

THE OLD MAN THE BOAT

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As for the multitudinous opinion expressed in the subjoined far-rago; as for my present assent to all, or dissent from any portion of it; as to the possibility of my having, in some instances, altered my mind, or as to the impossibility of my not having altered it often, — these are points upon which I say nothing, because upon these there can be nothing cleverly said. It may be as well to observe, however, that just as the goodness of your true pun is in the direct ratio of its intolerability, so is nonsense the essential sense of the Marginal Note.¹

In late January, in early afternoon, dim midday sun shows on a frozen moat between the national gallery and the royal family's summer castle near the narrow opening in a dried hedgerow where one enters the queen's garden from the king's park to find an oversized bronze of Queen Caroline Amalie stood on a squat base before a parish of brown plots organized in a regular grid beneath her, each rectangular sector crossed on its diagonals by a brittle shrub trimmed to form a perfect X no higher than a knee, so that when surveyed from above, the garden plan brings to mind a canceled BINGO card. In her left hand, the queen holds an unspecified book, while to that same side of her, another thick hedgerow is notched for alcoves for benches for visitors, perhaps for reading, as per the queen's example, though in late January, when the king's park is brittle and bald, those visitors to the queen's garden who are wont to catch up on their chapters from the comfort of wooden slat seating are obliged to struggle against a formidable glare reflected off the polished aluminum cylinder mounted next to each bench, not to mention the disdain of frigid north air, which is to say, in late January, a chair in the

queen's garden offers little benefit to a weary reader that a metal trashcan and the axial wobble of the planet don't conspire to countervail. Indeed, when we close our eyes now to recall the scene, only those gleaming trashcans protrude from memory, and though we don't disclose the fact as preamble to extend some general comment on memory's caprice, or argue that insignificant details really ought to be remarked despite their place among many more thoroughly considered features of a park, or proceed from a bit of minutiae to a more profound or fanciful scheme in which what were minutiae become critical facts, or expound the history of a mundane appurtenance, or employ the same as a foil in a polemic on the transfer of property from private to public use during our modern age and *vice versa*, or even to lodge further complaint against diffuse effects of bitter weather, we are left to wonder whether this aberrant souvenir (the gleam off a wastebasket) is a sign produced or a sign received, and what it might signify, in either case, apart from the low—hanging fruit embargoed by the foregoing interpretations. In either case, with our mnemonic faculty allocated to shining waste, we rely on the walking constellation of half-clues and red herrings found in our notebook, relevant as much for what is left out as for what was put in, none of which may be all that relevant, though if the notebook and the pensioner at watch over the first floor of the small museum just east of the park should be admitted here, then it will be known that sometime during the late 1700s, and probably it was the 1790s, a portion of the castle grounds were relinquished for public streets and private buildings, including the street and building where the small museum

An important component of human parsing is ambiguity resolution. How can we find out how people choose between two ambiguous parses of a sentence?... Much of the more recent ambiguity-resolution research relies on a specific class of temporarily ambiguous sentences called **garden-path** sentences. These sentences, first described by Bever (1970), are sentences which are cleverly constructed to have three properties that combine to make them very difficult for people to parse:

1. They are **temporarily ambiguous**: The sentence is unambiguous, but its initial portion is ambiguous.
2. One of the two or more parses in the initial portion is somehow preferable to the human parsing mechanism.
3. But the dispreferred parse is the correct one for the sentence.

The result of these three properties is that people are “led down the garden path” toward the incorrect parse, and then are confused when they realize it’s the wrong one. Sometimes this confusion is quite conscious... Other times the confusion caused by a garden-path sentence is so subtle that it can only be measured by a slight increase in reading time. ... Besides grammatical knowledge, human parsing is affected by many other factors..., including resource constraints (such as memory limitations...), thematic structure and semantic, discourse, and other contextual constraints. While there is general agreement about the knowledge sources used by the human sentence processor, there is less agreement about the *time course* of knowledge use. [Some researchers] argue that an initial interpretation is built using purely syntactic knowledge,

now stands, and where, in what was originally the parlor floor when the museum was a house, in what would have been the living room, a watercolor, which dates from the 1830s, and which is hung just to the left of one of the windows facing the street, depicts the building itself as viewed from across the same street from a point-of-view directed one-quarter turn to the left, off a perpendicular headed away from the perimeter of the king’s park, such that when one stands inside the house, next to the window, in front of the little painting, in the same orientation to the perpendicular, but this time from the opposite point-of-view, so as to see both painting and window at once, as if one is looking onto the very scene in which the house has been depicted, and beyond which one would encounter the queen’s garden, if one then tries to decipher the correspondence between the two scenes, which, to repeat, are related as views faced through opposite sides of an imaginary screen set down at a 45-degree diagonal over the middle of the street, no slight confusion is caused at not finding one’s own person standing behind the window in the painting, looking back at one’s self inside the room, and we would be inclined therefore to conclude, based on the notebook’s revelation of the matter suppressed, that the garden receptacle connotes a deeply-lodged superstition that one thing can be reached from any other, if only one manages to align the appropriate vectors of space and time, and its connection to this powerful bias is the reason it (the gleam off a wastebasket) shines so brightly in the mind, as it first did in the eye! Yet, if one were to follow a straight course along different lines of sight and thought, through the window across the park into the

and that semantic, thematic, and discourse knowledge only becomes available later. This view is often called a **modularist** perspective; researchers holding this position generally argue that human syntactic knowledge is a distinct module of the human mind. Many other researchers... hold an **interactionist** perspective, arguing that people use multiple kinds of information incrementally. For this latter group, human parsing is an interactive process, in which different knowledge sources interactively constrain the process of interpretation.¹¹

queen's garden and out the other side, finally to alight on the national gallery, where a corner room on the second floor dedicated entirely to *trompe-l'œil* paintings hailed from the royal collection contains three-dozen canvases or more, several that depict some portion of wall on which various 17th Century implements, including musical instruments, adornments and weapons are hung, others that simulate bulletin boards on which scraps of paper and mementos are held between a lattice of crisscrossed ribbons, still others in which elements of *vanitas*—grinning skulls, wilted bouquets and the like—are arranged on shelves, or tucked into niches, or illustrated as paintings within paintings, and one most ambiguous specimen that purports to be the back of a dark grey linen canvas viewed through the frame of its own wooden stretchers, set on the floor and leaned against the wall behind some stanchions and ropes, as if gallery staff were called away in the midst of hanging it and simply abandoned the cause—all of which are rendered in minute detail at actual size—one might be further persuaded not only of what was already obvious—that the consort of eye and mind could be misled by all manner of spectacle—but that the very guidance of subjects along proverbial garden paths is the explicit aim of select craft. Aside from that picture of its own backside which is propped against the wall, the paintings in the gallery are hung close together in multiple rows on three sides of the room in what amounts to *an imagined reconstruction of how the paintings were presented in the old Perspective Chamber*, according to the explanation provided in an accompanying wall text, duly recorded in the notebook. Indeed, the arrangement would

Viewed in this light, the propagation of an error, although it may be unfavourable or fatal to the temporary interest of an individual, can never be long injurious to the cause of truth. It may, at a particular period, retard its progress for a while, but it repays the transitory injury by a benefit as permanent as the duration of the truth to which it was opposed. These reflections are offered for the purpose of proving that the toleration of the fullest discussion is most advantageous to truth. They are not offered as the apology for error; and whilst it is admitted that every person who willfully puts forward arguments the soundness of which he doubts, incurs a deep responsibility, it is some satisfaction to reflect that the delay likely to be thus occasioned to the great cause can be but small; and that those who in sincerity of heart maintain arguments which a more advanced state of knowledge shall prove to be erroneous, may yet ultimately contribute, by their very publication, to the speedier establishment of truth.¹¹

seem to increase the paintings' stale similitude, as when so many precisely executed pictures are seen at once, each takes on a verity it would not if the gallery contained only one or two or even a half-dozen similar ones, the extended family attaining a dimension not more real, but all its own, more or less consistent and whole, if more or less fictive, in that no single thing in any one painting or in the room overall permits scrutiny without some adjacent thing to distract, which may well be the trick of *trompe*, generally, as is often the case with words in ordinary sentences, that if one word or two is given disproportionate attention a sentence ceases to convey its most obvious meaning, whereas if we move apace over the whole, we grasp a sense that is more than a sum of dissected parts, so that when we read quickly *This room is an imagined reconstruction of how the paintings were presented in the old Perspective Chamber*, for example, we understand there is some historical reference in the arrangement of a roomful of paintings approximately as it was in a different room once part of the Royal Kunstkammer, and it is only if we slow down to ponder whether an arrangement can be both imagined and reconstructed, just suppose, that we distance ourselves in our stuttering way from that data we were at first all too ready to accept, though if we do hesitate to consider that what is imagined is only constructed, whereas what is reconstructed is not much imagined, we may yet drift towards some insight regarding backwards affinities between construction and imagination, which the sentence, and again the lot of paintings, wants to lend us if only we are foolish or careful enough to borrow. In either case, it is as much to do with discernment

as with superstition that nonsense is sense or sense is nonsense, as one notable 19th Century poet admired for her concision put it, sort of, though to see without demurrer, as if one thing doesn't lead to another, surely gives short shrift to brilliant impressions, and what is what, then?



¹ Edgar A. Poe, *Marginalia* (1849)

¹¹ from Ch. 12.5 of *Speech and Language Processing: An Introduction to Natural Language Processing, Computational Linguistics, and Speech Recognition*, a textbook written c. 2000 by Computer Scientists Daniel Jurafsky and James H. Martin, author of *A Computational Model of Metaphor Interpretation*.

¹¹¹ Charles Babbage, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1837), Chapter I, "The Nature of the Argument"