Nazi enterprise, then, is the destruction of the boundary between healing and killing)". In turn, M. Amis (1991: 157) not only instils this concept into the mind-set of the main character, but turns it into a postmodern play on words (the fourth aspect of "doubling"), which is also paradoxically literal in view of the reverse narration:

> Sometimes, wildly, I find myself urging Odilo to use violence […]: violence, which mends and heals. Actually, though, I have little enthusiasm for the venture. Could he do it, do you think? Is it in him? I've come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under the cover of numbers. He could never be an exception; he is dependent on the health of his society.

This play on the words "healing" and "killing" is not merely a linguistic device but a profound commentary on the moral inversion, psychological dissociation, and ideological perversion embodied in the actions of Nazi doctors in Auschwitz. The novel's backward timeline creates a literal interpretation of "killing is healing", where the gas chambers "revive" victims, bullets are "sucked" out of bodies, and crematoria "create" life from ashes. This forms the illusion that killing (in forward time) is healing (in reverse time). By presenting killing as healing, Amis

underscores how the Nazis' actions were justified through a perverse redefinition of ethical norms, where extermination was framed as a "solution" to a fabricated problem. This aspect clearly exemplifies the "ethics of violence."

The narrating agency in *Time's Arrow* may be viewed as the fifth artistic technique of "doubling." The novel's narrator is a mysterious instance, who guides the reader through the doctor's life in a disorienting reverse chronology (inverted dialogues and descriptions), and who shares his feelings (often alternating uses of "I" and "we") but lacks access to his thoughts or control over events. This technique mirrors the moral inversion of the Nazi doctors. Some passages suggest the narrator may be the doctor's soul (or conscience): "Perhaps Irene puts it best – she certainly puts it most often – when she tells Tod that he has no soul. I used to take it personally, and I was wretched at first" (Amis 1991: 53). In another scene, where the doctor performs prohibited abortions, his soul hears this: "'You do good work, Doctor,' everyone here tells me. I deny this. I immolate myself in denial. If I died, would he stop? If I am his soul, and there were soul-loss or soul-death, would that stop him? Or would it make him even freer?" (Amis 1991: 88). This voice is a way of trauma narrativization simultaneously presenting the internal and external perspectives that diverge and have no consensus in the perception of reality.

While Amis shows the "doubling" on the example of Odilo and Uncle Pepi, the psychological analysis of the real Mengele in *The Nazi Doctors* shows his case as something specific:

> While all Nazi doctors underwent doubling in Auschwitz, Mengele was special in the seemingly extreme incompatibility of the two components of his double self, along with the extraordinary energy he could mobilize within that adaptation. His doubling was enhanced by certain psychological traits. I have in mind three dominant features of his self-process: his schizoid tendencies, his extraordinary capacity for numbing, and his impulse toward sadism and omnipotence (which turn out to be closely related). (Lifton 1986: 264)

3.2. Textualization of trauma psychosomatics

The novel constructs a subtle and darkly ironic understanding of how traumatic experiences can lead to or exacerbate psychosomatic symptoms, or those physical conditions that are caused or worsened by psychological factors.

The notion of the perpetrators' nightmares is a widely recognized phenomenon. "There are also some important features of the nature of the nightmares to add. One is that they are often eidetic – they are replays of the actual events, as if a videotape of the incident were playing in the head" (MacNair 2002: 6). One of the realities of Auschwitz was transformed by Amis into the content of Odilo's nightmares. Thus, the early SS uniforms included black jackboots that were part of their distinctive all-black attire introduced in 1932. These boots were symbolic of authority and intimidation. "There were reports of 'men with white coats and SS boots,' the combination that epitomized much of the 'euthanasia' project in general" (Lifton 1986: 70). In the novel, this becomes oneiric imagery: "I bet they don't have the dream we have. The figure in the white coat and the black boots. […] So maybe these are the things we're heading toward: the white coat and the black boots, the combustible baby, the soiled bib on its hook, the sleet of souls" (Amis 1991: 63). The doctor in the nightmare symbolizes the moral perversion of Nazi ideology, particularly the corruption of medicine under the Third Reich. The white coat, a universal emblem of care, is subverted by the black boots which evoke the SS and the machinery of death. This figure represents the part of Odilo's psyche that cannot fully suppress the moral horror of his actions.

For representing trauma, Amis appeals to the notion of constantly returning memories, fears, and somatic symptoms. Odilo hates his own reflection, he hates looking at the stars, and he has a haunting nightmare. All of these are accompanied by distinct somatic reactions:

> Every sixth or seventh day or so, in the morning, as we prepare to sack out, and go through the stunned routines of miring, of mussing (we derange each eyebrow with a fingerstroke against the grain), Tod and I can feel the dream just waiting to happen, gathering its energies from somewhere on the other side. We're fatalistic. We lie there, with the lamp burning, while dawn fades. Tepid sweats form, and shine, and instantly evaporate. Then our heart rate climbs, steadily, until our ears are gulping on the new blood. Now we don't know who we are. I have to be ready for when Tod makes his lunge for the light switch. And then in darkness with a shout that gives a fierce twist to his jaw – we're in it. The enormous figure in the white coat, his black boots straddling many acres. Somewhere down there, between his legs, the line of souls. I wish I had power, just power enough to avert my eyes. Please, don't show me the babies. […] Where does the dream come from. (Amis 1991: 39)

The recurring haunting visions of the murdered souls follow Odilo – no new identity helps him escape from the apparitions of the murdered people who go "to the day's work, with their heads bent back"; "looking for the souls of their mothers and their fathers, their women and their children, gathering in the heavens" (Amis 1991: 123). An episode early in the novel, where Tod destroys the card with the Hippocratic Oath, can serve as evidence of the lingering weight of guilt. It is a form of self-destruction, as it severs Tod from the moral framework that once defined his identity as a doctor. This act marks surrendering to the dehumanizing logic of the Nazi regime, sacrificing his humanity for ideological conformity.

3.3. The perpetrator's identity metamorphosis

Perpetrator trauma involves disintegration – a fracturing of the self, where the perpetrator's identity is split, which may result in adopting multiple personas or identities to distance oneself from guilt, often leading to a loss of an integral selfhood. The main character in *Time's Arrow* uses four different names,

changing them as he flees from country to county seeking escape from prosecution (with the assistance of a Reverend Nicholas Kreditor who apparently helps war criminals in hiding), while also "firming up a fresh identity" (Amis 1991: 101) every time. The name given him by his parents is Odilo Unverdorben (where "Odilo" means "wealthy in land" or "prosperous", and "Unverdorben" translates as "unspoiled", "unpolluted", or "untainted"). It represents the innocence of his child identity. As the doctor steps into the hell of Auschwitz and loses innocence and escapes afterwards, he assumes three other identities, reflecting his attempts to reinvent himself. After Auschwitz, he runs away with the help of gold (the melted teeth of numerous murdered Jews) to Portugal and becomes Hamilton de Souza:

> […] a really first-rate new name […]. I am assuming that this identity business is a foible of John's, of Tod's, of Hamilton's, and not universal. But look outside, at the street-skinned hills, the wildernesses of the parks behind their railings, and all the people. This crowd must churn with pseudonyms, with noms de guerre. Those that the war will soon reel in. We've been through three names already. We seem to be able to handle it. Some people, though – you can see it in their faces – some people have no names at all. (Amis 1991: 101)

The Portuguese surname "de Souza" refers to the Sousa River in northern Portugal, being a habitational name, indicating that the original bearer came from one of several places named Sousa in Portugal. The "pseudonyms" mentioned by the narrator imply a deliberate erasure of Odilo's self, but the awareness of this disintegration hints at an underlying trauma that persists.

Hamilton adopts his next name John Young during a period spent in New York City, further distancing himself from Europe and any potential repercussions for his wartime actions. "John" is of Hebrew origin, derived from the Hebrew name "Yohanan" meaning "God is gracious", and historically highly popular. It is, ironically, a speaking name, which highlights the stark contrast

between Odilo's youthful innocence and his involvement in atrocities.

Under his last identity as Dr. Tod Friendly, he settles into suburban America, attempting to blend into society and conceal his dark past. The name Tod means "death" in German, which definitely reflects back his past. "Friendly", however, is darkly ironic. These multiple identities reveal both Odilo's desire for anonymity and redemption and the fragmentation of his personality due to the sense of guilt.

The real Dr. Mengele, in fact, escaped retribution. As the researcher of the Nazi doctors' mentality clarifies, "He was reported to have died in 1979 as a result of a heart attack while swimming and to have been buried under the name of another man in Brazil. The identification was made from a study of his remains, especially bones and teeth" (Lifton 1986: 382). Soon after that identification, however, the former inmate of Auschwitz refused to "believe that the arrogant, overbearing figure she had known in Auschwitz could have undergone a 'change in personality' and become the frightened hermit in Brazil" (Lifton 1986: 382). Lifton (1986: 383) asserts though: "But we do have a story of metamorphosis after all – that of a man divested of his power for evil, gradually disintegrating in life, mentally and physically, and then rapidly and visibly as a corpse. That metamorphosis will inevitably over time take hold in the minds of survivors and others". This is exactly the point of convergence between historical trauma and postmemory. What Amis deals with in the novel is historical trauma embodied in the images of the gassed men, women and children, of rapes and tortures, which are fixed in the memories of the survivors and witnesses, the Nuremberg prosecutors and judges, researchers and fiction writers alike. A split personality in real terms and two parallel fictional agencies in the novel (the body and the soul of a Nazi doctor) represent the metamorphosis from the perpetrator of evil into a traumatized perpetrator. The extent to which this figure is burdened with guilt or traumatic symptoms is certainly the lacuna in real history. And all lacunas in history are always the

point of entry for writers. The past that has brought about one of the most devastating traumas cannot be forgotten, though excavating it from memory is a trauma in itself. The traumatizer is often a cast-off subject in cultural discourse. Amis, however, delves into this type of mind. The personality plays back the memory film about the life of brutalities and atrocities, while the soul hovers around in disbelief and stupor trying to make sense of this story, wondering and asserting: "When is the world going to start making sense?"; "The world has stopped making sense again"; "I keep expecting the world to make sense. It doesn't. It won't. Ever" (Amis 1991: 113, 149, 82).

4. Conclusion

Thus, in the context of postmemory, *Time's Arrow* defamiliarizes the Holocaust employing the artistic means that highlight perpetrator trauma. "Doubling" is realized by recreating real-life prototypes through fictional characters, the antithesis between the horrible and the clean and elegant (the alter ego or splitting), as well as the play on words reflecting moral inversion and dissociation. The reverse story telling mirrors the moral inversion, too, while the soul as the reporting agency offers a way of trauma narrativization with two simultaneous perspectives. The perpetrator's traumatic disintegration is re-enacted through identity fragmentation where symbolic naming performs an ironic function. The oneiric imagery in nightmares (the content of which is historical reality) causes somatic trauma symptoms.

The portrayal of Nazi doctors' perpetrator trauma in *Time's Arrow* serves as a powerful caution against historical amnesia, illustrating the capacity of postmemory fiction to illuminate the enduring impact of past atrocities and to warn against their recurrence.

References

Amis, Martin (1991). *Time's Arrow*. New York: Vintage Books.

Arendt, Hannah (1970). *On Violence.* New York: Harcourt Inc.

Benjamin, Walter (2021). *Toward the Critique of Violence*. Peter Fenves, Julia Ng (eds.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Camus, Solène (2024). "'But will I write disgustingly?' The shock of transmission in Martin Amis's *The Zone of Interest*". *Études britanniques contemporaines* 66. Available at <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/14475>. Accessed 11.06.2025.

Finny, Brian (2006). "Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* and the postmodern sublime". In: Gavin Keulks (ed.). *Martin Amis: Postmodernism and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 101–116.

Hirsch, Marianne (2012). *Generation of Postmemory.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Kulka, Richard A. et al. (2013). *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings from the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Langholtz, Harvey (2002). "Foreword". In: Rachel M. MacNair. *Perpetration-induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, vii–ix.

Lifton, Robert Jay (1986). *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Litz, Brett T., Leslie Lebowitz, Matt J. Gray, William P. Nash (2016). *Adaptive Disclosure: A New Treatment for Military Trauma, Loss, and Moral Injury*. New York: The Guilford Press.

MacNair, Rachel M. (2002). *Perpetration-induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Morag, Raya (2018). "On the definition of the perpetrator: From the twentieth to the twenty-first century". *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 2/1: 13–19.

Vice, Sue (2000). *Holocaust Fiction*. London – New York: Routledge.

Marina Ragachewskaya
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1000-4238
University of Gdańsk
Institute of English and American Studies
Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
marina.ragachewskaya@ug.edu.pl