

EFFECTS OF GARDEN-PATHING IN MARTIN  
AMIS'S NOVELS *TIME'S ARROW* AND  
*NIGHT TRAIN*



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She calls me up and says, "Get over there. There's nobody home."  
So I get over there, and guess what. There's nobody home. Martin  
Amis, *Time's Arrow*



I. INTRODUCTION

It might seem an odd paradox to praise a novel by epitomizing it as "deceptive", "confusing", or "misleading". But when it comes to Martin Amis's novels *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *Night Train* (1997), one is tempted to think in such terms. Evidently, Amis is slyly enjoying a kind of postmodern game with the reader, and yet (or perhaps, for this reason) both novels are also highly rewarding reads. As I will argue here, *Time's Arrow* and *Night Train* both employ narrative and structural techniques that produce what in psycholinguistic parlance is known as a "garden-path effect" triggered by a "garden-path sentence". As Mitchell Marcus puts it, garden-path sentences have "perfectly acceptable syntactic structures, yet [...] many readers initially attempt to analyze [them] as some other sort of construction, i.e., sentences which lead the reader "down the garden path"" (1980: 202).<sup>1</sup> In other words, garden-path sentences make readers follow up a certain hypothesis which may lead to processing failure, mistaken interpretation, or even lasting miscomprehension.

Soon after linguistic researchers became interested in garden-path sentences the effect was also found to be present in larger units of text-types: Hockett (1973) and Yamaguchi (1988) came across it in jokes and riddles, while Mey (1991) and Jahn (1999) tracked it down in short stories. As I intend to show here, Amis, too, using a range of manipulative narrative structures, deliberately leads his readers astray, ultimately forcing them into a process of re-analysis. Before turning to the garden-path phenomenon itself, however, it will be helpful to introduce the basics of what Manfred Jahn recently termed "cognitive narratology" (1997; 1999). This theory seeks to explore the cognitive mechanisms of the reading process by importing concepts and ideas from Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Minsky 1979; Abelson 1976 *et al.*) and cognitive linguistics. Here, I will particularly draw on the notion of the reader's "construction of frames" (Minsky 1979; Perry 1979; Jahn 1997, 1999), which is in turn neatly connected with the major garden paths in *Time's Arrow* and *Night Train*.

Throughout the essay I will assume that Amis's garden paths are highly functional: rather than just annoy readers, they actually lead "somewhere", and produce a notable aesthetic effect. Exploring the ways in which Amis's texts garden-path me, I am fully aware that my reading is tied to specific personal, cultural and sociological conditions and assumptions. Therefore, what I term "the reader" or "readers" is, strictly speaking, a metonymic label for my subjective reaction to these texts. I am reasonably confident, however, that the texts' structures and narrative strategies were designed to trigger these or quite similar reactions.

## 2. CONCEPT-DRIVEN READING: THE NOTION OF FRAMES

What happens when we take a novel and start reading the first few pages? Obviously, we are confronted with an unknown and as yet dimly-lit fictional world. So at first, we will try to orient ourselves in this world and get a rough picture of what is going on. But how do we actually go about this? As the "whole of anything is never told" (Sternberg 1978: 1), as all information can never be given at once, what kind of general strategy do we employ in reading?

According to AI theorists, all our knowledge is stored and structured in our minds within so-called "super-structures", such as "schemes" (a term first used by the socio-psychologist Frederic Bartlett (1932)).

mind and its central role in concept-driven information processing. Consider the following example by Bransford and McCarrell which illustrates the extent to which understanding must be considered a constructive process:

The haystack was important because the cloth ripped. (1975: 209)

Without any further context, this sentence fails to be meaningful. But what if the "cloth" in question is the cloth of a parachute? This piece of information will make readers draw from their knowledge of [parachute jumping], and now the haystack not only makes sense in terms of importance but also as a life-saving circumstance.

Similarly, when we read a sentence like "He ordered a cherry pie for dinner", we naturally presume, apart from the fact that a male person is sitting in a restaurant, that there is a waiter who will serve him, and that the person will have to pay for his meal. Additionally, we may infer that the person is slightly extravagant and/ or stingy because what he orders for dinner is just a dessert rather than a proper meal. All of these conclusions are made on the basis of structures or schemata that are stored in our minds. Menakhem Perry alludes to this when he speaks of the "reader's construction of frames":

Any reading of a text is a process of constructing a system of frames or hypotheses which can create maximal relevancy among the various data of the text —which can motivate their "co-presence" in the text according to models derived from "reality," from literary or cultural conventions, and the like. Each of these hypotheses is a sort of "label" constituting an answer to questions such as: What is happening? What is the state of affairs? What is the situation? [...] What is the purpose? What is the speaker's position? (Perry 1979: 37)

Perry's frames correspond closely to Bartlett's schemata and serve as guiding norms in the encounter with the text. In the act of reading the reader constructs "a set of frames which can motivate the convergence of as many of the various details in the text as possible" (Perry 1979: 36). Moreover, Perry adds, this set of frames functions as a "negative defining principle, so that deviation from it becomes perceptible and requires motivation by another frame or principle" (1979: 37).

theorists of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the mid-seventies. In his popular essay "A Framework for Representing Knowledge" (1979) Marvin Minsky writes:

Here is the essence of the frame theory: When one encounters a new situation [...] one selects from memory a structure called a frame. This is a remembered framework to be adapted to fit reality by changing details as necessary. A frame is a data-structure for representing a stereotyped situation like being in a certain kind of living-room or going to a child's birthday party. Attached to each frame are several kinds of information. Some of this information is about how to use the frame. Some is about what one can expect to happen next. [...] We can think of a frame as a network of nodes and relations. The "top-levels" are fixed, and represent things that are always true about the supposed situation. The lower levels have many *terminals* — "slots" that must be filled with specific instances or data [...]. Much of the phenomenological power of the theory hinges on the inclusion of expectations and other kinds of presumptions. A frame's terminals are normally already filled with "default assignments". (1979: 1-2)

According to Minsky, frames represent knowledge on a higher level of abstraction than knowledge which is activated by a concrete event. If we return to the example of the restaurant, the "top levels of a frame" of which Minsky speaks are representations of those things that are "always true" for all visits to restaurants: "to get a table", "to order a meal", "to ask for the check", etc. The "slots", however, are usually filled with "default values", and are concretized situationally with specific items, as for example that the waiter is "female" and called "Rosie".

As one can see, frames and data (i.e., a situation, a text) are mutually dependent entities: the frames offer us the conceptual structures for accumulating textual material in a way that makes sense, and the data tell us whether the frame used is appropriate. "Functionally", as Jahn puts it, "frames [...] disambiguate structural, lexical, referential, and illocutionary ambiguities, supply the defaults to fill the gaps in the discourse, and provide the presuppositions that enable one to understand what the discourse is about" (1999: 176).

Shortly after Minsky had introduced his concept of frames, many other terms were coined by cognitive researchers, all of which were based on roughly the same idea: a human mind which is capable of employing numerous "super-structures" in which certain situations and stereotypes ("making a phone-call", "seeing a film", etc.) are stored and structured. These structures or remembered experiences not only help us orientate ourselves in everyday situations, but are equally relevant in the act of reading. Although there are a number of alternatives to the term "frame", such as "scripts" (Schank and Abelson 1977) or "category" (Mandler 1979),<sup>2</sup> I will stick to Minsky's notion of frames in the following discussion of Amis's two stories.

As long as a text does not present any processing obstacles, readers will activate and follow the appropriate type of frame, which helps them make decisions on the specific meaning of a word, a sentence or the whole text. As Umberto Eco once put it: "A 'reading' is the choice of a path and therefore a *direction*" (1976: 97). In the following I will try to locate central passages in Amis's novels that trip readers up causing them to use "false" frames which have to be revised later. While specific signals in the texts persuade the reader to draw on familiar types of frames, it becomes harder and harder in the course of the reading process to link up incoming textual material with the frames constructed thus far. At a certain point then — just as in the smaller units of garden path sentences — the reader realizes that he was led up a garden path and has to revise his or her hypotheses.

### 3. CONSTRUCTING A STRANGE WORLD: *TIME'S ARROW*

*Time's Arrow* tells the life of a Nazi doctor presented by means of a technique of chronological inversion. As the critic Richard Menke quite rightly put it, *Time's Arrow* is "[a] postmodern *unbildungsroman*" [my italics] (1998: 959): almost everything in *Time's Arrow* runs backwards, as if it were possible to press the rewind-button of a movie-tape called "life", creating odd and occasionally comical scenes: Garbage men for example arrive in the morning to dispense the trash; pimps hand over plenty of cash to their call girls; old people become younger and healthier. This mode of telling is not totally new,<sup>3</sup> but Amis is perhaps the only writer whose account is so elaborated and perfected that "[d]isorientation is one's initial response" (Diedrick 1995: 163). Catherine Bernard even claims that the whole structure

of the novel "hurls the reader in a narrative black hole where he loses his bearings" (1993: 133). Although some critical comments on the back of the Penguin 1992 paperback-edition gave the game away by telling the reader that the protagonist's life is told backwards, it is still likely that readers will be garden-pathed by the beginning of the story. Here it is:

I moved forward, out of the blackest sleep, to find myself surrounded by doctors... American doctors: I sensed their vigour, scarcely held in check, like the profusion of their body hair; and the forbidding touch of their forbidding hands —doctor's hands, so strong, so clean, so aromatic. Although my paralysis was pretty well complete, I did find that I could move my eyes. At any rate, my eyes moved. [...] They were, I sensed, discussing my case, but also other matters having to do with their copious free time: hobbies, and so on. And the thought came to me, surprising in its fluency and confidence, fully formed, fully settled: How I hate doctors. Any doctors, all doctors. (TA 11)<sup>4</sup>

This opening descriptive passage provides essential expository information. Somebody (an as yet unspecified "I") wakes up and does not feel comfortable about the doctors surrounding him. Although the word "hospital" is not mentioned at first, the scenario instantly reminds us of what we have stored as a "hospital-", or more specifically, as an "operation-frame": it is quite logical for the reader to presume that the narrating "I" awakes from some sort of an anaesthetic or that an operation preceded the hospital stay. Naturally, one is curious to learn about the facts that made a hospital stay necessary. Perhaps the first-person narrator was involved in an accident, or had a serious disease. Whatever a reader might imagine at this early stage of the reading process (and this includes numerous possibilities) is exactly what Minsky calls the "filling of the slots with specific data": our frame for a "hospital stay" is activated, and we instantly attempt to enrich it with imaginative concrete data.

But in expecting a clearer account of the hospital situation, the reader is already walking down the story's first garden path. In the course of the next three pages, the narrator somewhat incongruously claims that he is getting better progressively, but at the same time, that there seems to be something totally wrong about the world he is living in: "Wait a minute. Why am I walking backwards into the house? Wait. Is it dusk coming, or is it dawn? [...] Why are the birds singing so strangely? Where am I heading?" (TA 14). Only readers who are already aware of the story's trick —the reverse

chronology— can understand that they are in fact learning something about the narrator's past. Yet the hints that foreshadow this unique mode of narration are only to be found here and there. A reader may also speculate that the narrator is mentally ill —a hypothesis which also provides an explanation as to why he finds himself in a hospital.

After the story's first peculiar incidents, the reader is likely to find the story's first dialogue confusing at first, though it will in all probability supply a clue as to how the story works:

"Dug. Dug," says the lady in the pharmacy.

"Dug," I join in. "Ooh y'rrah?"

"Aid ut oo y'rrah?"

"Mh-mm," she'll say, as she unwraps my hair lotion. (TA 14)

This looks rather better translated, read backwards and from bottom to top:

"Hm-mm."

"How are you today?"

"Good," I join in. "How are you?"

"Good. Good," says the lady in the pharmacy."

At this point our ordinary-life frame falls apart: there is no event that precedes the "blackest sleep", from which the narrator awakes at the beginning, no accident, disease, no mental instability that required a hospital stay. The narrator "awakes" from his death-bed and time is running backwards. The reader now realizes that it is necessary to invert the temporal flow of the world, as we know it, in order to make sense of the story.

The first garden path is triggered because the reader mistook an unrealistic "strange" world for a realistic one, presupposing a frame of a standard time scheme. Once the sequential logic of the story is clear, however, the reader must discard the idea that the narrator might be a madman; it is now much more likely that the narrator himself is at a loss when attempting to interpret this world of inverted causes and effects.

What happens at the beginning of the story in effect what Perry describes as "mistak[ing] a situation for an entirely different one simply because certain indices essential for its recognition were withheld in the text-continuum" (1979: 47). What is withheld in *Time's Arrow* is the fact that the principle of reading time in reverse is at work, and this certainly puts the reader on the wrong track. The question, of course, is why Amis wants to garden-path his

readers at all, as it is likely that some will put the book down in frustration before having fully realized the gimmick of the novel. Moreover, some readers might think it too arduous to have to translate every action described into its proper sequence or might find the annulment of the laws of temporal sequence nonsensical.

Perhaps, what Amis hopes to gain by forcing the reader come to grips with odd patterns of chronology is the construction of a new kind of frame, i.e., a reversed-time frame that, apart from making its own kind of sense also sensitises the reader to the process of reading itself.

However, we shall see that the time trick is not the only device Amis uses to interrogate and manipulate conventional reading strategies. The novel's narrative perspective itself is highly misleading. Seemingly helpful and "conatively solicitous" (Bonheim 1982), the narrating "T" introduces himself quite early: "I live, out here, in washing-line and mailbox America, innocuous America [...], You're-okay-I'm-okay-America. My name, of course, is Tod Friendly. Tod T. Friendly" (TA 14). This type of information mainly helps the reader to instantiate a frame for the narrative situation. But the first cause for puzzlement occurs at the end of that same paragraph, when the narrator talks of a second language "here in Tod's head", adding that "[w]e sometimes dream in that language, too" (TA 15) —thus bizarrely turning the first-person singular into a plural that does not look like a generalizing plural. Perhaps even more oddly, from this point onward the reader has to deal with a strict separation of the character Tod Friendly and an ominous "passenger or parasite" who lives in Tod Friendly's head (TA 16) and is in fact the narrator of the story. Once again, then, a frame that agrees with common reality patterns (the narrating I = Tod Friendly) has to be replaced by an unusual frame in which the narrator acts as some kind of an inner voice in Tod Friendly, a voice which Tod Friendly is wholly unaware of. But what or who is this inner voice? And what is its precise status? Certain clues in the further course of the story suggest that the narrator is Tod's soul, no less: "Perhaps Irene put it best [...] when she tells Tod that he has no soul. I used to take it personally, and I was wretched at first" (TA 62). Or at another point, when the voice remarks: "I happen to know Tod isn't squeamish [...]. But the body I live and move in, Tod's body, feels nothing" (TA 33, 34).

But what is the purpose of installing an innocent soul as the story-teller? Without an idea as to why an abstract entity functions as the narrator, the reader will face further confusions in the course of the story's peculiar journey back in time: "Tod", explains the narrator-voice, "won't be Tod for much longer. He'll trade in that name and get a better one" (TA 74). Soon

after that, Tod goes by the name "John Young", who works as a surgeon in New York; and after that, he has another identity in Portugal under the name of "Hamilton de Souza". All of these name-changes start to make sense in the last third of the novel, when "Hamilton de Souza" eventually "transforms" into "Odilo Unverdorben". The reader is then told that Odilo Unverdorben is a Nazi doctor in the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Significantly, the chapter in which this clue is revealed begins with a rather relaxed narratorial voice which claims that

[t]he world is going to start making sense... *Now*. I, Odilo Unverdorben, arrived at Auschwitz Central somewhat precipitately and by motorbike, with a twirl or frill of slush and mud, shortly after the Bolsheviks had entrained their ignoble withdrawal. (TA 124)

When we turn this passage around again, it becomes clear that the whole action depicts the escape of Unverdorben from Auschwitz shortly after the arrival of the Russians. Odilo thus has fled from the camp at the end of World War II, which is the reason why he had to change his names repeatedly —because he was an internationally wanted Nazi criminal.

Only now will the story unfold its meaning; the plot becomes transparent, as do the aim and the implications behind Amis's narrative technique. No matter how strong the sympathy the reader felt for the protagonist in the course of the story, he now discovers —and this comes as a shock— that he has been following the story of a Nazi criminal with whom he identified. Again this is a clear case of recovering from a garden path, and indicative of the way in which Amis questions traditional narrative patterns such as the concept of "round characters" (Forster 1927) with whom readers may identify. Significantly, in an interview with Victoria Alexander, Amis pointed out that "Nabokov said in a lecture once you should never identify with the characters of a novel. You should always identify with the author of a novel and see what he is trying to do" (1994: 581).

This attitude is clearly a key to understanding Amis's novel: by deliberately forestalling straightforward interpretation and thus questioning teleology and fixed meanings, Amis is giving us a new approach to seeing history. What Amis seems to suggest is that the Nazi regime is more than just the effect of a particular causal chain of events, and for this reason he does not present another account of how the Jews were treated in the Nazi concentration camps. Commenting on the conditions in Auschwitz, the narrator states: "Hier ist kein warum. Here there is no why, [...] no when, no

how, no where" (TA 128). Rather, to approach the Nazi issue, Amis invites the reader to take a look at things upside down, or as Bernard put it, to let the reader "become estranged from the continuum of life itself, to unlearn the very biological processes which make up existence" (1993: 133). In this way, perhaps, one might better grasp the brutality of the regime and its "style", as Amis calls it in his afterword. The point is that the "nature of the offence", Amis's alternative book title, may be of such a bewildering complexity that it simply cannot be explained satisfactorily. Seen from this point of view, *Time's Arrow's* incoherent narrative structure becomes a suitable metaphor for the incoherence of history, the inexplicable nature of Hitler's regime. And, in a sense, the garden path experienced by the reader is comparable to the garden path that trapped the German people.

#### 4. CONSTRUCTING A CRIME NOVEL: NIGHT TRAIN

*Night Train* is Amis's latest novel to date and belongs, like *Time's Arrow*, to the shorter forms of his artistic production. The text comes in the form of a diary and explores two subgenres of the detective story, namely the "hard-boiled detective story", initiated in the 1930s by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. It also imitates a lesser known genre, the so-called "police procedural", which appeared in the 1950s and is still popular today, as one can see in TV serials like "Columbo" or "NYPD Blue".

*Night Train's* garden-path traps can be observed on two distinct levels. Primarily, the reader is led astray by the story's "genre-frame": the text initially presents itself as a crime novel and at the end turns out to be something entirely different. But, along with the detective-narrator, the reader is also garden-pathed by the "case" itself, which is thrown into focus right at the beginning:

I am a police. That may sound like an unusual statement —or an unusual construction. But it's a parlance we have. Among ourselves, we would never say I am a policewoman or I am a police officer. We would just say I am a police. I am a police. I am a police and my name is Detective Mike Hoolihan. And I am a woman, also. What I am setting out here is an account of the worst case I ever handled. The worst case —for me, that is. When you're a police, "worst" is an elastic concept. You can't really get a fix on "worst". The boundaries are pushed out every other day. "Worst?" we'll ask. "there's no such thing as *worst*". But for Detective Mike Hoolihan this was the worst case. (NT 1)

The passage exhibits a striking clash of linguistic registers —at one point, the narrator uses educated phrases such as "parlance", and "elastic concept", and then moves on to slang expressions like "can't get a fix". Beyond this type of stylistic experiment we are instantly led into the world of the Chandleresque "tough guy"-story with its typical mode of straightforward and self-conscious narration. Stylistically, the text's simple syntax and its frequent use of the first person sounds as if it was spoken by Marlowe, Chandler's paradigmatic private detective. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe begins his narrative thus: "I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars" (1939: 9).

In the course of the next few pages further typical features of the hard-boiled detective story are quickly confirmed: the story takes place in a big American city where violence is nothing extraordinary. The detective may be female but she is also quite tough: a chain-smoking ex-alcoholic who has seen it all: "Jumpers, stumpers, dumpers, bleeders, floaters, poppers, bursters. I have seen the bodies of bludgeoned one-year-olds. I have seen the bodies of gang-raped nonagenarians" (NT 4). And finally, the case she sets out to solve involves the mysterious death of Jennifer Rockwell, daughter of Mike's boss Colonel Rockwell: One day Jennifer is found dead in her apartment —with a gun in her hand and three shots in the head. Jennifer was raised in a secure and happy family, was married to a loving husband, worked as an astrophysicist, and was generally considered a cheerful and charming person. As Mike puts it, Jennifer was a "favorite of everybody [...]. I watched her grow into a kind of embarrassment of perfection. Brilliant, beautiful. Yeah, I'm thinking to-die-for brilliant. Drop-dead beautiful. [...] She had it all and she had it all, and then she had some more" (NT 7). So as the circumstances of her death are not in line with what Mike calls a "yeah-right-suicide" (NT 7), could this have been a murder?

At this stage, readers will draw from their general knowledge of detective narratives or TV crime serials and will install what could be called a "whodunit-frame". Of course, a search for clues and the final revelation of the murderer is central to any detective story. One might even argue that crime literature is *the* "garden-pathing genre" par excellence, since nothing would be more tedious than for the villain to be identified on page one. Think, for example, of Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" which garden-paths its readers on the strength of the natural expectation that the murderer must be a human being. As a matter of fact, a thoroughly enjoyable detective story is

expected to lead to a surprise ending at the end of a path of well-strewn red herrings.

In *Night Train*, Martin Amis certainly gives us a surprise ending, though not before he has his narrator follow up a series of leads. This provides the reader with a large number of explanations that could theoretically complete the "whodunit"-frame. Suicide, to begin with, seems to be ruled out since there is no motive nor does it seem possible to shoot oneself three times in the head. There are also other traits that make the suicide appear a little *too* stereotypical—as if someone had wanted to let murder look like suicide: for example the lithium that the doctors find in Jennifer's blood, or a book of Jennifer's called "Making Sense of Suicide". Among its suspects are Jennifer's husband Trader Faulkner, with a possible motive, jealousy; and Arn Debs, apparently a secret lover of Jennifer's.

All of these possibilities concerning Jennifer's death are investigated step by step by Mike Hoolihan. At the end of her narration, after numerous interviews with the people who knew Jennifer and had seen her shortly before her death, Mike finds herself lost in a maze that is filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. Yet Mike (and we too) still believe that the solution of the case is near. Astonishingly, though, nothing of the kind materializes: instead it eventually begins to dawn on us that none of the clues and suspects lead anywhere. At the end of the day, everything in the tangled web of Jennifer's life points toward an elaborately staged suicide, planned meticulously with false clues designed to exonerate her family of all blame: "As she headed toward death", Mike reasons, "she imprinted a pattern that she thought would solace the living. A pattern: Something often seen before. Jennifer left clues. But the clues were all blinds" (NT 146).

And the story? Not a whodunit, but a whydunit—yet one whose question remains unanswered. A hard-boiled police procedural with no *denouement*, no closure, no murderer, no revelation. Naturally, if one flips back to the beginning of the novel there are some giveaways anticipating the end, but on a first reading these are likely to be misconstrued. For instance, shortly before Mike presents her diary of the investigation, she says that she considers the case to be "solved" at that particular moment, but warns us:

These papers and transcripts were put together piecemeal over a period of four weeks. I apologize also for my inconsistencies in the tenses (hard to avoid, when writing about the recently dead) and for the informalities in the dialogue presentation. And I guess I apologize for the outcome. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. (NT 5)

Few readers will take this passage to indicate literally that Mike is sorry that there is no "outcome", no revelation in a grand "Columbo" fashion. Failing to fulfill its promise as a detective story, the text turns into a pitch-black psychological study of womankind and human motivation. Yet there is much value in this kind of manipulation of genre and the spoiling of our expectations: not only does it make us aware of how we tend to read, what general expectations we draw from certain text-types, but also springs a surprise on us of a fresh, though rather peculiar, nature. And perhaps it also makes us aware of the artificial nature of other detective stories that often create cheap showmanship, in fact having nothing to do with real life. In real life, there isn't always a showdown, a satisfactory closure, a "motive" that explains what people are like and what life is about. Significantly then, the novel's end undermines the fictionalization of life that Mike herself finds absurd and detestable:

With TV you expect everything to measure up. Things are meant to measure up. The punishment will answer the crime. The crime will fall within the psychological profile of the malefactor. The alibi will disintegrate. The gun will smoke. The veiled woman will suddenly appear in the courthouse [...]. I'll tell you who wants a why. *Jurors* want a why. They want reruns of *Perry Mason* and *The Defenders*. They want *Car Fifty-Four*, *Where are you?* They want commercials every ten minutes or it never happened. (NT 108)

Refusing to arrange a "perfect" and "grand" ending, Amis eschews all natural frames of closure, leaving behind all fictional stereotypes and conventions. Amis's narrative roads are roughly paved and never lead his readers to where they think they are going.

## 5. CONCLUSION


David Lodge suggests in his essay "The Novelist at the Crossroads" (1977) that critical attention should be directed towards a certain type of "problematic" narrative, toward "[...] the trick novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader [...] through a fairground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors that open disconcertingly under his feet [...]" (1977: 105). This essay analyzed and isolated only some of the trap-doors in Amis's two novels, but attempted to highlight their modes and functions as well as the consequences they may have for the act of reading.

In *Time's Arrow* readers are led astray because of the unique organizing principle of the reverse telling mode, while in *Night Train* the expectations concerning the genre of detective fiction never materialize. As a rule, Amis's garden paths thrive on the reader's lack of contextual knowledge, leaving them no choice but to use the common defaults of ordinary language and ordinary situations. Hence, Amis's garden paths, like all garden paths, are tied to a "dominant readerly preference" (Jahn 1999: 189). Yet to take these preferences for granted may be a risky business because it is also a postmodern truism that "no two readers ever read alike" (Jahn 1999: 191). The question then is whether the principle "no two readers ever read alike" also extends to what one might call, following Grice (1975), narrative co-operation maxims. Counterbalancing all individual readings are "preference rule systems" (Jackendoff 1983, 1987), to which all readers are apt to subscribe—to "a. Prefer to assume that the narrator is conveying something relevant. b. Prefer to assume that the narrator believes what he intends to convey. c. Prefer to assume that the narrator is giving the right amount of information. d. Prefer to assume that the narrator presents his material in an orderly manner" (Jahn 1997: 447).

Then again, reacting to and recovering from garden paths is likely to be governed by specific cultural and situational factors. That is the reason why it is hard to predict how Amis's garden paths might affect a general reading audience. To gauge the effect of Amis's novels here would require a detailed empirical study. Of course, one might also turn the argument around and claim that if readers are garden-pathed identically, it must be a consequence of the existence of similar frame structures and preference rule systems. What I can confidently state at this point is that, no matter whether an individual reader is or is not garden-pathed by Amis's traps, he or she may nonetheless assess their deceptive potentials.

From a more general perspective, it is easy to see that the garden-path phenomenon is a fairly common feature appearing not only in jokes, riddles, single sentences, but also in many other text-types, ranging from nonsense literature and detective stories to unreliable narration: Perry (1979) describes the manipulative power of William Faulkner, McHale (1987) explores the labyrinthine worlds of Victor Borges, and Watts (1984) throws a light on the covert plots in Joseph Conrad's prose. Amis, of course, is an inveterate garden-pather. In his perhaps most ambitious novel *London Fields* (1989), a dark tale set at the end of the millenium, the narrator Samson Young claims to tell the true story of a murder which is just about to happen: "I know the murderer, I know the murdered. I know the time, I know the place" (1991: 1).

Without needing to anticipate the clue of the novel here, it can be said that the end of the novel is also very different from what Young promises at the beginning. This led a critic of the *Guardian* to start her review of *London Fields* as follows: "This book is a cheat. A con-trick. From start to finish, all 470 pages of it, it's an elaborate tease" (Koning 1989). And in Amis's previous novel *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) there is a writer-character named "Martin Amis", who, like many other characters in the book, plays tricks on the protagonist John Self. At the end Self is told by his ex-girlfriend: "*You know, it can be good fun deceiving people*" [my italics] (1985: 335)—and this does indeed sound as if the author is speaking through her, thus highlighting one of his central narrative strategies.

While Amis himself once admitted in an interview that some of his narrative devices "come [...] under the main heading of "Fucking Around With the Reader"" (Morrison 1990: 98), I would like to go a little further and suggest that his deceptions create what Roland Barthes termed a "writerly text" (1975): a text that opposed to a "readerly" one turns its readers from mere consumers into "quasi-producers" of the story. Martin Amis thus creates a reading experience where his readers gain exactly as much as they put in. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In today's psycholinguistic literature, there is usually one example cited as the "classical" garden-path sentence invented by Thomas Bever (1970: 316): "The horse raced past the barn fell". This sentence is incomprehensible unless it is understood as: "The horse (that was) raced past the barn fell". Another example of a garden-path sentence is: "They told the boy that the girl met the story" (Fodor and Inoue 1994: 409), which confronts the reader with the odd semantic construction of someone "meeting a story". Naturally, it is the boy [whom the girl met] to whom the story is told. The present article's epigraph cited above may be considered a (mild) garden path joke.

<sup>2</sup> Gross (1994) additionally lists the terms "sceneries", and "story grammars". For a detailed overview readers may want to refer to Mandler (1984).

<sup>3</sup> According to Kakutani (1991), an inverted time scheme was used by Pinter in *Betrayal* (1978); Diedrick (1995: 164) draws attention to Vonnegut's



*Slaughterhouse Five*, in which the character Billy Pilgrim watches a World War II movie backwards.

<sup>4</sup> All references to the 1992 Penguin edition of *Time's Arrow* are abbreviated to TA; and the 1998 Vintage edition of *Night Train* is abbreviated to NT.

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