READING MARTIN AMIS'S RECREATION OF THE PERPETRATOR'S GAZE IN *THE ZONE OF INTEREST*

LA RECREACIÓN DE LA MIRADA DEL PERPETRADOR EN *THE ZONE OF INTEREST,* DE MARTIN AMIS

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202410052

AÍDA DÍAZ BILD
universidad La Laguna
adbild@ull.edu.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7543-5872>

Abstract

The Zone of Interest is a historical novel set in Auschwitz in the months from August 1942 to April 1943, and which belongs to the category of perpetrator fiction. This article centres on the character of Paul Doll, the camp commandant, who represents the banality of evil and, through whose voice Amis gives the readers a sharp picture of the abominations committed by the Nazis, while he recounts the causes and devastating consequences of the perpetrators' actions. By transforming Doll into a buffoon, Amis offers a different perspective on the Holocaust and makes the reader realise that those responsible for the worst crimes were neither monsters nor exceptional human beings, but normal, vulnerable people who had the fate of millions of Jews in their hands.

Keywords: *The Zone of Interest*, Martin Amis, perpetrator, Holocaust, Auschwitz, buffoon.

Resumen

The Zone of Interest es una novela histórica que transcurre en Auschwitz desde agosto de 1942 hasta abril de 1943 y que se incluye dentro de la categoría de "perpetrator fiction". Este artículo se centra en el personaje de Paul Doll, el

comandante del campo, que encarna la banalidad del mal y a través de cuya voz Amis le ofrece al lector una visión nítida de las atrocidades cometidas por los Nazis y recrea las causas y el efecto devastador de las acciones de los perpetradores. Amis transforma a Doll en un bufón y ello le permite dar una visión diferente del Holocausto y hacer que el lector sea consciente de que los responsables de los peores crímenes no eran seres excepcionales ni monstruos, sino gente normal y vulnerable que tenía en sus manos el destino de millones de judíos.

Palabras clave: *The Zone of Interest*, Martin Amis, perpetrador, Holocausto, Auschwitz, bufón.

1. Introduction

In "The Jewish Tragedy and the Holocaust" Isaac Deutscher states that the great obstacle to understanding the Holocaust is its uniqueness. He does not believe that the passage of time will provide a better comprehension of what happened: "It is rather the fact that we are confronted here by a huge and ominous mystery of the degeneration of the human character that will forever baffle and terrify mankind" (1968: 164). Saul Friedländer agrees with Deutscher that, although knowledge of the Holocaust has increased, there is "no deeper comprehension than immediately after the war" (1976: 36). In fact, he asserts that, in the case of the Shoah, we have to abandon our natural tendency to look for some meaning or interpretation, because "[i]n Walter Benjamin's terms, we may possibly be facing an unredeemable past" (Friedländer 1989: 73). In this sense, Friedländer arguably belongs in the group of writers and scholars who believe that, on a global level, there is no redemptive message in the Shoah (Langer 1975; Friedländer 1988; Ozick 1988).

British author Martin Amis echoes these scholars' words when he admits that, despite his extensive reading on the Holocaust, "while [he] might have gained in knowledge, [he] had gained nothing at all in penetration" (2015: 309). Amis recognises that he has always been amazed and fascinated by the Holocaust's exceptionalism (Rosenbaum 2012; Seaman 2014). He is concerned not only with the magnitude of the event, but also with the inexplicability of the crime and of the figure of Hitler and the actions of the German people (Seaman 2014). In fact, he admits that the problem of understanding Hitler bedevilled him until he read Primo Levi's statement on the Nazi fanatical hatred of the Jews: "But there is no rationality in the Nazi hatred: it is a hate that is not in us; it is outside man, it is a poison fruit sprung from the deadly trunk of Fascism, but it is outside and beyond Fascism itself. We cannot understand it, but we can and must understand from where it springs, and we must be on our guard" (Levi 2004: 395-396). Levi's

statement was like an epiphany for Amis since it relieved him of the pressure to understand the Holocaust, and he felt free to write about it again (Rosenbaum 2012).[1] As Ron Rosenbaum states, Amis seems to believe that he has a responsibility as a writer and thinker to deal with the extermination of six million Jews in his works (2012). This explains why, after the publication of *Time's Arrow* (1991), in 2014 Amis returns to the subject of the Holocaust with *The Zone of Interest*, a novel set in Auschwitz in the months spanning August 1942 to April 1943.

The Zone of Interest, as Tova Reich has asserted, may be considered as a novel of written testimonies (2014). The story is told from the point of view of the three central characters, who Reich interprets as representations of the collaborator, perpetrator and victim. The collaborator is Angelus Thomsen, a womaniser who happens to be a nephew of Martin Bormann, Hitler's private secretary; the perpetrator is Paul Doll, the "Old Boozer", the camp commandant and the source of most of the comedy in the novel;[2] and the victim is Szmul, the leader of the *Sonderkommando*, the name given to Jewish prisoners forced to do the Nazis' "dirty work", that is, to help the Nazi officers deceive the prisoners on arriving at the camp and dispose of the corpses.[3] This article centres on Paul Doll, a ludicrous figure who personifies Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil and, through whose voice Amis gives "the reader a stomach-turning awareness of the abominations the Nazis inflicted on their victims" (Kakutani 2014). By transforming Doll into a buffoon, Amis achieves what he believes should be the aim of a writer, which is to change the reader's habits of perception, so that they can look at the world with refreshed eyes (Stadlen 2013).

2. *The Zone of Interest*: A Perpetrator Fiction within a Historical Novel

Whereas *Time's Arrow* is an experimental novel,[4] with *The Zone of Interest* Amis wanted to deal with the Holocaust in a more realistic way, and this is why he chose social realism as the genre for the novel (Seaman 2014). Some critics have indeed described the book as a traditional, realistic, historical novel (Ozick 2014; Preston 2014; Wood 2014), and one which merits praise due to Amis's thorough research into the atrocities committed by the Nazis. In fact, in the acknowledgements section and epilogue at the end of the novel, Amis includes the historical documentation he used to write the novel and emphasises that he "adhere[d] to that which happened, in all its horror, its desolation, and its bloody-minded opacity" (2015: 310). Wynn Wheldon believes that Amis has achieved a great accomplishment is performing a fundamental task by doing justice to his subject: "If it only helps to explain to those who at present so promiscuously throw around

the word 'genocide' what that awful word in reality denotes it will have earned the attention it will certainly receive" (2014). Wheldon's statement is very revealing, because Amis eschews what James E. Young considers to be one of the main problems with what he calls "documentary fiction". According to Young, although the writer of Holocaust fiction asserts the factual basis of his work, there is a danger of trivialising the historical event that is recreated (1988: 201). In addition, Young establishes an insightful distinction between non-fiction and fiction about the Holocaust. For him, "[w]here the nonfiction account attempts to retrieve its authentic connection to events in order to reinforce its documentary authority, fiction necessarily fabricates its link to events in order to reinforce its documentary authority" (1988: 211-212). In the case of the literature of atrocity, as Langer points out, the writer has the "advantage" of dealing with a portion of reality the audience already knows. Due to this reason, this kind of narrative can never be just a fiction inasmuch as an author "can never totally conceal the relationship between the naked body and the covering costume, the actual scars of the Holocaust and the creative salves that often only intensify pain" (1975: 91).

More specifically, when it comes to Holocaust fiction, *The Zone of Interest* belongs to the category of what Robert Eaglestone calls "perpetrator fiction" (2010, 2013, 2017). This literary critic explains that in the last two decades there has been a boom across Europe and America of works dealing with perpetrators —a trend that, according to Eaglestone, has a three-fold justification: the growth of historical research into perpetrators, the ongoing popularity of the historical novel and the fascination with the question of evil (2017: 48-49). Jenni Adams has also pointed out that this renewed attention to the figure of the perpetrator in recent Holocaust literature "forms another key strand of the lifting of prohibitions and taboos within both literature and criticism" (2014: 251). Erin McGlothlin considers that this taboo, which until recently shunned or regulated representations of perpetrators, derives from most literary critics' belief that Holocaust fiction should focus on the victims' suffering and pain (2010: 212) in order to avoid betraying the memory of the victims (213).[5] However, she strongly defends that critics should earnestly and critically analyse the consciousness of the perpetrators: "If we leave the representation of their thoughts and motives unexamined, we construct them as abstract, mythical figures whose actions cannot be accounted for (even and particularly if their thoughts and actions remain, in their extremity, essentially incomprehensible to us)" (214).[6]

The aforementioned statement by McGlothlin is highly significant because those scholars, who in recent years have argued in favour of the need to explore perpetrator trauma, have argued that such research would contribute to destroying the perception of "perpetrators as cartoonish monsters by exposing their

ordinariness and humanity" (Mohamed 2015: 1157). Certainly, as Stef Craps and his co-authors point out, some believe that by focusing on the emotional and psychological response of perpetrators to events, there is a danger of identifying the perpetrator with the victim and excusing his or her crimes (2015: 920). Obviously, those interested in perpetrator trauma do not only reject this possibility, but emphasise that the unease that readers experience when contemplating the psychological scars of the perpetrators may derive from "the uncomfortable and challenging nature of the self-scrutiny that this entails" (Vice 2013: 16), revealing our potential for evil (Craps, Cheyette and Gibbs 2015: 920). Certainly, whereas *Time's Arrow* also belongs in the category of perpetrator trauma narrative,[7] the main aim of *The Zone of Interest* is to show how ordinary people are capable of the worst atrocities.

3. Paul Doll: The Perpetrator's Gaze through the Figure of the Buffoon

In *The Zone of Interest*, Szmul, Thomsen and Doll conclude that the concentration camp shows your soul, revealing who you really are. In Doll's words, "it's true what they say, here in the KL: No one knows themselves. Who are you? You don't know. Then you come to the Zone of Interest, and it tells you who you are" (Amis 2014: 68). Amis is very much concerned with the fact that, as survivors have constantly asserted, you discover who you really are when you find yourself in extreme circumstances: "In normal, peaceful, civilized life you are aware of ten per cent of your resources and your deeper personality, but in an atrocity producing context you find out amazing things about yourself, both the perpetrators and the victims" (Seaman 2014). In fact, in an insightful article Christopher R. Browning makes a statement that reinforces Amis's thesis: "The men who carried out these massacres, like those who refused or evaded, were human beings. I must recognize that in such a situation I could have been either a killer or an evader —both were human— if I want to understand and explain the behaviour of both as best as I can" (1992: 36).

Actually, according to Arendt, the case of Eichmann confronted the judges with the question of how long it takes an average person to overcome their repugnance toward crime and how they behave on reaching this point (2006: 93). Indeed, half a dozen psychiatrists certified that Eichmann was "normal" (25) and, for Arendt, this normality was more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, because it showed that Eichmann and many others were neither monsters nor perverted or sadistic (276).[8] Moreover, what the trial showed was that Eichmann and those who were like him represented the banality of evil since they were incapable of

thinking or at least thinking from the standpoint of somebody else (49). It was precisely this banality —this sheer thoughtlessness— that predisposed Eichmann to become one of the worst criminals of the period (288). The terrible lesson that was learnt in Jerusalem, where the trial took place, was that "such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together" (288). In the same line, Amis argues that we must accept the fact that those who implemented the Final Solution were not a gang of psychopaths "getting together saying, let's kill a lot of people, let's have an orgy of violence", but a group of people who thought they were doing something good in the name of Good (Wachtel 1996: 45).

Nearly every page of *The Zone of Interest* reports some horror, which is not the figment of Amis's imagination, but the reflection of a cruel reality, and it is in this portrayal of the enormity of the Holocaust that Doll's consciousness plays a major role. According to most critics, Doll is an admirable creation. Michael Hofmann has argued that Doll is "really the only reason for reading the book" (2014: 3) and Alex Preston maintains that "the sections in his voice are the novel's bravura performances" (2014). For his part, Wheldon believes that the "best realized is Doll, in whose company the novel is most enjoyable" (2014), and Reich has asserted that the commandant is "a masterful comic performance" (2014). Doll has also been described as "a wickedly funny Monty Python figure" (Oates 2014), a buffoon (Oates 2014; Reich 2014), an oaf, a clown. Incidentally, "clown" is the word that Arendt uses to describe Adolf Eichmann. She argues that the German transcription of the taped police examination constitutes a gold mine for a psychologist, "provided he is wise enough to understand that the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny" (2006: 48). She believes that during the trial the judges became aware of his "worst clowneries" but decided to ignore them, because it would have been hard to sustain that someone like him had caused so much harm (2006: 54). This is the terrible reality that Amis portrays through the ridiculous character of Doll.

It is no surprise that the conception of this Nazi perpetrator as a comic figure in Amis's work may be met with objection. Ozick, who has been very critical of the character of Doll, has asserted that "[h]istory as comedy has a parallel effect: it trivializes the unconscionable. The blood the clown spills is always ketchup" (2014). She also claims that no genre is more liberated from the obligation to be truthful to history than comedy. This viewpoint, however, is questionable because, as some critics have proved in the last few years, comedy can deal with the Holocaust respectfully while offering a different perspective that does not belittle its enormity. Des Pres believes that comedy has become essential when coping with such a horrifying event as the Holocaust, because "humour counts most in

precisely those situations where most decisive remedies fail" (1991: 218). Mark Cory endorses De Pres's argument when he emphasises that, as a literary device, humour has "functioned aesthetically to make the unfathomable accessible to the minds and emotions of the reading public" (1995: 39). Casey Haskins reaches the same conclusion in his analysis of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* when he argues that humour is often the only possible response to a reality before which ordinary representational strategies fail (2001: 380). *Life is Beautiful* has certainly attracted the attention of those scholars concerned with the Holocaust and its representation through comedy. Most of them agree with Haskins that the film, far from trivialising the Shoah, proves that comedy can provide a different perspective without cheapening its subject. Thus, Daniel Kotzin claims that in the film "[l] aughter is nearly irresistible but it is earned without minimizing the horror of the camp" (1998: 4), while Maurizio Viano argues that comedy can be an effective tool for the dissemination of the memory of the Holocaust (1999: 33).

In keeping with this, Amis himself has argued that humour should have no limits, although he recognises that a subject such as the Holocaust carries with it certain responsibilities, a kind of decorum that the writer must bear in mind (in Mars 2015). As Preston has argued, humour in *The Zone of Interest* is more restrained than in other works by Amis and is always directed towards the ethical ends of the novel (2014). Paul Doll is the main source of comedy in the novel and, by approaching the terrible events of the Holocaust from the point of view of a buffoon, Amis succeeds in creating a terrifying picture of the cruelty and violence of the "ordinary men" who committed mass murder. The first step in the whole process of extermination was the confinement of Jews in ghettos, where many of them died, either of starvation or disease (Gill 2018: 38). However, in Amis's novel Doll gives us his own view of life in the ghettos while blaming the Jews themselves for living in such dramatic conditions, as a way to dehumanise them:

> (As a loving father, I found it particularly hard to stomach their vicious neglect of the semi-naked children who howl, beg, sing, moan, and tremble, yellow-faced, like tiny lepers.) In Warsaw there are a dozen new cases of typhus every week, and of the ½ a million Jews 5-6,000 die every month, such is the apathy, the degeneracy, and, to be quite frank about it, the want of even the rudiments of self-respect. (Amis 2015: 110)

This biased description of the ghettos offers readers a devastating picture of this Nazi perpetrator, particularly his lack of empathy, his sense of racial superiority, his fanaticism, as well as his blindness to the fact that it is the Nazi apparatus that has led the Jews to this terrible predicament. Nonetheless, the implication that the Jews are responsible for their subhuman living conditions, for their "degeneracy",

which can be extracted from Doll's words, rather reveals the prejudices that Nazi officials like Doll had about them.

The second step for many Jews after the harsh experience of the ghetto involved being transported to a concentration camp by train. Here Amis makes the reader acquainted with what he calls "the mercenary aspect" (in Rosenbaum 2012) when he refers to these trips toward death: "how incredibly avaricious the whole operation was. The way they made the Jews pay for their tickets in the railway cars to the death camps. Yeah, and the rates for a third-class ticket, one way. And half price for children" (in Rosenbaum 2012). Precisely, in the novel one of the Nazi characters, Boris, expresses how bizarre the whole situation surrounding the train tickets is: "'You know they pay for their own tickets? They pay their own way here, Golo. I don't know how it went with those Parisians, but the norm is […]'. '…But this —this is fucking ridiculous" (Amis 2015: 41-42). As a Nazi, Boris understands the rationale behind many of the norms implemented by the Third Reich, but, like Amis, he finds it absolutely ridiculous that the victims have to pay for their tickets to Auschwitz. In fact, in the above conversation Boris refers to a train that has just arrived from Paris with new prisoners. Doll and Professor Zulz, the head doctor, do not hesitate to mock the French is spite of the ordeal they are about to go through:

> "Three classes? Well, you know the French. They do everything in style."
> "Too true, Professor," I rejoined. "Even the way they hoist the white flag has a certain —a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Not so?"
> The good doctor chuckled heartily and said, 'Damn you, Paul. Touché, my Kommandant.'
> Oh yes, we bantered and smiled in the collegial fashion […]. (Amis 2015: 22)

The fact that Doll and his colleagues can make these jokes when dealing with the painful fate of the prisoners is quite revealing, because, as Andrea Reiter explains, many reports by survivors testify to the sadistic "humour" of the SS despite the eventual doom awaiting the butt of the joke (2005: 127). Actually, throughout the novel Doll prides himself on his sense of humour, like when he jokes about the tattoo on a prisoner's arm: "And is that your phone number? Just joking" (Amis 2015: 127). He even considers himself blessed with "a sense of humour" (111) when he makes fun of a Jewish family at a funeral service in the Jewish cemetery of Warsaw. Doll shows again his cruel humour when he is confronted by a French woman who has just arrived at Auschwitz:

> "No service at all. Even in 1st class!"
> "Even in 1st class? An outrage."
> "All we had were the cold cuts we'd brought with us. And we almost ran out of mineral water!"
> "Monstrous."

> "…Why are you laughing? You laugh. Why are you laughing?"
> "Step back, Madam, if you would," I spluttered. "Senior Supervisor Grese!" (24)

The reference to Ilse Grese is highly relevant because she was Senior SS Superior at Auschwitz and killed an average of thirty people a day —hence her nickname, "the Hyena of Auschwitz". She was in charge of selecting women for the gas chamber, which explains why Doll calls her to deal with the French woman "in the appropriate manner" (25), a euphemism for her use of the most sadistic methods, such as sicking dogs on inmates. Of course, Doll "respects" her: "Grese is admirably firm with recalcitrant females" (21). As Rees explains in his memoir, Rudolf Höss, the SS officer and commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, records that for mass murder to be successful it was vital to conduct the whole process in an atmosphere of great calm, which is why it was important to keep an eye on those individuals who could cause trouble for the Nazis on their way to the gas chamber by warning the other prisoners of what was going to happen to them. Such people were immediately removed from the scene and shot (Rees 2005: 146). Obviously, in *The Zone of Interest* the French woman does not know what is awaiting her, but the fact that she complains and therefore can disturb the whole process turns her into a threat for Doll and the deathly project he is involved in.

Once the Jews arrived at the concentration camp, what Rees has described as "one of the most infamous procedures associated with Auschwitz" started: the initial selection which "would come to symbolize the cold-hearted terror of the place" (2005: 141-142). Boris again describes it very well: "The most eerie bit's the selection" (Amis 2015: 4). The weak ones —women with children, elderly people— were sent directly to the gas chamber, whereas those fit for work, the healthy ones, were kept alive. In the novel, this process of selection is described by Doll:

> As for the Selektion: all but a few were under 10 or over 60; and even the young adults among them were, so to speak, selected already.
> Look. That 30-year-old male has a broad chest, true, but he also has a club foot. That brawny maiden is in the pink of health, assuredly, and yet she is with child. Elsewhere —spinal braces, white sticks. (23)

The fact that Doll becomes disappointed because the young woman is pregnant is highly significant because both pregnant women and mothers with children were sent directly to the gas chambers. As Rees has explained, although the selection process separated men from women and husbands from wives, Nazi officials very soon realised that it would be against their own interest to force mothers away from their children. The reason would be that "the upset involved in such separation would be so great as to rival the emotional disturbance caused to the killing squads by shooting women and children at close range —the very trauma

that the gas chambers had been designed to diminish" (Rees 2005: 168). Doll himself refers to this reality in the novel:

> And now, I see (the teletype lay before me), that that moron Gerhard Student at EAHO is floating the bright idea that all able-bodied mothers should be worked till they drop in the boot factory at Chelmek! *Fine,* I'll tell him. *And you can come to the ramp and try separating them from their children.* These people —they just don't *think.* (Amis 2015: 73, emphasis in original).

As his words evince, Doll is furious with the bureaucrats, but not because he worries about the mothers dying in the factory from hard work and starvation, since he is indifferent to their suffering. Yet, ironically, he presents himself as the actual victim of those who try to make his life more difficult, which is highly revealing, because in his final statement Eichmann argued that the court had not understood him, since he was merely "the victim of a fallacy" and only the ruling elite deserved to be punished (Arendt 2006: 247-248). Actually, Arendt argues that Eichmann's statements in the police examination are so funny because he told everything in the tone of someone who thought that people would feel sympathy for what he considered to be the hard-luck story of a man whose personal affairs and work plans always went wrong (2006: 50). Like Eichmann, Doll presents himself as a victim, not only because his colleagues and superior officers do not appreciate his work, but because, as will be discussed later, he marries a woman who overpowers him.

Once the selection was complete, it was necessary to make the Jews believe that what was going to happen was just a formal procedure, which was done for everyone's benefit, as Doll's welcoming of the prisoners reveals:

> *We apologise for the lack of sanitary facilities in the boxcars. All the more reason, though, for a hot shower and a light disinfection —because there are no diseases here and we don't* want *any.* Frightfully good, that, I had to admit. The stethoscope, the white coat (the black boots)— awfully good. *Oh, and would diabetics and those with special dietary needs report to Dr Bodman after supper at the Visitors' Lodge. Thank you.* Fearfully good, that, really 1st rate… (Amis 2015: 176, emphasis in original)

The aim of the Nazis' reassuring words was not to make the Jews' last minutes less painful, but to solve some of the problems that the procedure might generate. As Rees affirms, "[n]ot only did it prove easier to get people into the gas chamber by deception rather than outright force, it was also less stressful for the killers themselves" (2005: 121). This explains why, for Doll, the fact that the French have arrived quite "comfortable" by train is a dream come true because everything has been done peacefully without the need to use "the dogs, the truncheons, and the whips?" (Amis 2015: 25). Yet, although Doll is very proud of the way in which he welcomes the new inmates, his colleagues question his ability to deceive the prisoners:

> "What's wrong with the business of the barrel?" The barrel: this was a wheeze I dreamt up in October. Concluding my speech of welcome, I'd say, *Leave your valuables with your clothing and pick them up after the shower. But if there's anything you especially treasure and can't afford to be without, then pop it in the barrel at the end of the ramp*. I asked, "What's wrong with it?"
> "It stirs unease," said Entress. "Are their valuables safe or aren't they?"
> "Only the juvenile and the senescent fall for that 1, Kommandant," said Zulz. "All we ever find in the barrel's a jar of blood-thinners or a teddy bear." (173-174, emphasis in original)

The irony and comedy that pervades the whole extract emphasises Doll's incompetence and his role as a buffoon, who becomes the source of laughter for those who work for him. In this sense, it could be argued that one of the most subversive aspects of the novel is that Amis has created a perpetrator who is everything but strong and powerful. In fact, he is described by his wife, Hannah, as "so coarse, and so…prissy, and so ugly, and so cowardly, and so stupid" (Amis 2015: 298). Interestingly enough, Hannah is the strong one in their relationship, which is a clear reversal of the roles allocated to women married to camp commandants. Doll admits that he is afraid of her (222) and that he cannot discipline her (31). She even gives him black eyes, which, as Doll himself admits, "seriously detract from [his] aura of infallible authority" (58) and makes him feel "like a pirate or a clown in a pantomime" (59). What Doll is not aware of is that he is really a clown whom nobody respects. Doll would like Hannah to be more "tractable" (62) and more solicitous when he comes home burdened with problems (29). Nonetheless, Hannah's aim is "to hasten the psychological collapse of the Commandant" (143), because she despises what her husband is doing in Auschwitz. She knows that he sometimes uses music to muffle the horrible screams of the inmates when they are confronted with a reality they cannot process because of its terrifying nature. On such occasions, she is so numb with terror that she cannot utter a word, and only smoking helps her cope with the situation (14-15). Accordingly, the Nazis actually used music at the concentration camps, especially to calm newly arrived prisoners (Fackler). In this case, Doll has given orders to his musicians to start playing because the French inmates have just seen a heap of corpses in a lorry and are terrified:

> Now you don't go far in the Protective Custody business if you can't think on your feet and show a bit of presence of mind. Many another Kommandant, I dare say, would have let the situation at once degenerate into something decidedly unpleasant. Paul Doll, however, happens to be of a rather different stamp. With 1 wordless motion I gave the order. Not to my men-at-arms, no: to my musicians! (26)

As this excerpt from the novel shows, once again Doll is presented as a clown, an oaf, who is convinced that he is a kind of genius for the way in which he has

handled the whole situation. But for Hannah, who knows what he has done, this is just another instance of his cruelty and inhumanity, which leaves her devastated. In fact, at the end of the book she admits that she has been destroyed by what she witnessed and experienced in Auschwitz (Amis 2015: 299).

Nevertheless, Amis does not only recreate the devastating effect of the perpetrators' actions on their victims and even themselves; he also explains the rationale behind some of them. Thus, gassing was not the Nazis' first option. They started by shooting the Jews, but then they decided to use Zyklon B to eliminate them, not only because it was cheaper, but because it helped the executioners cope with their task (Rees 2005: 89-90). One of the characters in the novel, Professor Konrad Peters, describes the reasons for this change: "But the gas chambers and the crematories are just epiphenomena. The idea was to speed things up, and *economise* of course, and to spare the nerves of the killers. The killers…those slender reeds" (Amis 2015: 246). According to Rees, when Heinrich Himmler visited Minsk in August 1941 to see the work of the killing squads first-hand, he realised that many of the officers were traumatised after the executions, since the shootings included women and children (2005: 86). Eichmann himself was horrified when he went to Minsk and Lwów and saw the shootings: "Our people will go mad or become insane, our own people" (Arendt 2006: 89). In the novel, one of the characters refers to the way in which some of the Nazis were mentally destroyed by the denigrating tasks they were asked to fulfil: "I heard they were killing psychiatric patients in Konigsberg. Why? To clear bedspace. Who for? For all the men who'd cracked up killing women and children in Poland and Russia" (Amis 2015: 95). Doll himself admits that not everybody is prepared to follow the execution orders: "And mind you, disposing of the young and elderly requires other strengths and virtues —fanaticism, radicalism, severity, implacability, hardness, iciness, mercilessness, und so weiter" (123). Here the use of irony and more particularly antiphrasis —what Doll considers virtues are obviously unacceptable vices— enables Amis to emphasise once again the brutality and dehumanisation of the Nazis.

One of the cruellest jokes that readers can find in the novel in relation to the extermination of the Jews appears when a woman who has just arrived at the camp smears lice on Doll's face and he has to follow the same protocol as the inmates to get disinfected: he is told to take off his clothes and fold them tidily (Amis 2015: 181). The whole situation is ironic because Zyklon B was used initially at Auschwitz as an insecticide and that the "epiphany" about the mass killing potential of this gas occurred when Karl Fritzsch, Höss's deputy, came to the conclusion that "[if] Zyklon B could be used to kill lice, why could it not be used to kill human pests?" (Rees 2005: 89). Once the prisoners had been gassed

in the chambers, the Nazi officers had to get rid of the bodies. At first, they decided to bury them in what Amis ironically calls in the novel the "Spring Meadow" (Amis 2015: 37). The problem is that the bodies soon start to putrefy, and the smell becomes unbearable, as readers can grasp from Doll's words: "You could smell it, of course; and you could hear it. Popping, splatting, hissing" (65). A delegation of local worthies talks to Doll about the problem the population is facing:

> "…They said it's undrinkable no matter how many times you boil it. The pieces have started to ferment, Hauptsturmfuhrer. The water table's breached. There's no alternative. The smell is going to be unbelievable."
>
> "The smell is *going* to be unbelievable, my Kommandant? You don't think it's unbelievable already?" (61, emphasis in original)

In this extract Doll is addressing Wolfgang Prufer, his *Lagerführer*, who is shocked by Doll's inability to acknowledge a terrible reality. In fact, Doll does not realise that Prufer is just being ironic and reprimands him for always complaining. Because of the smell, they have to dig up the bodies and find a way to get rid of them. The first idea they have in the novel is to blow them up, which, of course, creates a surrealistic situation, because rather than disappear completely, the corpses go everywhere and there are "bits hanging from the trees" (65-66). When reading this scene in *The Zone of Interest*, one is tempted to believe that this is just another instance of Amis's sarcastic humour. Even Doll, who is an incompetent officer, is perplexed when they tell him about the experiment, because he realises how ludicrous the whole thing is. Unfortunately, the whole episode is based on facts. Amis is merely reproducing the testimony of Wilhelm Jaschke, a captain in Einsatzkommando 8 (Rees 2005: 87), who explains that Albert Widmann, an SS Untersturmführer from the Technical Institute of Criminal Police, in charge of devising a new method of killing the prisoners, first thought that to blow them up would be a viable option. He put several mentally ill patients in a bunker with a packet of explosives, and the result was truly heinous.

Given the aforementioned unsuccessful experiment, Doll decides that the best option is to burn the corpses, but he does not know how to make naked bodies catch fire (Amis 2015: 74). Ironically enough, it is precisely Szmul, the leader of the *Sonderkommando*—the Jewish prisoners in charge of throwing the bodies into the fire— who gives him a series of suggestions "which, as it happened, proved key" (74).[9] Pressburger, who was a member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz, testifies to this reality and emphasises that the stench was terrible (Rees 2005: 144). Pressburger's reference to the stench provoked by the burning of bodies is of utmost importance, because, as Kakutani has pointed

out, one of the most powerful aspects of the novel is Amis's "insistent dwelling on the stench that emanated from the camp (which would have been impossible for nearby residents to ignore, however invested they might have been in denial)" (2014). The stench became part of life in Auschwitz, and obviously nobody could ignore it. In fact, one of the civilian contractors at the Buna-Werke plant complains to Doll that in the town, which is 50 km away, it is impossible to swallow a mouthful from six to 10 p.m. because the wind brings the terrible smell. Even Doll is shocked when he goes outside and is confronted with the disgusting smell:

> During the drive back […] I kept pulling over and sticking my head out of the window and taking a sniff. It was as bad as I've ever known it, and it just got worse and worse and worse…
>
> I felt as if I were in one of those cloacal dreams that all of us have from time to time —you know, where you seem to turn into a frothing geyser of hot filth, like a stupendous oil strike, and it just keeps on coming and coming and piling up everywhere no matter what you try and do. (Amis 2015: 112, emphasis in original)

The smell was really so unbearable that a British prisoner who survived after working at the Buna-Werke, stated that he could never forget the "sweetish gagging corruption that caught at the throat and nose and clung to clothes and hair" (Jeffreys 2008: 234). Doll's approach to this terrible reality shows to what extent he is delusional, since he believes that everyone has from time to time what he calls the "cloacal dream", which he describes using words like "geyser" or "stupendous", as if he were describing something beautiful.

Moreover, Doll, who represents the quintessence of Nazism and is becoming more paranoid and grotesque as the novel advances, imagines himself surrounded by dead bodies recently exhumed for immolation on the pyre while he is attending a concert. However, in juxtaposition to the corpses of Jews, he believes that dead German bodies do not stink: "And how sweet the Aryans smelled! If I rendered them into smoke and flame, the burning bones (I felt confident) would not forsake that fresh aroma!" (Amis 2015: 191). Doll admits that this is not the first time his mind plays tricks on him. During his previous experience as a concert spectator, he "spent the whole $2^{1/2}$ hours intently estimating how long it would take (given the high ceiling as against the humid conditions) to gas the audience" (70). Doll's ludicrous daydreams show the extent to which he is obsessed with his work and believes in the righteousness of the Nazi project. In another passage from the novel, he goes so far as to state that the fact that prisoners are often incapable of assimilating what they see at the camp is "a reminder of —and a tribute to— the blinding *radicalism* of the KL" (27-28, emphasis in original). By

characterising Doll as a buffoon who is constantly despised and ridiculed by his wife and colleagues, who is not aware of his own shortcomings and who wholeheartedly supports the Nazi vision, Amis is capable of dealing with some of the most terrible atrocities committed by the perpetrators from a different perspective.

4. Conclusion

There is a moment in the novel when Doll says to Szmul that he has never hated the Jews, but something "had to be done about them" (Amis 2015: 139). Doll goes so far as to ask himself why they do what they do (222). Doll's moment of doubt does not last long, but it is highly revealing because, as Eaglestone has argued, both perpetrator testimony and perpetrator fiction seem to promise to answer the question "why", explaining why the protagonists committed such atrocities, but in the end they fail to answer the question they posed for themselves. They swerve, leaving "our speech broken, with nothing to say" (2017: 29). It is obvious that, for Amis, there is no reason, and his aim with *The Zone of Interest* is not to provide a definitive answer or interpretation. As Julia Klein has asserted, "It may require a novelist's skill to penetrate the psyche of a Holocaust perpetrator. But even when the novelist is as accomplished as Martin Amis, the mystery of radical evil is probably destined to remain elusive —possible to describe, but not to understand" (2014).

In this novel, Amis makes no claim of offering the reader new insights into the Holocaust, but to remind them of its enormity. He truly believes that it is important to remember an episode of modern history whose brutality and horror still leave us bewildered (Rosenbaum 2012), and in order to achieve his goal he uses comedy, which, according to him, is the only form left that can take on the real ills (Wachtel 1996: 53). In a world where evil is not always punished and good is not necessarily rewarded, "we can deal with iniquity only by sneering and laughing if off the stage" (Wachtel 1996: 53). Since the machinery of punishment and conversion has become obsolete, the writer can only use ridicule to achieve his aims. This is precisely what Amis does in *The Zone of Interest* by creating Doll, a buffoon who shows that intellectually and morally shallow people can become the incarnation of evil. By approaching the atrocities committed at Auschwitz from the point of view of a character who is defined by his stupidity, incompetence and fanaticism, Amis offers the reader a different perspective and makes them realise that those responsible for the worst crimes during the Holocaust were not monsters or exceptional human beings, but normal, vulnerable people who had the fate of millions of Jews in their hands.

Notes

1. Ozick has criticised Amis for what she considers to be a manipulation of Levi's words (2014).

2. Although Amis asserts that he based the character of Doll on Rudolf Höss, Alex Preston has argued that Doll exists somewhere between Rudolf Höss and Kurt Franz, an SS officer and commandant at the Treblinka death camp, whose nickname was Doll (2014).

3. On the figure of Szmul, see Aída Díaz Bild (2018). In an interview Amis explains that in *Time's Arrow* he dealt with the victims from a distance, but by the time he started working on *The Zone of Interest*, he felt closer to them, because now he was married to a Jewish woman whose family were Holocaust victims (in Mars). Already in 1993 Amis defined himself as a philo-Semite and emphasised how much he admired the Jews for their heightened intelligence and their tendency towards transcendentalism (Self 1993: 162).

4. Most of the articles on *Time's Arrow* focus on how the experimental narrative strategies —double narrator, reverse chronological order, defamiliarisation— contribute to the novel's ethical import. See McCarthy (1999), Vice (2000), Martínez-Alfaro (2008) and Chatman (2009).

5. In his analysis of Jonathan Littell's "Les Bienveillantes", Debarati Sanyal expresses the same idea: "How can its narrative deployment be dedicated to those who perished at their hands" (2010: 50).

6. McGlothlin's statement echoes Aharon Appelfeld's thoughts on the Holocaust. He rejects the tendency to mystify the Holocaust, to link the extermination of Jews to the incomprehensible, the mysterious, the insane and the meaningless (1988: 92).

7. See Martínez-Alfaro (2011) and Roldán-Sevillano (2021).

8. It is highly revealing that throughout the novel Doll emphasises again and again that he is "a normal man with normal needs. I am completely normal. This is what nobody seems to understand" (Amis 2015: 32, emphasis in original).

9. Amis pays so much attention to the episode of digging up the bodies and burning them because he thinks that historians have not paid enough attention to it. He believes that the Germans were trying to cover their tracks, although it was only 1942, because they knew they were going to lose the war and would have to pay for their terrible crimes if they came to light (Seaman 2014).

Works cited

Adams, Jenni. 2014. "New Directions in Holocaust Studies". In Adams, Jenni (ed.) *The Bloomsbury Companion to Holocaust Literature*. London: Bloomsbury Academic: 237-263.

Amis, Martin. 1991. *Time's Arrow*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Amis, Martin. 2015. *The Zone of Interest*. London: Vintage.

Appelfeld, Aharon. 1988. "After the Holocaust". In Lang, Berel (ed.): 83-92.

Arendt, Hannah. 2006. *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin.

Browning, Christopher R. 1992. "German Memory, Judicial Interrogation, Historical Reconstruction: Writing Perpetrator History from Postwar Testimony". In Friedländer, Saul (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the "Final Solution"*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U.P.: 22-36.

Chatman, Seymour. 2009. "Backwards". *Narrative* 17 (1): 31-55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0015>.

Cory, Mark. 1995. "Comedic Distance in Holocaust Literature". *Journal of American Culture* 18 (1): 35-40.

Craps, Stef, Bryan Cheyette and Alan Gibbs. 2015. "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Round-Table Discussion". *Humanities* 4: 905-923. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h4040905>.

Des Pres, Terrence. 1991. "Holocaust *Laughter*?" In *Writing into the World. Essays 1973-1987*. New York: Viking Adult: 216-233.

Deutscher, Isaac. 1968. "The Jewish Tragedy and the Historian". In Deutscher, Tamara (ed.) *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*. London: Oxford U.P.: 163-164.

Díaz Bild, Aída. 2018. "*The Zone of Interest*: Honouring the Holocaust Victims". *Journal of English Studies* 16: 48-68.

Eaglestone, Robert. 2010. "Reading Perpetrator Testimony". In Crownshaw, Richard, Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (eds.) *The Future of Memory*. New York: Berghahn Books: 123-134.

Eaglestone, Robert. 2013. "Avoiding Evil in Perpetrator Fiction". In Adams, Jenni and Sue Vice (eds.) *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film*. London: Vallentine Mitchell: 13-24.

Eaglestone, Robert. 2017. *The Broken Voice. Reading Post-Holocaust Literature*. Oxford U.P.

Fackler, Guido. "Official Camp Orchestras in Auschwitz. Music and the Holocaust". <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/camps/death-camps/auschwitz/camp-orchestras/>. Accessed May 30, 2024.

Friedländer, Saul. 1976. "Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust". *Jerusalem Quarterly* 1: 36-59.

Friedländer, Saul. 1988. "Roundtable Discussion". In Lang, Berel (ed.): 287-289.

Friedländer, Saul. 1989. "The 'Final Solution': On the Unease in Historical Interpretation". *History and Memory* 1 (2): 61-76.

Gill, Anton. 2018. *The Journey Back from Hell. Memoirs on Concentration Camp Survivors*. United Kingdom: Sharpe Books.

Haskins, Casey. 2001. "Art, Morality, and the Holocaust: The Aesthetic Riddle of Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*". *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (4): 373-384.

Hofmann, Michael. 2014. "Splashing through the Puddles". *London Review of Books* 36 (20): 3-5.

Jeffreys, Diarmuid. 2008. *Hell's Cartel. IG Farben and the Making of Hitler's War Machine*. London: Bloomsbury.

Kakutani, Michiko. 2014. "Ordinary, Everyday Monsters". *The New York Times* (2 October) <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/03/arts/martin-amiss-new-novel-the-zone-of-interest.html>. Accessed April 10, 2016.

Klein, Julia M. 2014. "Review of *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis". *Chicago Tribune* (September 26). <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-prj-zone-of-interest-martin-amis-20140926-story.html>. Accessed August 6, 2021.

Kotzin, Daniel. 1998. "A Clown in the Camps". *The Jerusalem Report*, October 26. ProQuest: 1-6.

Lang, Berel. (ed.) 1988. *Writing and the Holocaust*. New York: Holmes & Meier.

Langer, Lawrence L. 1975. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale U.P.

Levi, Primo. 2004. "Afterword: The Author's Answers to His Readers' Questions". Trans. R. Feldman. In *If This is a Man and The Truce*. London: Abacus: 381-398.

Mars, Amanda. 2015. "Martin Amis: Ya no veo lejanas a las víctimas del Holocausto". *El País* (September 20). <https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/09/20/actualidad/1442765518_101973.html>. Accessed September 21, 2015.

Martínez-Alfaro, María Jesús. 2008. "Fact and Fable: Ethics and the Defamiliarisation of the Familiar in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*". In Lorenzo Modia, María Jose, José Miguel Alonso Giráldez, Mónica Amenedo Costa, María J. Cabarcos-Traseira and Begoña Lasa Álvarez (eds.) *Proceedings 31st AEDEAN Conference*. A Coruña: Universidade da Coruña, Servizo de Publicacións: 497-507.

Martínez-Alfaro, María Jesús. 2011. "Where Madness Lies: Holocaust Representation and the Ethics of Form in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*". Onega, Susana and Jean-Michel Ganteau (eds.) *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*. Schöningh: Brill: 127-154.

McCarthy, Dermot. 1999. "The Limits of Irony. The Chronillogical World of Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*". *War, Literature, and Arts* 11 (1): 294-320.

McGlothlin, Erin. 2010. "Theorizing the Perpetrator in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*". In Spargo, R. Clifton and Robert M. Ehrenreich (eds.) *After Representation? The Holocaust, Literature, and Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers U.P.: 210-230.

Mohamed, Saira. 2015. "Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Atrocity". *Columbia Law Review* 115 (5): 1157-1216.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 2014. "The Death Factory". *The New Yorker* (September 29). <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/death-factory>. Accessed April 10, 2016.

Ozick, Cynthia. 1988. "Roundtable Discussion". In Lang, Berel (ed.): 277-284.

Ozick, Cynthia. 2014. "There Were No Love Stories in Auschwitz. Is it Okay for a Novelist to Invent One?" *New Republic* (October 31) <https://newrepublic.com/article/120029/zone-interest-review-it-ok-invent-holocaust-love-story>. Accessed February 28, 2017.

Preston, Alex. 2014. "Review of *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis". *The Guardian* (September 7). <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/07/the-zone-of-interest-review-martin-amis-impressive-holocaust>. Accessed April 10, 2016.

Rees, Laurence. 2005. *Auschwitz. The Nazis and the "Final Solution"*. London: Penguin, Random House.

Reich, Tova. 2014. "Review of *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis". *The Washington Post* (September 25). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/book-review-the-zone-of-interest-by-martin-amis/2014/09/25/c61670fc-32c0-11e4-8f02-03c644b2d7d0_story.html?utm_term=.170a6e1ad7eb>. Accessed April 10, 2016.

Reiter, Andrea. 2005. *Narrating the Holocaust*. London: Continuum.

Roldán-Sevillano, Laura. 2021. "The Double-Headed Arrow of Trauma: The Morally Traumatised Perpetrator in Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*". *Atlantis* 43 (2): 130-148. <https://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2021-43.2.07>.

Rosenbaum, Ron. 2012. "Martin Amis Contemplates Evil". *Smithsonian Magazine* (September). <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/martin-amis-contemplates-evil-17857756/>. Accessed January18, 2017.

Sanyal, Debarati. 2010. "Reading Nazi Memory in Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*". *L'Esprit Créateur* 50 (4): 47-66.

Seaman, Donna. 2014. "Interview with Martin Amis". *YouTube* (December 11). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHAqe-zLrGc>. Accessed May 3, 2016.

Self, Will. 1993. "An Interview with Martin Amis". *Mississippi Review* 21 (3): 143-169.

Stadlen, Matthew. 2013. "Interview with Martin Amis". *The Telegraph* (July 19). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/10190208/Martin-Amis-Cameron-looks-very-plausible.html>. Accessed April 10, 2016.

Viano, Maurizio. 1999. "Life Is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter". *Film Quarterly* 53 (1): 26-34.

Vice, Sue. 2000. *Holocaust Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Vice, Sue. 2013. "Exploring the Fictions of Perpetrator Suffering". *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 2 (1-2): 15-25.

Wachtel, Eleanor. 1996. "Eleanor Wachtel with Martin Amis". *Malahat Review* 114 (March): 43-58.

Wheldon, Wynn. 2014. "Review of *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis". *The Spectator* (August). <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-zone-of-interest-is-grubby-creepy-and-martin-amis-s-best-for-25-years/>. Accessed April 10, 2016.

Wood, Gaby. 2014. "Review of *The Zone of Interest* by M. Amis". *The Telegraph* (August 28). <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11061383/The-Zone-of-Interest-by-Martin-Amis-review-bracingly-weird.html>. Accessed April 10, 2016.

Young, James E. 1988. "Holocaust Documentary Fiction: The Novelist as Eyewitness". In Lang, Berel (ed.): 200-215.

Received: 06/01/2024
Accepted: 09/07/2024