

THIS IS NOT A THESIS: A THESIS ON DAVID MARKSON

by

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(Under the Direction of Jed Rasula)

ABSTRACT

This thesis (which is not a thesis) is a consideration of David Markson's book-length works, with the exception of his *Collected Poems*. While making some reference to his first book, which appeared in 1959, the study centers on Markson's 2001 publication, *This Is Not a Novel*, and continues through his 2004 release, *Vanishing Point*. Generic issues and the high/low literature distinction are considered and complicated here. Also of interest is Markson's artistic lineage, which he claims from innovative visual artists. Something that is perhaps unusual about this project is that it ponders, in some detail, the periphery surrounding the texts—genre labels, marketing, typology, design, etc. Because of its unconventional subject matter, the thesis is necessarily self-conscious and, at times, playful.

INDEX WORDS: David Markson, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Novel, Antinovel, Metafiction, Self-conscious novel, Postmodernism, René Magritte, Albrecht Dürer, Robert Rauschenberg, Pulp fiction, Contemporary fiction

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ABBREVIATIONS KEY

To clarify parenthetical citations, I will employ the following abbreviations when necessary.

<i>Springer's Progress</i>	SP
<i>Wittgenstein's Mistress</i>	WM
<i>Reader's Block</i>	RB
<i>This Is Not a Novel</i>	TNN
<i>Vanishing Point</i>	VP

CHAPTER 1

PREFACE: READING THE WAY I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO

What is a novel in any case?

—David Markson, *Reader's Block* (28)

If the title of my thesis seems irreverent, playful, and/or contradictory, it's only in an attempt to treat my subject matter in the same way that it treats me. Approaching David Markson's work in an entirely straightforward literary-critical manner would miss the point. While never entirely serious, Markson's work forces us to grapple with issues fundamental to reading and writing. His texts evoke and then subvert many of the conventions we rely on when approaching a literary text. If Markson is our host in what Henry James called the house of fiction (7), he invites us to sit in a chair that will collapse and stand on the spot on the rug that covers a hole in the floor. But Markson isn't just a prankster setting up booby traps; he's showing the architectural flaws that have been there all along.

I suppose a preface to a thesis on a contemporary writer must confront the question, 'why should anyone care about these books?' The answer can be found in another question posed by Jonathan Culler: "Why are our most crucial and tantalizing experiences of literature located at the interstices of genres, in this region of *non-genre literature*?" ('Towards a Theory' 258 Culler's emphasis). If we can comprehensively assess a work of literature using the standard taxonomic genre labels, the work, or at least our reading of it, loses its vitality. We are engaged in literary taxidermy rather than exploratory zoology. Works like Markson's are very much alive; rather

than stuffing and mounting the beasts for display in the halls of the literary cannon, we have to wrestle with them.

A large part of the apparatus that helps us understand literature consists of the genre labels we use to classify works; however, genre does not always function in a purely descriptive manner. I understand the effect of genre on our reading in terms that Culler eloquently describes: "A genre, one might say, is a set of expectations, a set of instructions about the type of coherence one is to look for and the ways in which sequences are to be read" ('Towards a Theory' 255). In the same spirit, Linda Hutcheon discusses the way that genre labels can "program the act of reading" (128). The proper function of genre labels would be to help us group similar works together based on features we observe in them. Unfortunately, this practice often gets out of hand, and labels become our primary means of understanding literature. When a work doesn't fit into one of our categories, we don't know what to do with it.

Since the genre at issue here is the novel, the quote from Markson's *Reader's Block* that serves as an epigraph may provide the best starting point for a study of works that (at the least) do not fit comfortably into any genre or (at the most) openly defy our ability to categorize them. The question, 'what is a novel' is not one that has ever been easily answered, and I do not have any pretensions of attempting to do so now. The very existence of anthologies such as Michael McKeon's *Theory of the Novel*, a massive tome running nearly a thousand pages, indicates the vast amount of disagreement, even among specialists, about what we actually mean by the term *novel*. The elusiveness of the genre's essence is important to understanding Markson's work. We all "know" what a novel is, but when actually attempting to define it, only the most general answer is safe. One glossary of literary terms has an entry on *novel* that runs nearly forty pages most of which are spent listing novelists and novels (Cuddon 560-600). The first pages make a

few generalizations such as that the term is "applied to a wide variety of writings whose only common attribute is that they are extended pieces of prose fiction" (560). The best we seem to be able to do is venture a few broad guidelines and point to examples. This is probably the proper way to understand and employ the label, but this is often not what happens.

The lack of a clear definition is largely the result of the novel being a relatively young genre that is still developing, still living. Older literary forms like the sonnet or ode are more definable because, for the most part, no one writes them any more, except as exercises in form. *Novel* is in a situation similar to that of the term *postmodern*, the meaning of which is under contention because we are still (debatably) in the midst of that era. Brian McHale has described how this term has become a safety net for readers who are put off by difficult books: "After such an embarrassment, the reader, in order to reassert mastery over the text, may evoke the model of a genre or period which will 'explain' what has happened. In this case, he or she may evoke the model of so-called postmodernist fiction" (62). He clarifies his case, "Is there, then, any sense in which evoking postmodernism is more than merely a defensive gesture, a fending-off of the embarrassments of intractable fiction by relating it to certain extreme examples of intractability?" (62). The word novel performs a similar function in that both terms serve as catch-alls: *postmodern* for works we don't understand and *novel* for any book more than a third of an inch thick containing fictional nonpoetry.

The indefinite nature of the term is the source of its insidiousness. The broad application of the label would not present a problem if everyone accepted that *novel* is still under construction, but many have tried to pin down exactly what a novel is. This is exactly the sort of thing that criticism is supposed to be for, after all—definitions and terminology. While attempts

are well and good when provisional, the quasimodo status of the novel is an often overlooked point.

To risk a personal anecdote, as a graduate student in English, I own more books than many of my peers. On several occasions, people have come into my home and remarked on the number of novels I have. While I do have a good number of novels, mixed in among them on the shelves are a great many books containing poetry, essays, memoirs, criticism, theory, anthologies, epics, plays, comics, (auto)biographies, short stories, technical instructions, and history. The point is that when many, perhaps even most, people see a book, they don't call it a book; they call it a novel. If it proves not to be prose fiction, they can adapt by applying one of the other aforementioned labels, but anything that passes the fictional nonpoetry litmus test is a novel. In applying this label, they bring a number of expectations about what the book can or should contain. These criteria come from the books they have read that have been called novels and what they have been taught in Literature classes.

I'm speaking at this point about nonspecialist readers, but we can trace this tendency back to criticism. To hazard some generalizations, many people's ideas about literature are formed in high school. Unless we pursue some sort of literary study at the post-secondary level, our notions about literature are largely based on whatever was passed on from our high school English teachers. Assuming that most high school curricula are several decades behind the current trends in literary criticism, it's not unlikely that many people's idea of the novel are based on rather dated sources, from the literary-critical perspective. This scenario may seem a bit of a stretch, but it's intended as an explanation of an observed phenomenon rather than as proof of its existence.

The idea of the novel propagated at the secondary level seems to be based on something like the model of formal realism that Ian Watt describes in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), the date

of which would make it a prime source for high-school curricula. To a certain extent, the battle against the assumption that eighteenth/nineteenth-century realism should provide the standard by which to judge the novel is not one that I need to fight. Many critics have advocated for revisions of the conception of the genre that approximate my own. Hutcheon has even argued specifically against the use of Watt's ideas to define the genre: "Watt uses eighteenth-century 'formal realism' as a qualitative measure, as the defining characteristic of 'the novel.' He thereby ultimately forces himself into a position of declaring almost everyone but Richardson as outside the novel tradition" (43-4). Hutcheon has made a further point that is important to my study: "the history of novel criticism demonstrates that, while the novel *form* developed further, its *theories* froze in time somewhere in the last century" (38). Markson himself would seem to share this view, complaining in an essay dedicated to berating critics that his reviewers are "voicing critical judgments on the basis not only of [...] Victorian morality but also [...] an antiquated aesthetic stance" ('Reviewers' 125).

A key difference between my approach and that of Hutcheon and many others is that rather than attempting to revise the definition of *novel* or propose a new genre label, I argue, and I believe Markson's work calls for, an approach to literature that does not depend on classification. For instance, Tabbi attempts to assess Markson's work through *Wittgenstein's Mistress* by calling him "an early and continuing adherent to literary modernism" ('Introduction' 91) and in an interview with Markson asks him about those who have called *Wittgenstein's Mistress* "'minimalist' fiction" (114). Markson rebukes the latter label, and his recent work has clearly moved outside the province of the former. As I hope to demonstrate, Markson's books cannot be dispensed with by simply applying literary-critical terminology, like a salve to a rash.

Whether Markson's work is addressed to specialists or the general reader, it wages an attack on the broad application of the term *novel* (and by extension genre labels more generally).

With little to no critical dialogue on Markson's work to guide my approach, I have devoted a great deal of this study to figuring out how to read these books. Markson's work and especially *This Is Not a Novel* (the focus here), often tells us very explicitly how *not* to read it, and I have attempted to discover how to react when my readerly impulses are denied by the book I'm reading. In figuring out how to approach texts that are bent on dodging my habits of reading, I turned to a few studies of experimental fiction, which apply various labels to the works they consider: the self-conscious novel, metanarrative, surfiction, postmodern, etc. While Markson has made me label shy, I wouldn't go so far as to say that paradigms of experimental fiction are worthless, but they are always flawed. It is their shortcomings that are instructive, showing how innovative writing obliterates even descriptive boundaries. Most of the critics whose work I've reviewed are well aware of the provisionality and limited utility of their terminology and conclusions.¹

In contrast to this open-ended approach, in his somewhat infamous *Literature Against Itself*, Gerald Graff takes an ambivalent stance toward contemporary innovative writing. I say that his book is infamous because it seems that nearly every study of experimental writing that came after it has to mention it only to discredit it. I'll continue this trend, taking specific issue with Graff's complaint that "Contemporary fiction is often highly programmatic in its very revolt against programmatic concepts of fiction" (209). I don't disagree with the content of his claim; however, Graff sees this as a weakness of innovative fiction. How can one avoid such an

approach? Without clearly stating objectives and providing an apparatus for readers, innovative works would simply be denigrated and ignored because they would offer no point of entry. When one is attempting to get beyond a genre so vaguely understood and with such a malleable definition, one has to cover all the bases in order to avoid being thrown out with the rest. Graff accuses Alain Robbe-Grillet, for instance, of rebelling against an old system by offering a new one. Graff essentially denies innovators the right to theorize by taking their arguments to extremes that they would not vouch for. While Robbe-Grillet is dogmatic in his way, he is didactic about openness and innovation, which is qualitatively different than insisting on formal standards. In a semi-parodic commentary on the trajectory of contemporary fiction, Richard Kostelanetz offers "Twenty-Five Fictional Hypotheses" one of which responds to Graff's objection: "Modern art at its best deals not in the manipulation of conventions but in their *conspicuous neglect*" (286 my emphasis). It is just this sort of conspicuous and intentional neglect that Markson conducts in his late work. Besides, defining by negation, which Markson often does, while programmatic, is different than positing a program per se for fiction. Markson points to all the things that make a novel a novel and says, "you won't find that here."

Markson does include within his books a few guidelines for them. As Hutcheon has pointed out, innovative works of fiction often contain self-defining criteria: "the point of *metafiction* is that it constitutes its own first critical commentary, and in so doing, [...] sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered" (6).² *This Is Not a Novel* couldn't be encapsulated by the term *metafiction* because Markson doesn't include a narrative

¹ For instance, Hutcheon displays a suspicion of comprehensive theorizing that is essential to the study of progressive literature: "There can be no 'theory' of metafiction, only 'implications' for theory; each self-informing work internalizes its own critical context. To ignore that is to falsify the text itself" (155). McHale's entire project is devoted to avoiding a prescriptive definition of postmodernism.

² Because Markson's books do this, I tend to emphasize their beginnings. He usually includes such points early on.

that could be in a meta relation with itself, but the book has self-definition in common with the works that Hutcheon calls metafiction. I had settled upon a similar method of considering *This Is Not a Novel* before I encountered Hutcheon's work, and her affirmation of my method was very welcome. She also points out that "The laying bare of literary devices in metafiction brings to the reader's attention those formal elements of which, through over-familiarization, he has become unaware" (24). Markson certainly undertakes such an assault on literary conventions.

Brain Stonehill attempts to define the self-conscious novel and even goes so far as to develop a "Repertoire of Reflexivity" (30-1) that attempts to be a semi-comprehensive descriptive list of the possible tropes such novels employ. This project has only limited applicability to Markson's late work, but he makes a point about such fiction that applies to Markson: "Reflexivity may *seem* to threaten fiction's power of affirmation, but [...] it qualifies without canceling out" (188 Stonehill's emphasis). Similarly, Markson may be attempting to move outside the confines of recognizable genre, but this does not amount to a destruction of or threat to established literary forms. He is avoiding, not obliterating. Perhaps his work even strengthens them in a sense; by highlighting the conventions he dodges, we may more readily recognize their presence in other works.

Projects like Stonehill's and Hutcheon's are very useful in that they attempt to establish a vocabulary for discussing contemporary fiction. In doing so, they implicitly acknowledge a point Richard Walsh devotes a great deal attention to and goes a bit further with. In *Novel Arguments*, he responds to attempts to assess contemporary fiction in the traditional literary-critical mode of assigning terminology. He rejects the labels "postmodernism" and "metafiction" in favor of "innovative fiction" because, as he puts it, "I want a term that remains open to literary possibilities, rather than foreclosing them, and accordingly the only categorical definition of

innovative fiction I can countenance is a negative one" (ix). This response is intellectually responsible, recognizing that fiction that does not resemble forms of the past should not be assessed using the apparatus of years gone by. He also makes a convincing case that much of the consideration of innovative fiction has only paid attention to formal features, whether for the purpose of praising or repudiating. He argues that in the case of such fiction "its originality lies in neither its form nor its substance but in its *argument*. [...] The argument of a novel may be provisionally defined as the formal articulation *of* its substance, the substance articulated *in* its form" (x Walsh's emphasis). Walsh is arguing for a consideration of innovative work that does not attempt to separate form and content, which is always a tempting opposition to seek refuge in when encountering a new form. He further elaborates, "The concept of the argument of fiction provides a means of relocating the site of a fiction's aboutness. It is not to be found in its substance, nor in its form, but in the formal achievement of its substance; as such it is inextricable from process—the process of writing and the process of reading" (165). I must confess that a large part of this study is spent reveling in Markson's formal achievements, but, especially in the conclusion, I try to turn to a more responsible treatment of his work, considering in greater depth the works' aboutness, as Walsh calls it.

Walsh refers to "the process of writing and the process of reading"; while working on this project, I've begun to intimate a new understanding of the relationship between these two activities as well as a dual definition of the word *process*. I often find myself referring to the ways we process books. Often, such references are to a pragmatic form of reading that as a student of literature I have frequently been, covertly or explicitly, encouraged to undertake. Unfortunately, it often feels as if my job as a student and a teacher is to read books and cull the important stuff, whether thematic, historical, biographical or otherwise, so that I can regurgitate

this information in the form of papers or lectures and impress others with my astute observations. In this sense, *process* means to dispense with, to suck the essence from, to neutralize, to take care of, or to assess. While such reading is utilitarian in some ways, it ultimately takes the pleasure out of reading and oversimplifies literature. I realize I may be attacking a straw man (or perhaps a windmill), but I'm rather excited about this idea. If it lends me any credibility, Roland Barthes has noticed this as well: "The reduction of reading to consumption is obviously responsible for the 'boredom' many feel in the presence of the modern ('unreadable') text, the avant-garde film or painting: to be bored means one cannot produce the text, play it, release it, *make it go*" (63 Barthes's emphasis). Such an approach reduces reading to a mechanistic procedure with definite methods and clear goals.

Considering Markson's work and looking at critical studies of other innovative writers, I have come to understand an alternative meaning of *process*. In a more open-ended sense, it can describe an engaged activity in which the reader does not simply attempt to rip the kernels of wisdom from a text but participates in it. Many innovative works make such interaction nearly unavoidable, and the frustration I and others often feel with such texts comes from attempting to process them in the reductive sense. To describe this mutual participation of reader and writer, Jed Rasula has coined the term *wreading*, which he describes as his "neologism for the collaborative momentum initiated by certain texts [...] in which the reader is enlisted *as* an agent of the writing" (11 Rasula's emphasis). This view of the process of reading as one that is inextricably bound to the process of writing is a fairly recent revelation for me. In practical application, this new view of literature has made me much more comfortable using first-person pronouns in my writing rather than always referring to *the reader*. When talking about texts that

demand contribution from me, it seems counterproductive to defer the sense of involvement to a disembodied third-person figure.

Personal involvement leads to another point I must address before going any further. In considering these books, I rather liberally employ a term that has, to my knowledge, been sadly lacking in literary criticism hitherto: *fun*. At least part of what I mean here is as simple as one would guess. Reading and especially wreading are immensely pleasurable activities. I apply this term not only to Markson's early so-called crime novels but also to his later innovative work. While I wouldn't go so far as to argue that the fun of reading *Epitaph for a Dead Beat* is exactly the same as *This Is Not a Novel*, they do share at least one important trait. The enjoyment is of a different species but the same genus. I'm far from developing a full theory of fun and literature, but I do have one provisional point of connection that I've noticed in Markson's work. When reading, we learn, but perhaps more importantly, we lose ourselves for a bit in a book.³ In later sections, I'll focus on the relationship between learning and fun in Markson's books, but for now I'll address their ability to capture our attention.

Markson's early books employ most of the standard conventions of literary realism. We can slip into the sordid scenes that Markson has written because he delivers on every expectation we have about verbal representation. These books do not resist our readerly impulses at all. Markson creates coherent worlds and guides us through them with carefully crafted plots and psychologically comprehensible characters. For example, in *Epitaph for a Tramp*, Cathy's promiscuous tendencies are explained by an incident of sexual abuse in her childhood. This type of digestible and explainable character meets our expectations for the type of "people" we are

³ The notion of a reading self (and/or a nonreading self that can be lost in reading) is an interesting and problematic concept in light of *Reader's Block*, and I'll have a bit more on this later.

supposed to encounter in a novel. Learning about such individuals and the milieus in which they move allows us to escape from our own lives and enjoy some no-risk vicarious experience.

In his more recent books, Markson doesn't offer us the same sort of opportunity. Yet I think that, to perhaps an even greater extent, we cannot help but forget ourselves in these books. My perspective may be the result of my academic training, but I have found that I genuinely enjoy Markson's late work. In a bit of a paradox, these books are enthralling in their refusal to be so. Rather than being entranced by conventionally realistic tales of the big city, these books absorb my attention by denying me every opportunity to forget that I am reading a book and peer into a world of Markson's creation. I can never put out of my mind that I'm staring at pages of text. However, these books are so enigmatic that I lose myself in attempting to understand them. I invest in striving to read and understand Markson's books, and in this way, they provide the escapism that more conventional novels are (in)famous for. For very different reasons, these books also allow us to have a bit of fun.

Fun is a personal experience necessitating my presence in this thesis. Another reason I feel compelled to speak from my own point of view is the sparse critical commentary on Markson's work. Rather than responding to a well-established scholarly dialogue, I've been exploring relatively undiscovered literary country. This has been exciting in that I feel like I'm staking a claim about the importance of Markson's work. I've made use of the available scholarship, which consists of an issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* and a chapter in Joseph Tabbi's *Cognitive Fictions*. I should take special note of Tabbi, whose chapter and contributions to that issue of the journal represent the only extended critical attention that Markson's work has received. While I often disagree with him, his scholarship and insights have been invaluable. I've also made some reference to reviews of *This Is Not a Novel* in popular

publications. I found this helpful because it gave me some sense of how non-specialist readers respond to Markson's books. I don't want to seem like I'm being too self-congratulatory here in my discussion of the lack of writing on Markson. While I may be dealing with relatively fresh subject matter, I am employing a tried-and-true method of literary scholarship: analyzing one of an author's works in the context of his other writings.

Another point I probably seem quite proud of myself about comes relatively late in the thesis when I discuss of Markson's pulp writing, which he did early in his career. The scholarship on Markson tends to disparage these books, but I take a different approach. I rationalize disrupting my otherwise chronological consideration of Markson's oeuvre because my points about his pulp work are most germane to my discussion of *This is Not a Novel*.

I've encountered some difficulty in quoting from Markson's books, which is in keeping with the way they resist traditional methods of reading and criticism. I'm not the only one to have experienced this problem; Tabbi explains of his chapter on Markson, "I will need to quote a number of passages at some length, from widely separated sections of Markson's books. Readers will have noticed a certain flatness in the isolated passages cited so far; they, too, carry a greater stylistic charge in the overall context of other, related, passages" (*Cognitive* 104). Markson's books operate by building cumulative effects over the course of a reading. It is exceedingly difficult to capture this method using the normal mode of brief quotation. I've attempted to overcome this difficulty by creating selective assemblages, which I hope will consolidate an effect that Markson achieves by diffusion. For the most part, when including extended block-format quotations, I have tried to preserve Markson's layout of the text because, as will be argued, his arrangement of the words on the page is more important than the typology of other

prose works.⁴ To indicate this when quoting shorter passages within my paragraphs, I've adapted the practice of using slashes to indicate line breaks in a poem, using them to indicate the breaks between fragments.

One advantage of focusing on a living author has been the opportunity to contact him. My appendices contain the letters I wrote to and received from Markson. My correspondence with him has been very illuminating. The extent to which Markson and I disagree about his work was initially shocking to me. I will argue that Markson's work complicates many of our conventions of literary reading, including ignoring authorial intention. However, I have found comfort in this particular practice. Markson establishes his presence in some of his texts in a unique, and from a literary-critical standpoint, problematic way. I initially wanted this complication to result in dismissal of the intentional fallacy, but I realized that David Markson, the man, and I don't always agree about his work, making ignoring authorial intention a more tenable position. For instance, Markson refers to his last three books (*Reader's Block*, *This Is Not a Novel*, and *Vanishing Point*) as "practically a trilogy" in that "The style, methods, materials, etc., are virtually *identical* in all three" and insists that *This Is Not a Novel* belongs in the same category with the other two, "Whatever its title" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004 Markson's emphasis). While I agree that they do constitute a trilogy of sorts, the avoidance of the label *novel* by the second of the three sets it apart. Especially significant in this negation of the label is its presence. The book

⁴ I even had some practical experience with the importance of layout, typology, and labels while working on this project. Upon Dr. Rasula's suggestion, I had made this section (now oddly called my first chapter/preface) simply a preface with roman numeral page numbers, but when I sent the document in for format check, the graduate school insisted in an enigmatic commandment that I move the preface to before the table of contents, which would drastically alter its context and relation to the rest of the text. The (grammatically unsound) edict was, "Your Preface Page should be come after your Acknowledgements Page and before your Table of Contents. Make changes as needed and correspond changes to your TOC." To sneak the section in and not separate it from the rest of the text, I've labeled it a chapter, although it is really more like a preface.

brandishes convention, tempting us to employ the standard methods of reading, but as it does this, it denies our ability to understand the text via labels.

Markson also contends that my attention to genre is beside the point, and that what I'm concerned with doesn't have "anything to do with *the books themselves*—with what *is written on the page!*" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004 Markson's emphasis). From a certain point of view, he's right. I do have a rather formalist and genre-centric approach here; however, this seems appropriate given that we have no clearly available method of reading these books. Even without regard to its title, we need to invest in figuring out how to read books like *This Is Not a Novel*. Although I have to admit, as I do in my response to Markson's first letter, that if I were in his position I would probably also be annoyed that some kid was paying too much attention to periphery and not what I (Markson) had written. To a great extent, what I have undertaken here is an examination of the marginalia attached to Markson's work. While I do find some time to spend on "*the books themselves*," I spend a greater amount of time attempting to shed the baggage of literary study that would otherwise impede my reading of Markson, in much the same way that Kate, the heroine of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, does away with the detritus of a life that has no significance to her current situation.⁵ I hope that in the conclusion I begin to make up for my formalism. If not, I have still gained at least one valuable insight from my work on Markson: I am now at least twice as suspicious of the assumptions I bring to a text than I was before I began reading him. That's a step in the right direction. With this in mind, I proceed trying not to be one of the critics Markson calls "pedestrian spirits [who] simply do not stop to think about what it is they are

ultimately saying" ('Reviewers' 129) and hoping to avoid what Markson has called "the sort of inanity that critics are capable of" ('Interview' 113).

⁵ I'm willing to admit that my attention to such literary baggage may be the result of my academic training and that this whole thesis may just be me challenging many of the implicit lessons I've been taught while pursuing literary study. I may be fighting a battle rather unnecessary in the current literary-critical world, but it has been personally necessary. Markson offered me some advice on this topic: "I think I can honestly say that this sort of thing has *never* entered my mind when reading—in spite of my own MA. If it truly does enter yours, then fight it. Indeed, dismiss it all—entirely. It's got to be easier than you seem to think. *Read the books!* Screw the classroom and/or critical bullshit" (Letter 20 Feb. 2004). That's more or less what I hope to do here.

CHAPTER 2

NOVELS AS PRECURSORS TO A NOT A NOVEL

I am, with regard to reading, in a great doctrinal confusion.

—Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (33)

"For good or bad," explains Markson in a 1990 interview with Joseph Tabbi, "my own few things have been rather radically different from each other. Even stylistically. Which then again probably helps explain why they've sold so little—since it keeps readers from getting a comfortable handle on anything," (107). While Markson's assessment holds, there are certain formal elements, important in *This Is Not a Novel*, that he begins to explore much earlier. *Springer's Progress* contains Markson's first large-scale use of metafictional techniques, but even in *Going Down*, he briefly flirts with the method. The book opens, "Accept the illusion," as if the reader must be coerced into consciously buying into the world of the text (1). Rather than depending on the conventions of realism and his ability to employ them, Markson begins with an imperative sentence directed at his readers to force us into the Mexican cemetery of the book's beginning. After a description of Fern Winters, the novel's protagonist, the narrator instructs us to "accept the girl too" (1). After the opening, admissions of the text's fictionality fall away as Markson builds a rather dark, and at times pretentious but nonetheless realist, novel about a painter with a disabled hand and a dead poet's son who is tortured by personal demons.

In contrast to the serious nature of *Going Down*, in *Springer's Progress*, Markson moves into a comic mode, and as he does so, he crafts a more self-conscious novel. Markson has called *Springer's Progress* "a novel about the creative process, or one variant thereof—about what

triggers it, how it's pursued, about what goes on in the writer's *head*" ('Reviewers' 125 Markson's emphasis). Markson goes on to explain "What it's about most of all is plain and simply language. Language. Words, and wordplay. Meanings, and additional meanings. Sentence structures. Rhythms. Sounds. Wit. Resonances. About being infinitely more concerned with *how* things are said than with what" ('Reviewers' 125 Markson's emphasis). To do this, Markson chronicles the adventures of an alcoholic, near-fifty, blocked writer in the Greenwich Village area. In contrast to the purposefully dense prose of *Going Down*, Springer's tale is rendered in light, brief paragraphs, and the abundant dialogue is saturated with more literary jokes and puns than would be possible for real people but that makes for dazzling novelistic conversations. Perhaps what is most significant in terms of the development of Markson's experimentation with form, comes from the *mise en abyme* in *Springer's Progress*. Burton Feldman has described the novel by saying "It becomes a never-ending movement between reflecting mirrors: a story about writing a story. By now, that's a modernist cliché, but here it justifiably builds off the premise of that wonderful parodic voice" (160). The book traces Springer's extramarital affairs and his attempts to write about them. The work focuses on the act of writing, a preoccupation that continues throughout the rest of Markson's work. One technique Markson uses to achieve this is the depiction of the self-questioning that a writer goes through when attempting to compose:

This girl, this horsy Jess Cornford with the Winslow
Homer blouses and the sexy, cartilaginous neck, lead some-
place?

Springer given any thought to fictional names for these
people either, meanwhile? *Cojones*, later, least of his wor-
ries. (201)

We get an inside view of the writer at work, experiencing his frustration, self-doubt, and success right along with him. This method is employed more extensively in *Reader's Block*.

Springer's Progress also contains commentary on itself. After Springer's wife has taken a look at an early draft of his novel, she asks of his protagonist, named Springer as well, "Tell me why the telescoped style, correlative for his state of mind?" (203). Springer answers, "I suppose. Not much reason to reach for baroque cadences when all he himself is reaching for is the next drink" (203). Springer also offers an internal dialogue in which he considers what the book we are reading and that he is writing is about:

Listen, blotterbrain, try to be sober for seventeen seconds.
Your problematical ending beside the point, what do you
ultimately want out of this coprophagous excursus?
O, words, obviously.
Meaning?
Play a little. With luck a phrase or three worth some
lonely pretty girl's midnight underlining. (218)

Markson begins a practice here that persists in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and that continues for the rest of his career to date. His works contain guidelines for how to read them and/or what he was after in writing them.

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, the form that Markson develops over the course of his next several works begins to emerge. The novel is written from a single perspective, composed of brief paragraphs made up of short fragmentary sentences, and inaugurates some other trends that Markson will continue to explore. Tabbi summarizes the significance of the philosopher mentioned in the title: "Though she claims never to have read a word of Wittgenstein, Kate unwittingly enacts his philosophy through a patient and gradual discovery of complexity in the most ordinary language (the mental operations hidden in a mere 'manner of speaking') and an attention to the ways that words set limits on what can be thought" (*Cognitive* 101). Tabbi has laid the ground work for an in-depth comparative reading between *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and *Tractatus* and he begins to conduct it, but this study is not the place to continue it.

Kate is the last person on earth. The text we receive is her associationally organized report of her thoughts after she has been alone for quite some time, probably about ten years (WM 7). The text contains no mention of a disaster that has wiped out the rest of humanity, leaving one to wonder how Kate came to be the only human being or if she is insane.⁶ In either case, Kate merely writes that she "woke up one Wednesday or Thursday to discover that there was apparently not one other person left in the world" (230). I say Kate writes rather than speaks, because throughout her text, she mentions that she is typing, even dwelling upon the tediousness of adding umlauts over the *e* in Emily Brontë's name (96). In addition to making rather mundane technical commentary on her writing, Kate is very self-conscious about her use of language and repeatedly comments on its imprecise referentiality:

Once, Turner had himself lashed to the mast of a ship for several hours, during a furious storm, so that he could later paint the storm.

Obviously, it was not the storm itself that Turner intended to paint. What he intended to paint was a representation of the storm.

One's language is often imprecise in that manner, I have discovered. (12)

This passage not only demonstrates Kate's attention to language and provides a nice parallel with issues explored in *This Is Not a Novel*, but it is also a prime example of Kate's organizational pattern for her text. She remarks, "Actually, the story of Turner being lashed to the mast reminds me of something, even though I cannot remember what it reminds me of" (12). Later she remembers Ulysses and the sirens but not Turner (83). Eventually she connects the two anecdotes (189-90). Kate's text develops this way, with one idea triggering, or failing to trigger,

⁶ Markson reports that he composed a section that was intended to precede what has been published as *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in which Kate goes through the experiences she reflects on in the book as it stands: living in museums, going mad, and searching for other people, among other things. He realized after beginning the second [Continued on Next Page]

another. As Evelin Sullivan has remarked, "*Wittgenstein's Mistress* addresses the question of how memory works" (245). Since the text is a reflection of the process of Kate's memory, it contains numerous mistakes and confusions. She reports an anecdote and then later changes the names of the people or places involved, or she cannot remember if she has read a biography of Brahms, the title of which she also can't recall.

The immersion in anecdotal references to the lives of artists, writers, and philosophers is a technique Markson returns to in his later books. Steven Moore offers a cogent analysis of the significance of Markson's referential tendencies in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*:

For earlier writers (and in Markson's earlier works), culture was stable and objective, an orderly accumulation of facts—names, dates, compositions, critical opinions—that could be called up by the writer (and/or his characters) as in a user-friendly data retrieval system. In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, however, culture is unstable and subjective, a fading memory of 'baggage' that teases Kate with false connections, 'inconsequential perplexities,' and meaningless coincidences. (175)

Moore rightly points out that the status of cultural references has changed in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, and this change persists in Markson's later books. Burton Feldman argues that the type of allusion found in *Going Down* is more in the spirit of Joyce, Faulkner, or Lowry, and describes Markson's move beyond this mode (175). Indeed, Markson's allusions and references do not really bear the type of analysis that criticism usually undertakes.⁷ Rather than a reference

section that he would drop the first. If the book had been released with the first section attached, we could surmise that Kate is literally alone, but as Markson puts it, "the book as published *is* the book" ('Interview' 113).

⁷ Markson describes the traditional form of allusion and conducts a more or less standard exegetical approach to such references in his study of *Under the Volcano*. Explaining this view of allusions by comparing Lowry's to Joyce's he argues, "For all the differences in their ultimate aesthetic orientation, there remains between Lowry and Joyce an undeniable affinity of *method* i.e., that constitutional insistence upon reference and allusion which calls forth archetypal equations" (x). Markson's work, from *Wittgenstein's Mistress* on, does not indicate an interest in this type of allusion.

leading to a deeper understanding of the text, Markson's profusion of allusions makes a comment on allusion itself. This eluding (or elusion) of normal modes of processing allusion prefigures the more radical resistance to criticism that Markson builds into his subsequent books. For Kate, allusion has become something that one does automatically, unconsciously, or even unwillingly. When one's brain is packed full of knowledge about various historical figures, the material makes spontaneous appearances in one's consciousness. Allusions and references become a habit of thought rather than a method of infusing a text with significance.

Tabbi makes an observation that highlights aspects of Kate, which resemble some of the techniques Markson uses in *This Is Not a Novel*: "By making his central figure an artist, Markson was also able to give freer play than before to allusions, always important to his work, to the visual arts" ('Introduction' 100). Such allusions occur with a vengeance in *This Is Not a Novel*, in which Markson seems to align his book with progressive figures in visual rather than literary art.

Perhaps the most important way in which *Wittgenstein's Mistress* seems like a precursor to Markson's later work is that it contains a consideration of its genre. Kate muses,

And Herodotus was almost always spoken about as having
been the first person ever to write down any real history,
incidentally.

Even if I am not especially overjoyed at being the last.
As a matter of fact I am quite sorry I said that.

Such thoughts again being exactly the sort one would have
wished to believe one had gotten rid of with the rest of one's
baggage, naturally. (189)

Kate considers her text a history of sorts. While her comment about dropping such ideas would seem to apply to the negativity of her thinking, I would like to stretch this passage to make generic considerations the baggage to be gotten rid of. Upon realizing that what she has been writing has led her to a rather morbid train of thought and depression, she remarks, "what I realized almost simultaneously, in fact, was that quite possibly I might have to start right from

the beginning and write something different altogether. Such as a novel, say" (229). She then begins to make plans to write "an absolutely autobiographical novel" (230). Kate realizes that the text she has already produced could not qualify as a novel. From Kate's perspective, a collection of trivia and anecdotal reflections on one's life does not a novel make. While she recognizes that she has not written a novel, Markson is engaged in novel writing. He has written a novel in which a character writes something that is not a novel.

The preoccupation with aspirations of writing a novel continues in *Reader's Block*. In this book, Markson continues to explore form, developing some of the characteristics that first emerged in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. The work is made up of brief sentences that often stand alone or are grouped into short paragraphs. Visually, *Reader's Block* introduces a change in that the paragraphs are separated by white space rather than just line breaks, contributing to the work's fragmentary feel. While this difference may not sound significant, I agree with Raymond Federman's idea that "The very act of reading a book, starting at the top of the first page, and moving from left to right, top to bottom, page after page to the end in a consecutive prearranged manner has become *boring* and *restrictive*. [...] And it is the writer (and not modern printing technology) who must, through innovations in the writing itself—in the typography and topology of his writing—renew our system of reading" (9 Federman's emphasis). Increased significance of the placement of the words on the page even in nonpoetry may not be an issue that Markson values, but his works do fit into this movement. This idea begins to become important in *Reader's Block* and will increase in significance in *This Is Not a Novel*. Like Kate's text, *Reader's Block* is saturated in references to, allusions to, and often unattributed quotations from the lives and works of numerous artists, writers, philosophers, and musicians. Unlike *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, however, the allusions do not serve the purpose of developing a character. Over the

course of Kate's text, she makes reference to a relatively limited number of historical figures and events in her own life. As a result, one develops a sense of a well-bounded consciousness and her personality, if not a degree of empathy for her. The references and allusions in *Reader's Block* are not as clearly linked to a character's consciousness and cover a much broader spectrum than Kate's. And while we have at least one character in *Reader's Block*, his situation within and relation to the text is not as clear as Kate's.

Even without regard to allusion, the status of character in this work is problematic. The novel opens, "Someone nodded hello to me on the street yesterday" (9). As an opening sentence, this presents no difficulty to the reader. A character is speaking or writing about a commonplace event, and we expect to discover more about *me* as we continue reading. Immediately, however, these assumptions are put on trial: "To me, or to him? / Someone nodded hello to Reader on the street yesterday" (9).⁸ When one reads the opening sentence, one assumes it is an entity speaking in the first person. The question about who *me* refers to and the subsequent answer points out that when one reads that sentence in one's head, it would seem to refer to oneself. Were it not for the conventions of reading, the *me* in one's head would be self-referential. The clarification that the sentence refers to Reader only perpetuates the complication. While on one level Reader is a character and a disembodied narrator has separated himself from Reader, Reader is also just that, the reader. In this manner, *Reader's Block* immediately draws attention to the active role that a reader always plays in a text.⁹ We are inevitably drawn into the construction of the text we are reading, especially since the novel chronicles Reader's attempt to write the text the reader has

⁸ Markson's use of masculine pronouns, while increasing the complexity via autobiographical implications, makes the play I'm examining here a closed game: no girls allowed. I'm not examining such issues here, but I can't help but notice them.

before him or her. Using the name Reader rather than a second-person pronoun to draw the reader into the story introduces a clever complication. *You* would be relatively easy to process, but the dual status of Reader does not allow one to identify the entity as either clearly a character or a reference to oneself. Of course Reader is all of these as—to some extent—characters are always both an entity within the text and a creation of the reader's mind. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, at times, Reader seems to be the narrator/author of the text, while at others questions are asked about Reader that do not seem to originate internally, so there is also an amorphous narrator floating about as well.

Richard Pearce has described works that contain this kind of confusion of conventions: "what the reader sees is no longer a clear picture contained within the narrator's purview, but an erratic image where the narrator, the subject, and the medium are brought into the same imaginative field of interaction, an image that is shattered, confused, self-contradictory but with an independent and individual life of its own" (48). After introducing this degree of complication, the text contains three brief anecdotes which refer to Wilfred Owen, Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Casals, and Bach. Following these, a three-line structure mimics the opening, reintroducing the ambiguous status of character within this text: "I have come to this place because I had no life back there at all. / I have, Reader has? / Reader has come to this place because he had no life back there at all" (9). At this point Reader has been clearly aligned with first-person pronouns, but Reader represents a dual role as both character and the actual reader. Perhaps this allows us to assume that Reader is writing the text, if he is at times speaking in the first person. For instance on the second page we encounter, "I am growing older. I have been in

⁹ From this point on, I will be using *Reader* with a capital *R* to refer to the entity in *Reader's Block* and *the reader* to refer to the impersonal disembodied entity so dear to literary criticism. This separation is somewhat misleading [Continued on Next Page]

hospitals. Do I wish to put certain things down? / Granted Reader is essentially the I in instances such as that. Presumably in most others he will not be the I at all, however" (10). So even the tentative grounds we have established for ourselves based on the first page are called into question.

While we struggle to parse out Reader's and our own statuses within the text, another figure is introduced with a tentative question: "Protagonist?" (11). Right away Protagonist becomes the one who received a nod on the street: "Perhaps someone from a shop Protagonist had stopped in at, a clerk? Or merely someone in a friendly mood in passing?" (11). From this point on, the novel chronicles Reader's attempts to develop a character named Protagonist, alternating between placing him in two settings, a cemetery and a beach. Drawn in by the title and the cooperative nature of the text, the reader is forced to experience Reader's writer's block, hence the title: "A title for all this, has Reader by chance yet given any thought to?" (143). Reader even makes a connection to Albert Camus's character who suffers from the same sort of creative stasis: "Also tending to forget that character in *The Plague*, Joseph Grand? Who rewrites the same opening sentence for a novel eternally, with only minimal variations?" (157). A little later on, he quotes one permutation of Grand's sentence: "One fine morning in May a slim young horsewoman might have been seen riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne" (Camus qtd. in RB 164). Grand rewrites eternally with a very idealistic hope: "On the day when the manuscript reaches the publisher, I want him to stand up—after he's read it through of course—and say to his staff: 'Gentlemen, hats off!'" (Camus 94). The narrator then reports the thoughts of the man Grand has confided this hope in: "Though he knew little of the literary world, Rieux had a suspicion that things didn't happen in it quite so picturesquely—

because Markson's use of Reader blurs the lines between author, reader, and character, but I've got to establish
[Continued on Next Page]

that, for instance, publishers do not keep their hats on in their offices" (94). In contrast to this comically scornful portrayal of an optimistic blocked writer, *Reader's Block* forces one to participate in the agony that can accompany writing. Spread throughout these abortive attempts we get an endless stream of references and allusions so that the work consists of about half narrative attempt and half reference.

In the midst of Reader's attempts to get started he, like Kate, considers the generic status of his work and also how readers will attempt to process the work. Like many of the propositions Reader makes about Protagonist, his observations about the work are often punctuated with question marks, making them tentative suggestions or inquiries rather than clear explanations of the work. At two points he unassertively calls the book "A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel?" (61, 137). Early on he asks, "Nonlinear? Discontinuous? Collage-like? / An assemblage?" (14). Over the course of the work, Reader seems to gain confidence in his ability to define his work. Moving from suggestive questions, he begins to make assertions, and adds new questions: "Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage. / Or of no describable genre? / A seminonfictional semifiction? Cubist?" (140). Reader moves from trying to find adequate descriptions to considering the work's generic status:

Also in part a distant cousin innumerable times removed of
the Tibetan Book of the Dead?

Of the cataloguing of the Cairo Geniza?

Reader and this notion of his.

Or does the absence of narrative progression plus that cross-
circuited schematism possibly render it even a poem of sorts?

Not to add *avec* exactly 333 interspersed unattributed quota-
tions awaiting annotation? (166)

something to hold on to.

This practice of internal meditation on its own generic status begins in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, continues in *Reader's Block* and reaches a fevered pitch in *This Is Not a Novel*.

Another affinity *Reader's Block* shares with *This Is Not a Novel* is a consideration of how the text will be processed by readers, especially students and scholars of literature:

Was the *diegetic diachrony* of narration truly damaged by Flaubert, as Lyotard says?

Diegetic, dialogic, hegemonic. Privilege, as a verb. Fore-ground, as a verb. Valorize. Praxis. Simulacra. Metafiction. Logocentrism. Phallocentrism. Discourse. Signifier/Signified. Aporia.

Late capitalism. Gynophobia.
Text.

None of the above. (RB 156)

Reader moves from making timid claims about his work to denying the applicability of the vocabulary of literary criticism. He displays an awareness of his forcefully unconventional novel, evolving from a blocked writer at the end of his rope to a rebel against the literary establishment. When one foregoes tradition, the uncertainty of innovation can be unsettling or discouraging. Reader displays this aspect of rebellious creativity as well. The work ends with a reaffirmation of the description he has repeated several times: "Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage" (193). But he adds to the list: "Wastebasket" (193). Fortunately, however, as discouraged as Reader seems at the end of *Reader's Block*, this hopelessness does not seem to extend to Markson, who continues to write and explore generic conventions. If in *Reader's Block* Markson is wandering around at the end of conventional form, in *This Is Not a Novel*, he moves on to being entirely finished with standard genres. At one point Reader asks, "Or perhaps not a novel?" (41), and in *This Is Not a Novel* Markson explores how that possibility could be best realized.

From title to typology to open defiance of labels, *This Is Not a Novel* invalidates and/or complicates the methodology we bring to a literary text. The book is constructed in a way that inoculates it from the viral attack of standard literary criticism, which would process and assimilate it, relegating it to the realm of texts that have been properly studied and understood. Through its challenges to our assumptions, the book preserves itself from becoming another etherized, embalmed, and pinned insect in the literary entomologist's display case. Because it is what we critics like to call problematic, the book maintains its vitality, stays alive.

CHAPTER 3

MOVING OUTSIDE THE NOVEL

I do not "concentrate," in my reading [...], either exclusively or primarily on those points that appear to be the most "important," "central," "crucial." Rather, I deconcentrate, and it is the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases which are "important" to me and are a source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system.

—Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (44)

By including the name of a genre in the title of his work, Markson changes the status of genre, making a title of what is usually only a label. Generally, titles indicate the content of a work. They allow a reader quick access to some idea of what the book will be about, announcing a theme, the name of a character, an event, etc. Labeling, however, ascribes a category to a work in order to make it easier to appraise, for instance, the common practice of including the phrase "a novel" on the cover of many works of fiction. Whether such a label appears by authorial decree or as an editorial afterthought makes little difference. It has a powerful influence on our reading, yet such a label has a different status in relation to the work than a title. If titles are linked to content, labels are linked to form. We often consider works as representatives of certain genres, restricting our expectations and consequently our ability to read them. In the most extreme case we cannot think of a work outside the genre label that it is supposed to exemplify.

Such limitations may even affect authors, confining their endeavors to the production of works that fit certain specifications. In the case of *This Is Not a Novel*, the title appropriately cues the reader to the issue of genre, the content of the work. Form and content are never separable, and here they merge in the most explicit way possible.

On its cover, *Reader's Block* is labeled "a novel by David Markson," which will affect or possibly determine how a reader will attempt to process the text. Such labels seem mostly for the purpose of classifying books so that they can be more easily handled as commodities. The text may not look much like that of most novels, but at least the clerks at the stores will know where to shelve the book. Markson comments that "Publishers often label something a novel when they fear its nature is ambiguous or that its title is confusing" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004). Making a further comment on the visual design of *This Is Not a Novel*, he says, "this has nothing to do with *the book*—it's merely design, promotion, sales, etc." (Letter 9 Feb. 2004). I agree that such *ex post facto* labels and packaging decisions have nothing to do with the books themselves, by which Markson seems to mean the texts themselves. However, such matters being peripheral does not necessarily mean that they have no influence on readers. We never really encounter simply *the book*; we come across texts that are packaged, labeled, marketed, and often burdened with history. If we are being honest with ourselves, I'm not sure if we can ever completely forget about or disregard such matters. As Linda Hutcheon argues, "It would seem to be clear that the word 'novel' on the title page or cover of a book would program the act of reading, ordering, and ultimately reducing complexity to a function of that reading" (128). Despite its unconventional fragmentary form, the reviews of *Reader's Block* do not broach the topic of its genre. The issue has already been settled. With *This Is Not a Novel*, however, Markson forces a consideration of genre, makes genre the subject of the work, makes the work its own subject.

Some readers have seen the title as a reference to Denis Diderot's "This Is Not a Story." This is an instructive allusion, given that Diderot's piece is an example of an eighteenth-century text that embodies many of the characteristics sometimes thought to be the sole province of more contemporary work: self awareness, acknowledgement of the reader's participation in the text, etc. In an introductory note, Diderot self-deprecatingly remarks that the work "is not a story, or if it is, then a bad one" (17). A similar comment could be made about Markson's book. He mentions Diderot a few times in his work, and refers to this tale specifically in *This Is Not a Novel*: "*Ceci n'est pas un conte. Diderot, 1772*" (138). But immediately after this citation he also includes, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe. Magritte, 1929*" (138).

FIGURE 3.1: RENÉ MAGRITTE. CECI N'EST PAS UNE PIPE. 1926.



The title seems to be making a much more pertinent reference to Magritte's painting *This is not a pipe*. If Markson's title does not force one to consider Magritte, the cover of the book also features a miniature reproduction of Magritte's *The Evening Gown*. In titling the work, Markson is highlighting a convention of fiction as essential to contemporary reading and writing as the issues related to visual representation that Magritte raises. In his commentary on *This is*

not a pipe, Michel Foucault explains, "it is quite apparent that the drawing representing the pipe is not the pipe itself" (19). But he then highlights the "convention of language" that the work makes problematic (19). Habitually, one would call a representation of a pipe by the name "pipe." On some level one operates on the assumption that "It [the representation of the pipe] does not 'aim' like an arrow or a pointer toward a particular pipe in the distance or elsewhere. It *is* a pipe" (20 Foucault's emphasis). If approaching the image of the pipe without the attached legend, one's immediate, conditioned reaction¹⁰ would be to call it a pipe. Magritte attempts to subvert an assumption so fundamental that one would be unlikely to notice or consider it otherwise. We are brought up in an environment where the convention of language that Foucault points out is a tacit agreement depended upon in everyday communication. Markson's title also draws attention to an often unquestioned assumption among readers of fiction.

Foucault explains that Magritte's legend, "sets out to name something that evidently does not need to be named (the form is too well known, the label too familiar)" (23-4). Similarly, Markson highlights and challenges one's likely initial reaction to his book. By aligning his book with Magritte's painting, Markson solidifies the seriousness of his issue, marking it as a fundamental aspect of reading. Just as one would unconsciously leap to call Magritte's image a pipe rather than a representation of a smoking device, without the title one would likely try to call Markson's text a novel. Effectively, Markson makes the case that many readers expect all

¹⁰ My use of Pavlovian terminology is intentional. I contend that the 'conventions of language' that Foucault discusses condition our reactions, leading us to assess stimuli in terms of the system (language) we depend upon. To an extent this is unavoidable, which is precisely why works like those of Magritte and Markson are important. They help their audiences recognize their assumptions and conditioning. In a characteristically wonderful passage, McHale says of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and I believe the same or similar could be said of Markson's work,

For the effect of this troublesome novel is, finally, the salutary one of disrupting the conditioned responses of the modernist reader (and we are all, still, modernist readers), of de-conditioning the reader. It is the same effect, no doubt, as *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Sound and the Fury* had on their first readers. (81)

I could continue quoting McHale's well-crafted and insightful sentences, but I've got to stop somewhere.

books to be novels. Joseph Tabbi briefly comments on *This Is Not a Novel*, saying that Markson has “purposely stripped it of every possible quality that one could conceivably associate with the form” (111). Tabbi's language is particularly apt, Markson has pulled away everything from the text that usually goes along with the novel. The very fact that Markson has to be so deliberate in avoiding the novel label indicates its otherwise inescapable pervasiveness.

The novel is the default label for any book more than a third of an inch thick that has not already been clearly labeled as poetry or nonfiction, and if a work does not fit into one of these categories, one simply does not know what to do with it. Readers approach texts with these built-in assumptions about genres, how to process them, and what to expect. Michael Dirda opens his review of the book by asking, "If *This Is Not a Novel* isn't a novel, then what is it?" Readers are so dependent on genre distinctions that when their default category is negated, they must scramble for a new one. In ruling out the novel genre, Markson, like Magritte, defies expectations, going against one's immediate impulse. Foucault contends, "A little like the anonymous hand that designated the pipe by the statement, 'This is not a pipe,' Magritte names his paintings in order to focus attention upon the very act of naming" (36). Markson's title also draws attention to such an issue by including the work's genre in its title rather than having it simply appear as a label on the book's cover.

Reviewers do not know how to respond to the negation of their default category. Stefan Cole says that even after reading Magritte's legend, "you will still have a painting, pure and simple. What do you have with *This Is Not a Novel*?" (par. 2). Cole's question is understandable, he can respond to Magritte's statement: 'yes, I see; it's a representation of a pipe'. But he cannot respond to Markson's title the same way. Markson makes a negative statement, but we cannot meet it with a positive claim. His title does not invite one to posit a replacement label to respond

to it, although many reviewers have tried to do this.¹¹ To meet his negation of the default category with an alternative misses the point. Not only is the genre-label *novel* being rejected, but also the very act of applying such labels.

Despite the uncertainty of how to read non-novel fiction, Markson's project is in some ways less radical and far-reaching than Magritte's. Magritte's work questions the entire medium of visual representation, but Markson's work focuses mostly on genre rather than the medium of writing itself. While Markson's book is not a novel in a different way than Magritte's painting is not a pipe, the work has an analogous effect on one's assumptions about literary genres to that which Magritte's painting has on conventions of visual representation. The works differ in terms of scope of application to works other than themselves. The title of Markson's book disrupts one's intention to call all fictive works novels, just as the text on Magritte's painting interrupts one's impulse to call it a pipe. In both cases, the artists make straightforward claims that deny the audience's conditioned reaction to the normal terms of a work of art. By alluding to Magritte's painting Markson indicates his desire to unseat our assumptions about his text. After Magritte, one can never look at a painting and comfortably say that it is what it represents, but after Markson, one may still find and identify novels, which employ the standard characteristics of the genre that he rejects. Even while refusing the label *novel*, Markson's book still performs many of the same functions as a traditional novel; it acts as a sort of placeholder for the novel, filling a gap left if we were to stop applying the label so liberally. If Markson's work were called *This Is Not a Book* or *This Is Not Writing*, he would be fighting a different battle. He does not put an end to the novel but marks his departure from it, his desire to work outside its confines. Yet, after an

¹¹ Dirda and Walters liken Markson's work to the commonplace book (par. 2 in both reviews), while Sven Birkerts claims, "This is not a novel. It's a poem." Davin Heckman even asserts that "Markson's work *is* a novel in more ways than one" (par. 4).

encounter with *This Is Not a Novel*, a cautious reader will have to be more careful in applying genre labels to any work. For the moment, I'm assessing the title only in constative terms. A bit later, I will consider it as a performative statement.

Foucault asks a question of Magritte's painting that applies to *This Is Not a Novel*: "Who speaks the statement?" (48). He describes the inscription as "neither precisely the work's title nor one of its pictorial elements" (16). Likewise Markson's title has a dual status in relation to his work. It is both a title and an element of the text itself. To some extent this may be true of any work, but especially so here, where the title appears in large type across the bottom of any two open pages, with "this is not" appearing on each even-numbered page and "a novel" on the odd-numbered page. Because the phrase is both a title and an element of the work, we cannot overlook the assertion. In Magritte's case, the work's complexity comes from the collision between the image and the statement. Neither one without the other would provoke as powerful a reaction. Markson, in making genre the topic of his work, also doubly asserts his title.

The inclusion of the title as an ever-present visual aspect of the text also highlights the use of the printed word as the medium of the book. Raymond Federman has argued that writers "must raise the printed word as the medium, and therefore *where* and *how* it is placed on the printed page makes a difference in what the novel is saying" (10). This book's participation in this notion makes *This Is Not a Novel* different from novelistic texts. For instance, consider what is often called the first novel, *Don Quixote de La Mancha*. This text has appeared in numerous editions featuring variations in pagination, annotation, typographical layout, font, physical size, etc., but all of these we call *Quixote*. That title applies to the text itself rather than any particular manifestation of it. Although my cheap Signet Classics edition of *Quixote* features the novel's title on every odd-numbered page, as is common, this unobtrusive presence of the title does not

affect the work in the same way as having the title sprawled across the bottom of every two open pages in a different color and size than the rest of the text. *This Is Not a Novel* is not simply a text but also an artifact. A different edition that changed the layout and appearance of the words on the page would drastically alter its effect: it would cease to be *This Is Not a Novel*.¹² Markson, however, does not endorse my assessments of the title and typology. When I asked him whose idea it was to prominently display the title, he replied, "Obviously, some damned-fool designer. I hated it, but it was too late to shoot the guy. Again though, what does that matter? Future editions will surely be different" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004). The changes that Markson anticipates in printings to come will affect the work more powerfully than he wants to realize. The current edition enhances the violation of the rules of engagement between reader and text. The book will be different without such reinforcements.

Markson regards his texts themselves as the only worthy object of interest here. From his perspective, this certainly makes sense. He labored over the writing of these books and had little or nothing to do with the marketing, packaging, etc. However, the object we actually encounter is not the text in a vacuum. He asks, "If you found my books with the covers torn off, and knew nothing about them at all, would you go on after half a page or not?" (Letter 20 Feb. 2004). I respond affirmatively (obviously I like this kind of thing), but in the case of *This Is Not a Novel*, the typology, which I emphasize (to Markson's chagrin), would affect my reading even in the

¹² Tabbi comments on the importance of Markson's placement of the text on the page:

Like Wittgenstein over years of writing (and through recurrent extended dry spells), Markson evolved a nonsequential method of composition that breaks the work into distinct lexical units of at most a paragraph or two; and Markson, also like Wittgenstein, makes jumps from one topic to another and has his protagonists continually return to a single idea from a number of different perspectives. Using line breaks and other visual arrangements on the page, Markson's more recent narrator, a blocked novelist named 'Reader,' frequently reflects on the form his novel might take. [...] The casting of language into what is, essentially a spatial and visual form is only partly realized in the novel, and the experiment is abandoned altogether in the internal novel that Reader projects but doesn't write. (*Cognitive* 107)

[Continued on Next Page]

absence of a cover. In any event, I didn't come across the books in a mangled form, and neither will most readers. I understand that Markson thinks I'm giving the texts themselves short shrift, but I don't think that what I'm doing is any less important than a more traditional hermeneutic or exegetical exercise. How could I even conduct such a project without first doing this? Such work is done for you with traditional novels. One of the charms of Markson's work is that it takes a revision of the reading process to read them. *This Is Not a Novel* is not accessible in the manner of a novel or any other recognizable genre. In addition to the bold proclamation of the work's title, many of the conventions that are fundamental assumptions of literary reading and criticism are summoned in the work only to be rejected as means of approaching this text. This makes the work exceedingly difficult to talk about because Markson has undercut the fundamental basis for that discussion. For instance, he makes the traditional separation between an author and a text problematic if not impossible through a figure called Writer.

Writer surfaces intermittently throughout the work, making claims about the text and himself. The work opens with two statements almost as forceful as the title: "Writer is pretty much tempted to quit writing. / Writer is weary unto death of making up stories" (1). Normal analysis of fiction would call for us to assess Writer in one of two ways, as a character or a narrator. However, Writer ensures that neither of these provides an easy way to process him. A bit further into the first page, we also learn that "Writer is equally tired of inventing characters" (1). He then moves from making comments about himself to also commenting on the text he is writing: "A novel with no intimation of story whatsoever, Writer would like to contrive. / And with no characters. None" (2). If the text will contain no characters, Writer has ruled out this category. He recognizes that he has made his own relation to the text and status within it

If Markson abandons the project in *Reader's Block* in *This Is Not a Novel*, he carries it further.

somewhat problematic: "Does Writer even exist? / In a book without characters?" (12). He responds to his own query in the most straightforward terms possible: "Obviously Writer exists. / Not being a character but the author, here. / Writer is *writing*, for heaven's sake." (13). In a way, this is so simple that it becomes confusing. Markson asserts his presence in the text via Writer, which is not really complicated except that it flies in the face of our basic assumptions about how to process a text. One could try to hold on to the standard mode of fiction reading by calling Writer an author created by Markson who writes *This Is Not a Novel*, but this would return him to the status of a character and would require an amount of mental gymnastics that Writer's flat declarations foreclose. Writer seems very intent on clearly establishing his status within the text; about midway through he reminds us "Writer sitting and/or talking to himself being no more than renewed verification that he exists. / In a book without characters. As noted, not being a character but the author, here" (82).

While on one level, Writer allows Markson to wage a large-scale assault on the conventions we are used to relying on, he makes this maneuver seem less threatening by infusing it with a healthy dose of self-conscious irony. Rather than being simply frustrating, Writer's ability to take away all the straws we would like to grasp at feels more like a game than an attack. This spirit of play persists throughout the work and provides elements of interest and accessibility that such an experiment might otherwise lack. Even though he does so in rather a lighthearted way, because Writer invalidates the way we would normally understand his presence in the text, we must examine how to discuss him. He cannot comfortably be called a character, and he does not meet the criteria of a narrator either. Such a voice is separable from a text's author and is, in essence, a character, whether homodiegetic like a Nick Carraway or heterodiegetic like a Jamesian narrator. In either of those situations, the narrator talks about a

world that he is either a part of or an observer of. Writer doesn't peer into another universe created within the text; he writes the text. It would not even really make sense to reach into the terminology usually associated with poetry to find a means of discussing Writer. The label *speaker* cannot reasonably apply to one who only writes, making his given name, Writer, the most appropriate.

We could more easily dispense with the author's commentary within the text if Markson had chosen to attribute such comments to *I*. We are accustomed to disassociating an *I* from a text's author and then dispensing with the text without having to align the *I* with any real person. Markson makes this more difficult by using a term that initially would seem more impersonal (what could be more personal than saying "I?"), and is thus able to assert his presence in the text. While a generic experiment like *This Is Not a Novel* may seem like a cold endeavor at first, it actually offers a form of emotional engagement that rivals that of realist fiction. The work does not offer realistic characters (who are actually just linguistic constructs) to draw one's empathy. Instead, one makes contact with an actual person, Markson himself. Of course such an assessment amounts to heresy in the world of literary criticism, but such a radical denial of literary convention is precisely what Markson seems to be after. He further breaks down any potential separation between himself and Writer when Writer makes reference to other texts he has written: "Writer incidentally doing his best here—insofar as his memory allows—not to repeat things he has included in his earlier work. Meaning in this instance the four hundred and fifty or so more deaths that were mentioned in his last book also" (147). This last book is, of course, *Reader's Block*. This reference solidifies the still-problematic connection between Markson and Writer and also establishes a continuity among his three most recent novels that is part of the reason that he refers to them as "practically a trilogy" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004). Although

not a consistent character or entity, Reader, Writer, and Author (a figure in *Vanishing Point*) are connected if in no other way than that they are all linked to Markson himself.

Questions should be coming up at this point if they have not already: Why listen to Writer? If Writer is a stand-in for Markson, doesn't taking his word on how to read the text amount to a blatant instance of the intentional fallacy? The answer to the second question must be a qualified *yes*. While we are trained to divide a text from its author, what can we do when an author dismantles the apparatus we use to make such a separation? We cannot amputate Markson's text from him. He has, self-consciously, blunted our scalpels by establishing a situation in which one cannot avoid considering him. We have to take Writer's word about how to read and judge the book; however, this does not mean that Markson-the-human-being has the exact status within the work that Writer stakes out for himself. For instance, I asked Markson why *This Is Not a Novel* came to be listed in the Novels category in the bibliography in *Vanishing Point*, and he replied, "Obviously because it *is* [emphatically underlined three times] a novel—and the title is of course playful" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004). While I read the title as playful, I disagree with Markson's labeling of the book, preferring to take Writer's in-text instructions. (I cannot find a fictional element in *This Is Not a Novel* that would make it a novel, but more on this later.) In my discussion, however, I often take Markson's background as explanation for qualities Writer displays. I don't regard this as conflicting with my disagreement with Markson. This is a text that employs contradiction and play as two of its important tropes; a little contradiction in my approach seems necessary when assessing something that is not logically consistent. Markson's ability to assert his presence in the text via Writer has significances other than simply complicating our usual modes of assessing intentionality.

Markson's insertion of himself into the text responds to attempts in theory to disregard the author. The source of such theoretical aspirations seems to be Roland Barthes's oft referred to "The Death of the Author." I do not think that Markson has Barthes in mind specifically, although he is aware of such theory even though he dismisses "a good percentage of what I do know [...] as old wine in new bottles" ('Interview' 114). Barthes is reacting to "the Author's empire" and takes a necessarily extreme tone (50): "the birth of the reader must be required by the death of the Author" (55). Because of its spirited, manifesto-like tone, his essay has been used (against what seems to be Barthes's more reasonable intention) by people who would like to completely disassociate writer from text, as if there is no relation between the two. Both positions (that the writer is the key to a text and that a writer has no relation to a text) are untenable because of their extremity; a more reasonable approach would lie somewhere in the middle. Markson does not seem to be reacting to Barthes per se but rather the theoretical climate that has persisted after him and that often claims him as its origin.

Writer's presence in the text makes an extreme reading of some of Barthes's claims more difficult to accept. In the case of Markson's work it does not seem that "a veritable *distancing*, the Author diminishing like a figure at the end of the literary stage" is taking place (51-2 Barthes's emphasis). In fact, Writer seems like a means for Markson to struggle against just such an eventuality. Markson fights to make us aware that there is a physical being who produced the text we read. His continual references to his health also serve this end. Shortly after asserting his existence, he adds, "Which is to say that Writer can even have headaches, then? / Writer can have headaches" (14). These are not the fictional headaches of a character but the real pains of the man who has written the text before us. He goes on to affirm, "Writer does have headaches. / In fact so did Virgil. / And Wordsworth" (15). He reaffirms the status of the author not only for

his text but for others as well. This trend recurs intermittently with references to Writer's and other authors' backaches (26). Writer also emphasizes the everyday activities of artists including horseback riding (57, 64) and using antiquated plumbing (58). Writer even makes reference to the bodily position he adopts when writing: "Rilke wrote standing up. / Lewis Carroll wrote standing up. / Thomas Wolfe wrote standing up. / Robert Lowell and Truman Capote wrote lying down. / Writer sits" (81). He draws attention to the physical act of composition. Markson seems to be promoting a view of writing that resembles what Jacques Derrida has called "the classical concept of writing": "This allegedly real context includes a certain 'present' of the inscription, the presence of the writer to what he has written, the entire environment and the horizon of his experience, and above all the intention, the wanting-to-say-what-he-means, which animates his inscription at a given moment" (9).

Perhaps the most powerful affirmation of Markson's relation to the work comes in the form of a quotation: "*I painted this from myself. I was six-and-twenty years old. Albrecht Dürer. 1498*" (66). Jeanne Ivy summarizes the general thinking about this painting: "Here, it is apparent that Dürer could use his skills as an artisan to promote himself, much the way early portrait painters were commissioned to immortalize their employers. Dürer painted his image to project an air of importance, to create perhaps, an increased social status." While Markson is not engaged solely in self-portraiture, he is, like Dürer, affirming himself in a climate in which such an action is not acceptable for an artist. In these post-post-structuralist times, asserting the presence of the author is radical.

In considering a text that defies genre categorization and intentionally subverts normal habits of reading, we cannot understand the work using the criteria of previously defined forms.

When a work ignores literary convention, we are left with few points of stability upon which to base our consideration of it.

FIGURE 3.2: ALBRECHT DÜRER. *SELF-PORTRAIT*. 1500.



The most reasonable and prominent option is to use the parameters that the work sets for itself as a means of examining it. In a sense, we must grab onto the handholds that Writer provides, but we are not really any more helpless here than when we unthinkingly rely upon the conventions of reading that we are trained to use. Linda Hutcheon has argued that one should pay attention to the self-proclaimed parameters of nontraditional texts, arguing that a metafictional text "sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered" (6). *This Is Not a Novel* certainly demonstrates this characteristic. One of the central preoccupations of the book seems to be defining itself.

In opposing expectations, Writer finds it necessary to spend a great deal of time delineating the boundaries of his project. Early on, he does so negatively. After establishing that the work will be "Plotless. Characterless" (3), Writer continues to specify qualities that the work lacks:

Actionless, Writer wants it.

Which is to say, with no *sequence of events*.

Which is to say, with no indicated *passage of time*. (4)

A novel with no *setting*.

With no so-called furniture.

Ergo meaning finally without *descriptions*. (5)

A novel with no overriding central *motivations*, Writer wants.

Hence with no conflicts and/or confrontations, similarly. (6)

With no social themes, i.e., no picture of society.

No depiction of contemporary manners and/or morals.

Categorically, with no politics. (7)

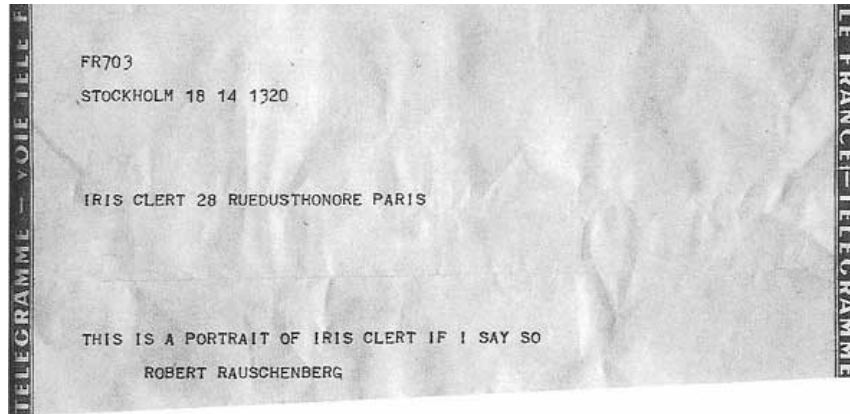
A novel entirely without symbols. (8)

Ultimately, a work of art without even a subject, Writer wants. (9)

Interestingly, Writer calls the work a novel at the same time that he is stripping the book of the most basic criteria of the genre, negating the presence of everything that we assume a novel or most any work of art should contain. This list, delivered in a relatively short span of pages, stages the work as a radical literary experiment. If everything that Writer claims to be avoiding is really absent, what can be left? Writer demonstrates his awareness of how innovative his project is. After the last negation listed above he quotes, “There is no work of art without a subject, said Ortega. / A novel tells a story, said E. M. Forster” (10). Writer not only defies our expectations, but he also consciously goes against prominent theorists of the novel.

Another means Writer uses to devalue the concept of genre is arbitrarily assigning labels to the work. He inaugurates this method relatively early in the book by reporting an incident from the career of an innovative visual artist: "*This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so*. Said Robert Rauschenberg in a telegram to a Paris art gallery" (17 Writer's emphasis).

FIGURE 3.3: ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG. *PORTRAIT OF IRIS CLERT*. 1962.



Writer uses Rauschenberg's precedent to assert his ability to categorize the work at whim. On the next page, he contradicts the work's title by writing, "This is a novel if Writer or Robert Rauschenberg says so" (18). And he quickly moves on to labeling the work on his own, firmly penning, "This is even an epic poem, if Writer says so. Requiring no one's corroboration" (21). He categorizes the work in a number of ways:

Also even a sequence of cantos awaiting numbering, if
Writer says so. (23)

This is even a mural of sorts, if Writer says so. (36)

This is also a continued heap of riddles, if Writer says so. (70)

Or even a polyphonic opera of a kind, if Writer says that
too. (73)

This is even a disquisition on the maladies of the life of
art, if Writer says so. (86)

Or an ersatz prose alternative to *The Waste Land*, if

Writer so suggests. (101)

Or a treatise on the nature of man, if Writer so labels it. (111)

Or a contemporary variant on the latter, if Writer says so. (147) [the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*]

This is also a kind of verbal fugue, if Writer says so. (170)

Nonetheless this is also in many ways even a classic tragedy, if Writer says so. (171)

Or sometimes of course even a comedy of a sort, if Writer says so. (184)

Or even his synthetic personal *Finnegans Wake*, if Writer so decides. (185)

Like the list of negations compiled above, encountering these suggested labels has a cumulative effect over the course of a reading. This profusion of classifications seems to indicate the uselessness of labeling the work, making attempts to do so as arbitrary as the categories Writer suggests. Indeed, after the last of these suggestions, Writer emphasizes that the label is appropriate for the book "If only by way of it fitting no other category anyone might suggest" (185). The book is constructed to evade categorization. Active here as well is the sense of play that Markson never loses the entire book. As he asserts his authority to define his own work, he creates a sense of excitement, reveling in the artist's power.

In this way, Markson's title, all the labels he facetiously offers, and Rauschenberg's telegram function performatively. Echoing J.L. Austin (57-8), Jonathan Culler proposes, "A simple test for the performative is the possibility of adding 'hereby' in English before the verb, where *hereby* means 'by uttering these words'" (*Literary Theory* 96). Markson's title, and similarly for all the labels above, could be read as, *I [Markson/Writer] hereby declare, this is not a novel*. The title makes what it says occur and assumes that the artist has the power to perform

such a creation or transformation. We could try to stretch our ideas of the novel and contort Markson's text to the point that we could cram the book into the label. However, the performative function of Markson's title invalidates such a move. The book becomes not a novel through Markson's declaration.

Amid the stream of negations and meaningless categories, Writer also makes a few positive assertions about what he hopes the work will achieve. Fairly late in the book, he repeats some of the descriptions that *Reader's Block* gives for itself. Instead of offering them as questions or as justification for abandoning the project, Writer offers them confidently:

Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.
Self-evident enough to scarcely need Writer's say-so.

Obstinately cross-referential and of cryptic interconnective syntax.
Here perhaps less than self-evident to the less than attentive. (128)

Not only have the former questions become statements, but Writer asserts that these are fairly apparent observations. This method of forceful assertion of its own terms marks the shift that Markson makes moving from *Reader's Block* to *This Is Not a Novel*. Whereas *Reader's Block* asked tentative questions about itself, *This Is Not a Novel* makes proclamations. While this might be seen as a movement from exploration of new territory to claiming that territory, Writer's edicts do not seem so foolhardy. Rather than egoistic bravado, Markson is claiming the work of art's ability to define its own terms. This requires not only a rejection of the most likely genre label but also a rejection of the practice of bestowing and depending upon labels.

In the vacuum that Markson creates (or evacuates) for his work, he establishes a few touchstones for evaluating it. Even though the work will contain no 'sequence of events' or 'passage of time', Writer says he wants the work to seem as if it is "getting somewhere in spite of

this" (4). He specifies this rather amorphous notion: "Indeed, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. / Even with a note of sadness at the end" (4). Writer establishes a structural criterion for the work and aspires to evoke an emotional response. It would be difficult for anything in book form not to have a beginning, a middle, and an end because one generally has to move through a book from the first page to the last. The desire to affect the reader is more ambitious, and the most important criterion also depends on the reader's reaction. Despite the work's lack of plot and character in any conventional sense, Writer wants it to succeed in "seducing the reader into turning pages nonetheless" (3). He is not out to produce what Markson has elsewhere called "one more immemorial academic novel" ('Reviewers' 125). One could argue that the book contains characters in the form of the numerous historical figures referenced throughout and that the plot consists of the reader's passage through the text. However, these are unusual manifestations of these qualities of fiction. To stretch these terms to make them fit Markson's book seems no less radical than allowing that they are absent. In any case, Writer explicitly rules out all standard ideas of plot and character.

This Is Not a Novel stands apart from the majority of so-called experimental literature because of Writer's and/or Markson's desire to keep the reader hooked. This aspect, entertainment, is often associated with the novel, and Markson does, with great attention, carry it into his not a novel, allowing the book to perform one of the functions of the novel. While this goal might be interesting of its own account, more compelling than the aspiration is the success. The most amazing aspect of the book is its ability to be interesting in spite of its unconventional nature. The book works because it is fun and enthralling reading. The next section attempts to trace and describe the types of fun we experience when reading this book.

CHAPTER 4

PLAYING IN THE MUD, OR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE MESSES

The fact that literary forms, that genres no longer have any genuine significance – that, for example, it would be absurd to ask whether *Finnegans Wake* is a prose work or not, or whether it can be called a novel – indicates the profound labor of literature which seeks to affirm itself in its essence by ruining distinctions and limits.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (220)

By subverting expectations and still aspiring to maintain readerly interest, Writer has set himself a difficult task, and he knows this: "Is Writer thinking he can bring off what he has in mind? / And anticipating that he will have any readers? (11). Like Reader, Writer experiences the uncertainty that accompanies exploration and innovation. He has strayed from the clearly marked path and his work may not succeed in its ambitious endeavor. Writer realizes that unconventional fiction often leaves readers behind and that experimentation does not necessarily lead to good writing. For instance, according to William S. Burroughs's friend and collaborator, Brion Gysin, not even Burroughs himself could stand to read some of the texts he produced

when employing the cut-up method.¹³ Such a result would constitute a failure by Writer's self-proclaimed standards.

While the book has not achieved great commercial success, it has received a respectable number of sympathetic or positive reviews in popular publications. Many of these reviews speculate about how Markson manages to hook the reader. Linking his interest to the plethora of deaths described in the work, John Freeman claims, "In spite of the book's lack of story, it's difficult not to keep flipping the pages out of morbid curiosity" (par. 3). Stephen Mitchelmore speaks of the work's "intoxicating rhythm" which compels the reader to return to it (par. 8). Laura Miller uses Writer's own words to claim that understanding how Markson succeeds in "seducing the reader into turning the pages [...] when most other books with the same anti-narrative agenda fail isn't hard to explain." She argues that Markson relies on "gossip, with a dash of puzzle." Davin Heckman finds the book "fun (and even easy) to read" (par. 4).¹⁴

The idea that a book like this one (saturated in descriptions of the author's compositional exhaustion, his physical ailments, and the deaths of numerous artists, composers, singers, writers, and philosophers) is fun should provoke some disagreement. Indeed learning, among many other

¹³ Gysin is referring to Burroughs's Nova Trilogy (*The Soft Machine*, *Nova Express*, and *The Ticket That Exploded*) in which he carries the cut-up method to the utmost extreme, producing texts that defy not only ideas of the novel but also basic rules of syntax. Gysin describes the texts:

William himself said he couldn't read them a second time... uh, they produced a certain kind of very unhappy psychic effects... there was no question of their *efficacy*, but, uh, for what one would *use* such a thing, uh, gave pause for thought... they were the sort of texts that you might use for brainwashing somebody, or you might use texts for control of an enormous number of people whom you drove mad in one particular way by one sort of application of this dislocation of language, where by sort of breaking off all their synaptic attachments to language you would maybe acquire a social dominance over them, which one considered completely undesirable. (62-3 qtd. in Wilson, Gysin's emphasis, ellipses, and grammatical stumblings—it is an interview, after all)

The fact that the texts produced an undesirable result points to an important aspect of innovative writing: the author does not necessarily know where his text is going, a point Markson emphasizes in *Vanishing Point*. Needless to say Burroughs's texts have not had great commercial success, although his status as a figure of popular culture and a literary rock star leads to a fair number of people buying his books, but few actually read them.

¹⁴ I am not sure what Heckman intends by saying the book is easy to read, but I assume he means that he has no trouble following its syntax. This particular comment does not seem concerned with generic issues.

morbid tidbits, that "Elizabeth Bishop died of cerebral aneurysm. / Elizabeth Bishop's mother died mad. / Lessing died of a stroke, though already wasted by severe asthma and damaged lungs. / Plotinus died of what was probably throat cancer" has an undeniably depressive effect (TNN 69-70). Yet, to read the book only as a litany for the dead or as evidence of an old writer worrying about his own demise would be as Mitchelmore puts it, "to miss the overall effect. It is something wholly other than melancholy" (par. 7). Freeman claims that "What leavens this parade of moribund details is Markson's desire to tap the comic minutiae from the well of tragedy" (par. 5). These reviewers hit on an essential feature of *This Is Not a Novel*. While the book's subject matter is morbid, Markson manages to construct an entertaining and compelling text that people enjoy reading.

At least part of the reason that Markson is able to innovate and still succeed in his goal of keeping the reader engaged comes from his experience writing novels intended expressly for entertainment. While publishing some short stories, "including quite a few Westerns," between 1959 and 1965, Markson also produced what he refers to as "some commercial stuff" including "three crime novels, paperback originals" ('Interview' 106). These books include *Epitaph for a Tramp* (1959), *Epitaph for a Dead Beat* (1961), and *Miss Doll, Go Home* (1965). The first two chronicle the adventures of Detective Harry Fannin as he interacts with various potential killers and literary poseurs in the 1960's Greenwich Village milieu, and the second tells the comic tale of a group of American expatriates living in Mexico who attempt to steal the loot of some recently-arrived bank robbers. The books are light, thrilling reading, and they are definitely geared toward a different audience than Markson's later work. The 1973 reprint of *Tramp* (retitled *Fannin*) features a full-color advertisement for Kent cigarettes, both regular and menthol, bound between pages eighty and eighty-one. The packaging of this text differs

dramatically from that of *This Is Not a Novel*, which in addition to its artifactual status also sports a blurb from David Foster Wallace who calls *Wittgenstein's Mistress* "pretty much the high point of experimental fiction in this country." Even though Markson's intended and actual audiences for his earlier and his later work seem to be very different, his initial books have an important bearing on his more recent innovative success.

Indeed, the issue of how a book is packaged and marketed may have a much more powerful effect on the way readers perceive it than we would like to admit. For instance the blurb on the back cover of *Tramp* gives the following description of Markson: "Logger, distance runner, book editor, die-hard Boston Red Sox fan, magazine writer, poker player, holder of a Master's degree and observer of the Greenwich Village scene." He is pictured sporting a cocky smile punctuated with a cigarette. This stands in stark contrast to the back of *This Is Not a Novel*, which rather than promoting a tough-guy persona, focuses on his avant-garde credentials. While such marketing would seem to be in an effort to distance Markson from his past, the packaging of *This Is Not a Novel* has a striking trait in common with one of the pulp novels. The cover reproduces Magritte's *The Evening Gown*, which depicts the back of a nude female figure standing rigidly upright. In a remarkable coincidence, the cover of *Fannin* features a scantily-clad woman, wearing a brassiere, smoking a cigarette in a long holder, and holding a glass. The contexts of these two female figures determine the way we process them. The first is an allusion to Magritte that helps establish Markson's artistic lineage, while the second is a trashy woman in keeping with the smut to be found within the book. More objectively, it is fair to point out that the covers of both books feature naked (or nearly so) women. The only difference is context, just as the difference between pornography and artistic nude photography is largely a matter of how and why such images are presented—different context same content.

FIGURE 4.1: DETAIL FROM COVER OF *THIS IS NOT A NOVEL*

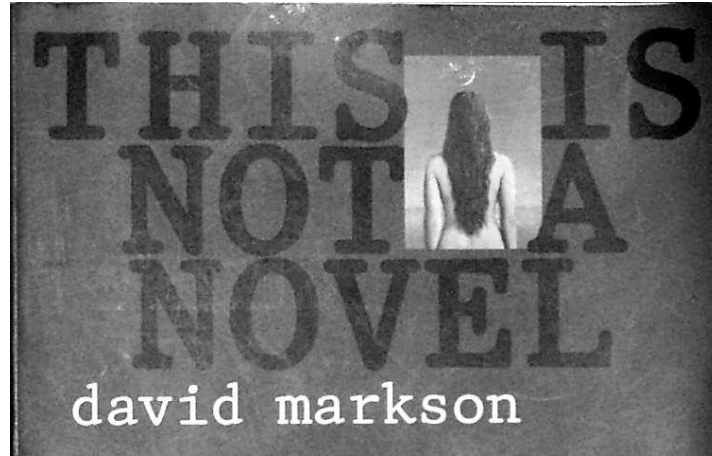
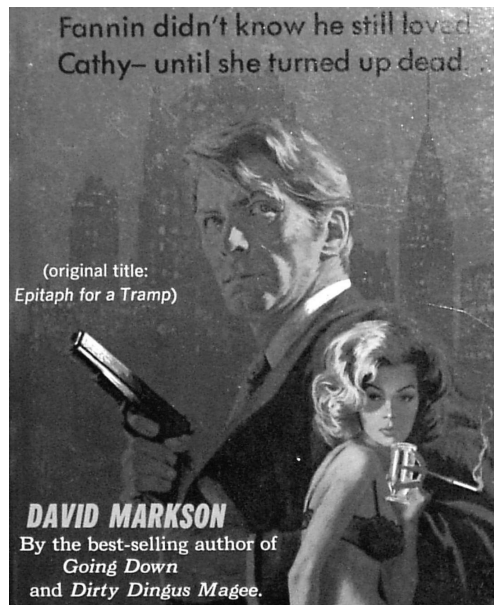


FIGURE 4.2: DETAIL FROM COVER OF *FANNIN*



These covers are a microcosm that demonstrates the segregation of Markson's early books. We would emphasize their differences and place them in disparate categories to preserve the sanctity of literature. We cannot simply dismiss Markson's genre work as completely different in kind from his later writing.

In his introduction to David Markson, Tabbi argues that by the time Markson publishes *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* (1966¹⁵), his work displays “an ease and naturalness in the writing, a result, presumably, of the craft Markson had mastered writing commercial fiction” (93). While Markson's early books undoubtedly helped him to hone his stylistic skills, he also gained experience entertaining his readers, an ability he has not lost in his later, more innovative work. As *Writer's* goal indicates, Markson still values this aspect of writing. What Markson learned about hooking his reader by writing genre novels, he still employs in his later works, which is why his reviewers have found them to be not only innovative but also entertaining. Perhaps the comic potential of *This Is Not a Novel* is best exemplified in *Writer's* ridiculing of a prominent literary critic:

Harold Bloom's claim to the *New York Times* that he could read at a rate of five hundred pages per hour.

Writer's arse.

Spectacular exhibition! Right this way, ladies and gentlemen! See Professor Bloom read the 1961 corrected and reset Random House edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in one hour and thirty-three minutes. Not one page stinted. Unforgettable! (130-1)

What's this? Can't spare half an hour? Wait, wait. Our matinee special, today only! Watch Professor Bloom eviscerate the Pears-McGuinness translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—eight minutes and twenty-nine seconds flat! Guaranteed. (132)

Did Professor Bloom take any books with him, do you know?

Someone said he had a twenty-six-volume complete Joseph Conrad. It's only a weekend cruise. (169)

¹⁵ According to Markson, "*Dingus* came out in 1966, though for some reason it's copyrighted the year before" ('Interview' 109).

While overt comedy like Writer's jabs at Bloom are the exception in *This Is Not a Novel*, the book also contains a number of subtler and sometimes less vindictive turns of wit. For instance, Writer includes the following citation: "George Santayana, reading Moby Dick: In spite of much skipping, I have got stuck in the middle" (3). Coming right after Writer has admitted that he wants to seduce the reader into turning the pages of his book, these lines merit a chuckle. Writer knows that in being ambitious he runs the risk of losing readers, even some of the really smart ones. This sense of humor and its implementation are aspects of Markson's writing that he developed and/or displayed writing his early novels.

Whether describing Harry Fannin's hatred of beatniks or Writer's ailments, Markson's work manages to be engaging. Markson also makes his work seductive reading in another way. *This Is Not a Novel* presents the reader with an opportunity to contact a dexterous intellect, allowing us to experience the fun of learning. Speaking of his allusive tendencies, Tabbi refers to Markson's "belief in the sheer pleasurability of creative recognition in the reading of literature" ('Introduction' 91). Markson provides readers of his later novels with the pleasure that comes from witnessing an original work of art, one that takes an ambitiously innovative stance. This type of fun is similar to that Derrida describes in his counteroffensive against John Searle's attack on "Signature Event Context": "Why did I take such pleasure in accepting this invitation? Nothing compelled me to accept [...]. Where does the pleasure I take in this repetition, in prolonging the debate, or rather the 'confrontation' come from?" (35). He continues, "What I like about this 'confrontation' is that I don't know if it is quite taking place" (37). I read Derrida as arguing that it is fun when things are messy, ambiguous, and complex. He invokes and employs a sense of play and uncertainty (and play with uncertainty) that comes from the fun of taking things apart. This is the same fun we experience as kids when we destroy some electronic gadget

in hopes of seeing how it works (and perhaps constructing a robot out of the parts). We don't really gain any sort of comprehensive understanding of the original device's functioning, but we do get to peek inside. While this type of fun is more esoteric than tales of murder in the big city, the basic ingredient remains, an aspect of which, as I argue in the preface, is absorbing our attention. One may object that the very nature of experimental writing entails the excitement of the atypical, but if this were the only enticement the work offered, it would not be as successful in engaging the reader.

One may also object that there is no fun in knowing that "Amy Lowell died of a stroke," and I do not deny the somber aspects of the book, but they are off set by less melancholic fragments and are overpowered by the book's overall effect (146). Even in the case of such morbid factoids, one experiences the charm of trivia.¹⁶ One is much more likely to find pleasure in learning that "Plutarch says that to force himself to study oratory, Demosthenes once shaved half his head—so that he would be too embarrassed to leave his house" (147). He shares the joy of knowledge with his reader. One could label many of Writer's entries as trivia, but the work also allows the reader to glimpse a higher order of intellectual satisfaction.

Markson displays the pleasure he finds in making connections among his points of knowledge: "apropos of virtually nothing at all, it happens that Ludwig Wittgenstein attended the same school at Linz that Hitler did, and at the same time. All of one's sundry aesthetic motives in abeyance for a moment—isn't that sort of thing just plain *fun* to be able to toy with?" ('Reviewers' 129 Markson's emphasis). In this instance, he uses the same method of accreting significance as he does in his books. Beginning with a quote, he wonders if many of his politically-oriented reviewers understand the reference "when Auden mentions 'what occurred at

Linz" and a dozen lines later mentions that "Linz was where Hitler spent his schooldays" (128).

Markson continues to revel in these types of connections over a decade later in *This Is Not a*

Novel when Writer relays:

There is no mention of writing in the *Iliad*. Any and all messages are passed along verbally.

Indicating incidentally that not one of the Greek warriors, during ten years at Troy, has ever sent a letter home. (12)

Or,

The Colossus of Rhodes crashed down in an earthquake in 224 B.C. Fully three centuries later Pliny the Elder would comment on the monstrous bronze fragments that still lay about the harbor. (158)

In passages like these, Markson assembles knowledge to form statements that are more than facts but that also differ from the information one would be likely to find in a history text. Such fragments go beyond citations to represent connections made possible by immense amounts of thought and study. They demonstrate how reading, learning, and knowing things can be fun. The difference between these passages and an historical text lies in the fact that a history typically has an agenda and builds a narrative to explain past events, Markson's book revels in knowledge for its own sake. The reader may marvel at such connections and engage in making them. This type of fun has a much narrower appeal than a gun-wielding private eye with revenge on his mind, but it is perfectly suited for Markson's intended audience in his later works.

The trivia is not just a step in the connection process; knowing for the sake of knowing is fun in its own right, but the revelatory passages in the work represent the culmination of factual knowledge and a higher level of enjoyment—making connections. A list of facts, which the work may initially appear to be, would probably not succeed in pulling a reader through to its end. The

¹⁶ I admit that this approach calls for an optimistic reader; I must be honest about my inclinations and recognize that [Continued on Next Page]

book moves beyond being a mere demonstration of intellectual pleasure and becomes a platform for us to engage in a similar process. In the absence of the means of establishing order that the conventions of genre usually lend, we yearn for a way of organizing or understanding the text. One attempts to trace trends and patterns as I have in this paper (and it has been fun). Of course, we look for patterns in any text, but the structure of this work makes such an activity almost inevitable. We cannot get distracted by falling in love with characters or getting lost in a story. No matter what audience he writes for, Markson takes as a principle of his craft that one must offer readers something to keep them turning the pages. Such a consideration may not be a necessary component of all experimental writing, but it is a goal that Writer establishes and achieves in this text.

Despite the spirit of intellectual play that runs throughout Markson's work, most commentators mark *Dingus Magee* as Markson's point of departure from 'commercial fiction'.¹⁷ Critics, who praise Markson's later achievements, seem somewhat uncomfortable with his having written pulp novels before he "began to publish serious fiction" as Tabbi describes it ('Interview' 107). He reports that after Markson finished his graduate work at Columbia "nearly fifteen years would pass before he published his first 'literary' novel" ('Introduction' 92). Yet, his first book, *Tramp* appears about seven years earlier than *Dingus Magee*. People who consider themselves serious readers do not want to read the same authors as the "drug-store clientele," which is how Steven Moore describes the audience of Markson's early work (167). Some critics attempt to mitigate the existence of Markson's crime novels by teasing literary merit out of them. Moore spends a little time in his essay pointing out that Markson's allusive tendencies are

some may not share them.

already evident in his early work. Moore makes an excellent point that Markson exhibits discomfort writing genre fiction. He says of Fannin's ability to casually allude to Shakespeare, "Markson is deliberately going against the grain of generic conventions (and reader expectations)" (166). While Markson defies expectations, he still manages to attract the reader's interest, as he continues to do in his later work.

A degree of this discomfort with Markson's genre-writing past may come from the man himself. Leslie Whitten refers to "Markson's three crime novels, which he seldom even lists among his published works" (180). Indeed, prior to the 1990 issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction* that includes the crime novels in its list of Markson's books and features essays that mention them, none of the bibliographies in his books contain them. In the journal and in Markson's subsequent publications (*Reader's Block*, *This Is Not a Novel*, and *Vanishing Point*¹⁸), the crime novels are listed, but they are segregated from his other work. Kept apart from his *Novels*, *Criticism*, *Poetry*, or appearances in any *Anthology*, Markson's early works are listed under the heading *Entertainments* on the lists that mention them. It is as if *novels* and *entertainment* are mutually exclusive. This separation is contradictory, as if to deny that one of the functions of the novel is to be entertaining and assert that the early books are nothing but fluff. The later books still perform the important novelistic function of entertainment. Sometimes Markson seems to make no apologies for his genre work: "*Dingus Magee* was meant to be a straight commercial genre novel" (108). As he worked, he got distracted by a desire to subvert the Western genre, but he admits his original intentions were simply to "pick up some rent

¹⁷ Of course, not all critics would disavow Markson's earlier work. James McCourt recognizes the appeal of Markson's *Epitaph* books in a humorous essay, "Come Back, Harry Fannin," which opens with the admission, "Of all David Markson's characters, I like Harry Fannin the best" (184).

¹⁸ Interestingly, in *Vanishing Point*, *This Is Not a Novel* is listed in the *Novels* category. This type of obvious contradiction is in keeping with Markson's playful attitude and further highlights the arbitrary nature of literary categorization.

money" (108). Markson's crime novels seem to have been relatively popular. Both the *Epitaph* books were reprinted. Oddly enough, the front cover of *Fannin* describes Markson as "the best-selling author of *Going Down* and *Dirty Dingus Magee*,"¹⁹ making reference to Markson's so-called serious novels. While he may not be ashamed of them, Markson does strongly enforce the separation between his early and later books. In response to my question about the segregation of the early books, Markson remarked, "Obviously, I'm the one who doesn't want those three old crime tales listed with my important work, and so I call them *merely* 'entertainments'" adding elsewhere "It was Graham Greene who did this first, I think" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004). I disagree with this separation, but again from Markson's point of view, it makes sense. He offers an explanation that I'll get to a bit later.

To marginalize the first three books is at least somewhat arbitrary. Most critics regard *Dingus Magee* as Markson's first important book, and the lists of works reinforce this distinction, but there is not unanimous agreement on this point. Burton Feldman calls *Going Down* Markson's "first serious novel" (158). Indeed, in terms of tone and narrative subject matter, *Going Down* is a very serious book, but Feldman's comment also seems to imply that what Markson does before *Going Down* is not serious and what he has done after is. This is simply not the case. *Springer's Progress*, while esoterically allusive, is an undeniably humorous novel. While *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Markson's subsequent books are not as explicitly concerned with humor, they are engaged in a type of play with language and genre that while serious is also fun. Even without regard to my quibbling with Feldman's terminology, his dissent from the

¹⁹ *Dirty Dingus Magee* is the title of the film version of Markson's novel *The Ballad of Dingus Magee*, making the reference even more odd because it refers to the film rather than Markson's book. Incidentally, the film stars an aging Frank Sinatra as the nineteen-year-old titular character. Markson refers to the movie as "that awful film of *Dingus Magee*" ('Interview' 109). According to Donald Honig, the movie is terrible despite the fact that Joseph Heller wrote an early draft of the screen play.

majority critical opinion shows that the separation between Markson's crime novels and his later work is an arbitrary distinction.

Dingus Magee may often get credit for being a turning point in Markson's career because of its overt discomfort with its genre. In this brief novel, Markson demythologizes the American west of the latter half of the nineteenth century by demonstrating how modern myths are constructed by the media. Early in his career, after a failed robbery attempt, Dingus muses, "Not that it comes to much difference anyways, [...] Because how is *Harper's New Magazine* or anybody else gonter know what a notorious desperado you are less'n some writer feller happens to walk in and catch you at it?" (116). Not only is Dingus's outlaw heroism exposed as a combination of rumor and sensationalistic journalism, but the same goes for virtually every other figure of the old west as well. When Wyatt Earp and Doc Holiday rob Dingus, they are afraid because they think they have stumbled onto a rough character, and Earp remarks of Dingus's money, "Well, we still got to take it. Because we been intending at least one gen-u-ine daring deed fer years now, instead of just writing to them newspapers, and this has to be it" (123). Yet in the midst of this parody of a so-called low genre, Markson also deflates the pomp of some high literary traditions. As Tabbi puts it, Markson "began the book with the intention of completing still another genre novel, but even as he found himself turning the entire myth and stereotype of the Western on its head, he discovered he could have every bit as much fun with the literature he knew, from Cervantes to the American Transcendentalists [...] to the Oedipus myth and *Tom Jones*" ('Introduction' 93).

Yet *Dingus Magee* is not the first challenge to a literary establishment that Markson makes. While in his anti-Western, he employs "a playful variation on Faulknerian prose [...] as if to see if you could use that same complex syntax in dealing with patent absurdity" (Markson

'Interview' 109). He has lampooned this particular practitioner of literary Modernism before. Moore mentions that "*Miss Doll, Go Home* (1965), parodies the format of *As I Lay Dying*" (167). The chapters in Markson's book are named after the character who narrates each particular chapter. One sentence-long section reads, "My fish is a mother" (101). This evokes, of course, the one-sentence Vardaman chapter from Faulkner's novel: "My mother is a fish" (84). If one would say that Markson was merely appropriating Faulkner's technique, this instance places him in the province of parody. In using the narrative techniques of Modernism (stream of consciousness and shifting point of view) to tell a story that would normally be reserved for low-genre books, Markson destabilizes the boundary between high and low literature. Tabbi recognize this as well, although he qualifies his claim in a way that disparages the early books:

The method came naturally to Markson even in the crime novels, where he introduced a fine beat dialogue and numerous 'literary' quotations into the genre. Here, as in *Dingus*, and, more subtly, in the next two books, he is so very obviously having *fun* with the 'tradition' that it is easy to miss the original effects he achieves by combining high-modernist styles and the staple subgenres of popular fiction: the Western, the crime story, the Gothic murder mystery (in *Going Down*), and the erotic romance (*Springer's Progress*). This is not mere imitation, much less parody, but a transformation of received styles in the service of new subject matter. ('Introduction' 94 Tabbi's emphasis)

Unlike Tabbi, I'm comfortable calling such appropriations parody. Generally, his points about Markson's structural allusions hold true, but I disagree with the separation between Markson's early and later work that is implicit in his commentary.

It is not even content that separates Markson's earlier work from his later. While the first three books are often called *crime novels*, it is not as if Markson leaves such subject matter behind after 1965. *Tramp* opens with Fannin's ex-wife Cathy stumbling up the stairs to his apartment, dying of stab wounds. But such disturbingly violent episodes are not the sole province of Markson's early work. Although the book is only comically violent, *Dingus Magee* does contain several shootings. More to the point, *Going Down*, by all accounts one of Markson's so-called serious or literary novels, revolves around the murder of Lee Priest, who is killed with a machete. The local doctor describes the crime: "it was...shocking. As if perpetrated in utter madness. He had hacked at her so savagely" (150).

The separation between Markson's first three books and his subsequent ones has no clear basis other than the fact that people who consider themselves serious readers do not want to claim the same authors as more casual readers.²⁰ The separation of all readers into two broad camps that I depend on in the last, and many other, sentences is admittedly problematic. Some people who would like to call themselves serious, literary-critical readers are not any more savvy than a so-called casual reader who will burn through three Agatha Christie novels in a single sitting. But I don't think I'm attacking a straw man when I say that such distinctions, while we may not like to admit it, influence our thinking about literature, reading, and readers. Like the other binaries that deconstructionists have undertaken to expose and dismantle, the separations between high and low genre and the corresponding differences in readers are insidious precisely because they go unexamined. Perhaps some of these are even more active because, in today's critical climate, we do not want to admit to participating in such distinctions. While I do try to

²⁰ In defense of the critics I've mentioned, I admit I would be hesitant to confess that a prominent contemporary genre author such as Stephen King, Tom Clancy, or Anne Rice had just put out a new book that I found very impressive. "No really, this new book is different," I would plead to my colleagues, but no one would listen.

avoid distinctions between high and low genre, I can't leave such divisions behind completely. Markson raises a good question in his second letter in response to my argument that his early work deserves attention: "Would you have ever heard of D. M. [probably short for *Dingus Magee* but perhaps David Markson] if I'd written only that sort of stuff?!" (Letter 20 Feb. 2004). Probably not. Comments like this one make me wonder who Markson is after. He doesn't want to write novels only of interest to academics, and he's not aiming for nonspecialist readers either. It seems his target audience is composed of people like himself: well-educated and even-more-well read but not under the direct influence of the academy, a small demographic unfortunately.

In any case, I maintain that there is no reason to be ashamed of Markson's early work. Writer includes a reference that helps to clarify: "You can actually draw so beautifully. Why do you spend your time making all these queer things? Picasso: That's why" (156). Like Picasso, Markson mastered the traditional forms of his medium early and quickly moved on to challenging those standards. Soon after the Picasso anecdote we learn that "Writer has actually written some relatively traditional novels. Why is he spending his time doing this sort of thing? That's why" (164). Just as Writer has established his lineage through Dürer, Magritte and Rauschenberg, here he takes a cue from Picasso. Like Picasso, Markson realizes that art must reach beyond limits and expectations. Yet Markson raises an angle on the separation between his early and late work that I had not considered:

Picasso was *painting* when he did the early work. I was treading water, just trying to make a buck. *Miss Doll* was a screenplay first. When I made it into a novel, and used the *As I Lay Dying* approach, I did so because it was the *easiest* method I could think of. I would never have used those tinny materials for a serious book—and would surely have worked infinitely harder, also. Was it Pound who said

much of the value of a work lies in what it cost? The "entertainments" cost *very very very* little—*Miss Doll* the least. T'aint "labeling," it's quality. (Letter 20 Feb. 2004)

Accepting Markson's claim here would throw us unmitigatedly into the province of authorial intention. And even if we were willing to make this move, isn't everybody always treading water? It's as if Markson would have us believe that one day we wake up and realize that we are now doing our important work. (Hopefully, this is the case, and I just haven't gotten there yet.) While he may not have been trying his hardest in the early work, everyone goes through some sort of apprenticeship. I had to write a number of more-or-less pointless poetry explications before I was ready and before anyone would let me try to do one of these (a thesis). At the time, I knew I was just completing an academic exercise (as I am now), but I also knew it was a necessary step toward something bigger. Perhaps the qualitative difference that Markson points out is an adequate criteria to establish the separation between his earlier and later books, but even so, his use of Faulknerian techniques because they were *easiest* indicates something of his skill. In any case, my purpose here is not to establish a qualitative theory of literature but to point out how high/low distinctions are still active in our thinking, despite our pretensions.

Regardless of such issues, the fact that Markson looks to painters to establish his artistic lineage demonstrates the varying attitudes toward innovation in verbal and visual media. Experimental paintings like those of Picasso or any of the others mentioned still perform the function of more traditional paintings. They can be hung on a wall and looked at no matter how forcefully they challenge the conventions of realistic painting. Even if these works change the way we perceive their medium, they are still *paintings* and accepted as such. The same tolerance

of experimentation is not extended to writing. In *For a New Novel*, Alain Robbe-Grillet²¹ has commented on the lack of understanding that the literary innovator faces. He generalizes to illustrate a common situation: a critic asks an author, "what were you trying to do" and the writer must respond that, "What he was trying to do is merely the book itself" (13). Markson has made a similar comment. He speaks of a preface that Malcolm Lowry wrote for a French edition of *Under the Volcano* in which Lowry had been expected to explain his intentions. According to Markson, Lowry admits that "one of his intentions had been to write a book" and continues to say, "I confess that my own purposes have frequently been as transparent" ('Reviewers' 124). Robbe-Grillet says of himself and others attempting to pursue the New Novel, "each time that general supposition, or the specialized criticism which both reflects and sustains it, attributes an

²¹ Markson has no familiarity with Robbe-Grillet, remarking that he "read one book, about two centuries ago, and cannot remember it at all" (Letter 9 Feb. 2004). But the affinities between Robbe-Grillet's ideas about the future of fiction and Markson's project in *This Is Not a Novel* are uncanny. In an essay entitled "On Several Obsolete Notions," Robbe-Grillet outlines the direction he believes fiction writing ought to take by describing the outdated nature of several conventions of the novel. He divides the essay into four sections: *Character*, *Story*, *Commitment*, and *Form and Content*. In each section, he defines his usage of the relevant term and explains why it is no longer an interesting goal or component of the novel. His use of the terms *Character* and *Story* are rather self-explanatory, and his rejection of these staples of the novel reflects his dedication to keeping literature alive. For instance, he says that character-dependent novels are "linked to [...] a society now past," and he calls for a "new course [...] with the promise of new discoveries" (29). Writer rejects the same conventions, when he inscribes that his text will be "Plotless. Characterless" (3).

Robbe-Grillet uses the term Commitment to refer to all forms of "didactic literature," rejecting the use of fiction as a means of social change or commentary (35). Markson also rejects the notion that he should write "something with sociopolitical-economic import" ('Reviewers' 125). Writer displays a similar disposition when he writes of the work at hand, "With no social themes, i.e., no picture of society. / No depiction of contemporary manners and/or morals. / Categorically, with no politics" (7). In the Form and Content section, Robbe-Grillet dismisses the idea that a work's content may be examined separately from its form. He describes the traditional conception of a great novel as 'one whose signification transcends its anecdote, transcends it in the direction of a profound human truth, a morality, or a metaphysic' (42). Writer wishes to avoid producing a work that anyone could argue signifies more than itself. He calls his work "A novel entirely without symbols" (8). Robbe-Grillet further argues that "Art is not a more or less brilliantly colored envelope intended to embellish the author's 'message'" (45). Writer expresses a similar sentiment when he claims to want "a work of art without even a subject" (9). Neither author wishes to package a message in the work of art; the form of the work is inseparable from its meaning.

Because of the extreme degree of similarity between their programs, I regard Markson and Robbe-Grillet as kindred spirits, as fellow innovators. They face similar problems and have evolved commensurate solutions. To some extent, Markson is operating in a (paradoxical) avant-garde tradition, which is not to suggest that Markson looks for models of innovations or innovators to mimic, but rather, that, sadly, pioneers face the same problems now that they faced decades ago when attempting to contend with established literary traditions. Evidence of this trend can also be found in Writer's allusions to avant-garde painters that I have discussed elsewhere.

intention to us, it can be asserted without much risk of error that our intention is exactly the contrary" (133). Markson expresses a strikingly similar sentiment when he explains that in attempting to remember the motivation behind a past work he must merely "recall what certain of my more pontifical reviewers have had to say. Approximately the diametric opposite will usually get things about right" ('Reviewers' 124). Markson sums up the plight of an author attempting to experiment with form when he laments, "Avoid the standard readily labeled constructs and you'll be excommunicated" ('Reviewers' 126). Once again, Robbe-Grillet would seem to agree when he states, "A new form will always seem more or less an absence of any form at all, since it is unconsciously judged by reference to the consecrated forms" (17). The consecrated form is the nineteenth-century realist novel; perhaps the resistance to deviation from this norm comes from the fact that language is fundamental to our conceptions of the world. We can distance ourselves from deviations in visual representations, but challenges to norms of language violate the sanctity of narrative, the structure we use not only in novels but also to make sense of our actual experiences. Culler argues that the novel is a particularly important instance of self-definition via language: "More than any other literary form, more perhaps than any other type of writing, the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world" (*Structuralist* 221). We have a survivalist impulse to protect the novel and thus our culture and ourselves, while such preservation of the form allows us to remain safe (or at least understand our dangers), it also causes us to be static.

Markson also shares a thirst for innovation with Robbe-Grillet. The latter makes very clear that his desire for innovations in form will not result in a new yet static genre. He argues that like other forms of art "literature too is alive" (10). When Robbe-Grillet discusses the New Novel, he does not mean to change the form of the novel, but to develop a view of literature in

which genres are always evolving. He further argues that "The work of art, like the world, is a living form" (43). Robbe-Grillet recognizes that "it is easier to indicate a new direction than to follow it" and admits his novels have not met his own standards to his complete satisfaction (50). Markson's work reflects a similar disposition. Structurally, Markson's later work has developed in an attempt to follow a new direction in the sense that Robbe-Grillet discusses.

Robbe-Grillet makes a comment in "New Novel, New Man" about critical response to experimental novels, claiming that "those who find our novels good insist that they have been written *against* our theories" (134).²² Such an observation reflects the conflict between writer and reviewer that Robbe-Grillet and Markson have both experienced. Robbe-Grillet emphasizes that his works are intended for a broad readership and not reserved for specialist critics (139-40). Markson aligns himself with this sentiment in *This Is Not a Novel* by making readerly interest one of his goals.

Establishing a balance between literary innovation and readable writing is a challenge that Writer is very aware of. Near the end of the book, Writer wonders,

Or was it possibly nothing more than a fundamentally
recognizable genre all the while, no matter what Writer
averred?

Nothing more or less than a *read*?

Simply an unconventional, generally melancholy
though sometimes even playful now-ending read?

About an old man's preoccupations. (189)

Writer seems to be wondering if he has missed his own point, if he has done anything other than produce a text that people will while away their time reading. In some ways this fear is justified

²² In her review of *This Is Not a Novel*, Miller makes a comment that is an example of Robbe-Grillet's claim: "he [Markson] seems to have written a book that's entertaining in spite of himself."

and reasonable and shows a great deal of self-awareness, as Writer wonders how valuable his project has been. Even if *This Is Not a Novel* is only a *read*, as he calls it, it is still that. No matter how successful or unsuccessful the experiment has been, this book, like the experimental paintings that Markson draws inspiration from, performs the same function as more typical works in the medium, as the very thing it tries so hard to avoid being. To some extent, it seems that acting as a placeholder for the novel while refusing to be one seems to have been the purpose of the book:

It is the business of the novelist to create characters.
Said Alphonse Daudet.

Action and plot may play a minor role in a modern
novel, but they cannot be entirely dispensed with.
Said Ortega.

If you can do it, it ain't bragging. [attributed to Dizzy Dean on 10] (189)

Writer has written a book-length work of semifictional nonpoetry that could not be called a novel, a novel that is not a novel.

The unavoidable question now must be 'What good is the book's avoidance of the label *novel* if it still performs the same function as works that more clearly deserve that label?' Most obviously, the book forces an evaluation of the assumptions we bring to a literary text. This alone is valuable enough to justify the project. The book prevents passive reading by not only defying expectations but also openly challenging the reader to think: "Account for Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia" (45), or "What existed before the Big Bang? Where? Exclude God from your response" (77). However, the book also serves an even more important purpose. Markson's work along with that of many other writers (Burroughs and Robbe-Grillet to mention only the writers referenced here) seeks to carry out "the profound labor of literature" as Blanchot describes it: "to affirm itself in its essence by ruining distinctions and limits" (220).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: APPROACHING (THE) *VANISHING POINT*

Once again the fatal trajectory has been made.

—typo in Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* (125)

Throughout I have been paying lip service to the inseparability of form and content. To be completely honest, I must admit a formalist bias in my approach so far. I justify this one-sided treatment by pointing out that in the absence of a critical discussion of these works, my first step was necessarily figuring out how to read them, calling for closer attention to form than would be desired if there was criticism that had already addressed these issues. At this point I hope to compensate for my formalism by turning to a more unified consideration of Markson's work. This shift is motivated partially by a desire to be as comprehensive as possible in my consideration of Markson, but more practically, Markson's semiautobiographical project is unavoidable for me in his latest book, *Vanishing Point*. I'm not sure if this is a result of the texts themselves or the order in which I encountered them, being bowled over by the innovation of *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel* and being ready to consider other aspects by the time *Vanishing Point* came out. Because it amplifies and explores issues hinted at earlier, this entire chapter could be taken as a footnote attached somewhere within my discussion of Markson's insinuation of himself into *This Is Not a Novel* via *Writer*.

While examining the connection between Markson and *Writer* in that section, I do not consider the autobiographical issues implicit in this connection. Autobiography pops up with

increasing frequency in Markson's work. Although speaking of *Springer's Progress*, Markson claims,

the very nature of the way I work makes the concept of autobiography pretty much meaningless. Even if you do happen to be thinking in such terms, you're already inventing for the sake of structure, for elementary "story," in your earliest draft. And then in that particular book every single one of those short chapters was revised endlessly, some as many as thirty times, none surely less than eighteen or twenty. So what sort of "real people" could be left at that point anyhow? ('Interview' 111)

Even if we take Markson at his word in this instance, the titular character is writing an autobiographical novel. More importantly, however, Springer's life seems remarkably parallel to Markson's own: they are both involved in the Greenwich Village literary scene, married to their editors, and have trouble with the volume of their literary outputs. Tabbi notes that "In the seven years that passed between *Going Down* and his next novel, *Springer's Progress* (1977), Markson's own life differed little in externals from the life of his character and alter ego, Lucien Springer" ('Introduction' 96). Indeed, Markson himself makes reference elsewhere to "My virtual alter ego Springer" ('Reviewers' 124).

Toying with autobiography continues in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, but this time Markson has his character consider self-representation and leaves himself out, as Kate considers the possibility of an autobiographical novel. While she abandons this prospect, her text does fulfill an autobiographical, though not novelistic, function for her. Yet, in the same interview where Markson claims that the concept of autobiography is meaningless in his work, he calls

Wittgenstein's Mistress "an autobiographical novel of a certain sort" in so far as "what Kate knows is what I know" ('Interview' 117).

The self-representational undercurrent becomes even stronger in *Reader's Block*. Especially in his three most recent works, Markson seems to be examining his own inexorable progress toward death. The narrator asks of Reader, "Or is he in some peculiar way thinking of an autobiography after all?" (RB 13). Over the course of the book, Reader contemplates giving Protagonist features from his own life, which parallel Markson's own: "Should he give him children, if he is still being in part autobiographical? / A son and a daughter, then?" (17). The former question is repeated with slight variations in two other places (41,184). Reader also includes anecdotes that correspond to Markson's life: "For Protagonist's literary past: Protagonist: Isn't it awfully long since Caitlin went to the ladies' room? Dylan Thomas: She's probably in that other saloon across the street. Go buy her a drink and tell her I apologize for ignoring her, will you? She'll let off less steam if it's you instead of me" (RB 147). Markson was friends with Thomas, and Reader suggests other episodes with Jack Kerouac and Malcolm Lowry among others, to whom Markson was also close.²³

If Markson is tinkering with autobiography in these books, why use the fragmentary structure littered with unattributed quotations? Why this particular marriage of form and content? The answer may lie in a flippant question: "Has Reader sometimes felt he has spent his entire life as if preparing for doctoral orals?" (RB 160). The breadth of knowledge that Markson displays in

²³ Tabbi summarizes the autobiographical component of *Reader's Block*:

"Protagonist" is a character created by "Reader" who is in turn Markson's own "partly autobiographical" invention, a figure who has written novels and fathered two children, and who worries over whether to devise "some background" for Protagonist's loneliness (24) or to "put down" his own recent experience in hospitals (Markson himself was operated on twice for cancer shortly after the publication of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*) [...]. (*Cognitive* 112)

[Continued on Next Page]

his books is staggering and while Kate sometimes worries that she is "showing off" (WM 105, 173, 211), Markson does not really seem to share this concern. For the most part, the books don't feel pedantic; rather, they seem very learned. For Markson these broad-ranging allusions would seem to be the stuff life is made of (to desecrate Humphrey Bogart's well-known line). In his consideration of Markson's allusive tendencies in his pre-*Reader's Block* work, Moore comments, "Markson is not merely name-dropping here; the references are an integral component of the characters he creates and the milieu in which they move." (165). He also recognizes that Markson's allusions demonstrate "not only the obvious—that literature is made out of previous literature—but that the experience of literature is as valid as any other kind of experience to write about, that Blake's rose is as real to some readers as a rose in someone's garden" (164). Writer echoes this sentiment: "Life consists in what a man is thinking of all day, Emerson said" (TNN 30). The assemblage form works well in rendering a life that consists largely of reading and mulling over what has been read. On a more light-hearted note, Springer uses allusion as a means of retreating from the troubles of his daily life:

There's this should be recorded here about Springer too, man retreats at rebuff. Queer sort of irrelevant cranial displacement occurs, idiosyncratic fragments of art history be what pops into his mind more often than not. Dana get authentically grieved at him, find himself pondering that Michelangelo wore his boots to bed. (SP 7)

Whatever function such seemingly random allusions serve in Markson's own consciousness, they seem to be an unavoidable part of it.

In *This Is Not a Novel*, Writer includes a passage that resonates with the autobiographical references in *Reader's Block*: "Your last novel was a flop. You've got two wonderful children

He also describes how a "three-level displacement, from 'the I' to 'Reader' to 'Protagonist,' allows the author to set down biographical data selectively" (112-3). But the particular autobiographical functioning of *Reader's Block* is not [Continued on Next Page]

depending on you. Don't you think it's time to consider doing something more financially responsible in your life? / This is also an autobiography, if Writer says so" (TNN 53). In addition to Markson's presence in the text through Writer, on a few occasions he [Writer and/or Markson] breaks from this method. Twice he directly addresses the reader: "I've been reading *Cousin Bette*. I've been reading it all summer. I may never finish" (TNN 76). About thirty pages later he asks, "You ever read that, that *Cousin Bette*? Should I go on with it?" (TNN 103). Writer is conspicuously absent in these two passages or possibly he's using, anomalously for him, the first person. We could go back to our old way of processing a literary *I*, but within the context of this work that's not really viable. Unlike the other instances of *I* in the text, which seem to be unattributed quotations, here Markson makes use of his established position within the text to interact with the reader on a personal, conversational level.

The enigmatically autobiographical nature of the text also comes through in three quotations that seem to come from Markson's kids. If we can see Springer as anything like Markson, interruptions from the children are a constant impediment while attempting to write. The childish interjections are "Hey, Dad, hot this for me, please?" (TNN 83), "Hey, Dad, sharp this for me, please?" (TNN 120), and "But where is your friend, Daddy?" (TNN 164). One can imagine the practical circumstances motivating these queries. The first two seem to come from one child because of their parallel structures. In the first the child wants some food warmed up, in the second, a pencil sharpened. In the third quotation, another child asks, perhaps motivated by a photograph, about one of Markson's friends. In *This Is Not a Novel* and to an even greater extent in *Vanishing Point*, Markson uses his presence in the text to consider his impending death:

the focus here. I merely wish to establish the existence of this trend and more closely examine it in *Vanishing Point*.

"All of this preoccupation implying little more, presumably, than that Writer is turning older" (TNN 147).

At the time of the release of *Vanishing Point* (February 2004), Markson had just turned seventy six; he was born in December of 1927. Markson could expect to live well beyond this age, but his health has been far from pristine as the comments of other critics and his admissions in his letters indicate. In his most recent text he seems to be not only considering death but also examining signs within himself indicating that it may be near. In the title, Markson continues to draw from visual art; it seems to be a play on the convention of visual representation in which the artist gains the illusion of depth by focusing the viewer's attention on a vanishing point. Also evoked in the title is death itself, the point at which one vanishes. This phrase first surfaces in *Reader's Block*. In considering how to handle the someone who nods hello to Protagonist, Reader muses: "Or possibly now someone he will never see closely at all, not coming toward him but moving in the same direction? And always a fair distance ahead? / Continuing on to become a kind of actualized vanishing point when Protagonist himself halts?" (RB 152). The phrase appears on its own two subsequent times in the text (157, 192). Here the only person that Reader has any interaction with, even if it is only casual, vanishes into the distance, emphasizing Reader's and/or Protagonist's isolation. But in the latest book, it seems to be Markson himself who is approaching the vanishing point.

Rather than Writer, in *Vanishing Point* we have Author. While Markson does not spend the time establishing Author's status that he does with Writer, I read him the same way as Writer: "Not being a character but the author, here" (TNN 13). Near the end of *Vanishing Point*, the following fragment appears: "Says William Dunbar's *Lament for the Makers*: The fear of death

distresses me. Which Author suspects he has quoted before in his life" (VP 184).²⁴ This fear haunts the entire text: "Does anyone ever die who is not remembered through the remainder of at least one other entire lifetime by *someone*?" (VP 111). The book begins with Author describing his process in assembling the book, but he quickly moves to meditating on his health:

Author has finally started to put his notes into manuscript form. (1)

Author had been scribbling the notes on three-by-five-inch index cards. They now come close to filling two shoebox tops taped together end to end. (1)

Actually, Author could have begun to type some weeks ago. For whatever reason, he's been procrastinating. (3)

One reason for Author's procrastination is that he seems not to have had much energy lately, to tell the truth. For work, or for much of anything else. (4)

Over the course of the book, Author discusses his fatigue, frequent naps, and stumbling, all of which he attributes to "Age. / Dammit" (VP 180). This preoccupation with death was very active in *This Is Not a Novel* and to a slightly lesser extent in *Reader's Block*, but here it is more prominent because Markson seems to have worked through many of the formal issues that drew my (and perhaps his) attention in the two previous books.

I don't want to make the case that Markson has backed off of the literary rebellion that he undertook in *This Is Not a Novel*; rather, in *Vanishing Point*, he has already fought the battle against restrictive conceptions of genre and has staked out his peculiar relation to his texts. Yet it seems that his publisher missed what Markson accomplished in *This Is Not a Novel*: the cover of *Vanishing Point* features the label that *This Is Not a Novel* so forcefully resists, "a novel." And

²⁴ He has indeed. In *This Is Not a Novel*, also near the end we get the Latin phrase, "*Timor mortis conturbat me*," which is immediately followed by an English translation (TNN 181). The Latin appears again a few pages later (185).

while in light of his previous book, the label seems inappropriate, this book fits into the category much more comfortably than the last. The blurb on the back of the book even discusses "the narrative's startling and shattering climax," a feature that would be unthinkable in the previous book. Admittedly, I may be making a bit too much out of such matters. Markson counsels me: "You don't label a bottle of 'Gin' unless it contains gin! All that stuff on the jackets is for people who move their lips when they read" (Letter 20 Feb. 2004). You do if you're playing a trick on someone, which is part of what Markson is doing in *This Is Not a Novel*. In any case, while he seems to be admitting that labels are usually appropriate, but they don't matter.

While *Vanishing Point* shares many features with *This Is Not a Novel*, Markson is engaged in a more novelistic and fictitious project in the new book. In doing this he is still concerned with the formal features of his work, but by this point he seems to regard his innovations as par for the course he has established: "Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage. As is already more than self-evident. [...] / A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel. This presumably by now self-evident also" (VP 12-13). But even if Author is not as focused on formal innovations, he still draws from visual art to reflect on his form: "A seascape by Henri Matisse was once hung upside down in the Museum of Modern Art in New York—and left that way for a month and a half. [...] / One hundred and sixteen thousand viewers had strolled past *Le Bateau*, the upside-down Matisse, without comment, before it was rehung correctly" (VP 1-3). Markson points out a work that was misunderstood and passed by even by those who should have appreciated it—everyone pretending to admire it while in secret not understanding it at all. Late in the book, Author returns to this idea, calling his book "An upside-down Matisse" (180).

Despite this declarative labeling of the book, a practice Writer repeats many times in *This Is Not a Novel*, Author is less assertive of his control over this project, admitting, "Not that rearranging his notes means that Author has any real idea where the book is headed, on the other hand. Ideally, in fact, it will wind up someplace that will surprise even Author himself" (VP 11). But he does admit that one of his purposes is to "experiment to see how little of his own presence he can get away with throughout" (93). Unlike *This Is Not a Novel*, which lays out its defining characteristics early on, the few that Author provides for *Vanishing Point* come midway through the text. Even this task is adopted without a sense of purpose: "Author is experimenting with keeping himself out of here as much as possible because? / Can he really say? Why does he still have no idea whatever where things are headed either? Where can the book possibly wind up without him?" (96). Of course, his declaration of his intention to keep himself out of the book asserts his presence.

At the end of the book, the absence of (the) a/Author is precisely what Markson explores by simulating his own death. This act sets *Vanishing Point* apart from *This Is Not a Novel*, giving the former a fictional quality that the latter avoids.²⁵ If one wanted to read against Writer's declarations, one could call his resistance of the novel form a type of narrative, but even in this case, it would be nonfiction. Markson is actually doing what Writer is. *Vanishing Point* shares this nonfictional/autobiographical quality in its references to Markson's life and the composition

of the book, but a simulation of Author's death is not a mimetic rendering of an actual event but a fictionalized projection based on available evidence and current experience. This fictional component is what makes the novel label appropriate for *Vanishing Point*, nor would I call this usage of the label a backslide. Markson has begun to explore what lies outside the confines of the novel, but in *Vanishing Point*, he wishes to deal with a subject only possible in fiction, casting him into the amorphous embrace of the novel.

In the last several pages of the book, Author makes a return to fiction that goes beyond the halting abortive moves of Reader and the open refusals of Writer. Author's appearances increase in frequency as he begins to build toward the moment of his death and a bit beyond:

Or are all these nuisance disabilities somehow more serious than Author acknowledges? (186)

And a sensation even of gaps in his consciousness? As if moments have sometimes bolted past that Author has somehow managed not to be aware of until they are gone? Recently did one? (187)

[...] This even newer image of Author's bed having gotten to be such a vast distance across the room?

Why can't Author tell whether he is imagining that or remembering it? (189)

Plus the sense that Author could also not seem quite able to make his way across?

Hovering there, did he almost seem to be? (189)

²⁵ My reading of the end of *Vanishing Point* differs from Markson's intention as does my non-novel, non-fiction reading of *This Is Not a Novel*. I don't think this invalidates my readings especially since I don't see an unimpeachable connection between Markson's claims about *Reader's Block* and the text itself: "Protagonist probably a suicide (Reader probably too)" (Letter 20 Feb. 2004). While numerous suicides are cited in the book, nothing explicitly connects them to actions taken by Reader or Protagonist. Markson claims that Writer's health problems infuse *This Is Not a Novel* with a fictional quality, but Writer's ailments seem to correspond to Markson's own. While I don't have access to his medical records, nor would I want it, from what I have gathered, Writer's ailments seem autobiographical; perhaps they are exaggerated. Markson says that the end of *Vanishing Point* depicts "Author incapable of speech after a stroke" (Letter 20 Feb. 2004). This intention is not in conflict with the text, but I don't think my reading is either. Since death has been dancing around in all these books (suicide in *Reader's Block*, sickness in *This Is Not a Novel*, and age in *Vanishing Point*), it makes sense for death to finally make a cameo, almost like a character.

But the brightness, was that when the brightness occurred?

Going in to take a nap he is now not sure he is really remembering having gone in to take at all?

That terrificness, that extraordinary flooding? (190)

Light? Brightness? (190)

Author's ailments begin to come to a head as he loses a consistent grip on consciousness and perceives bright lights. In a book where he is supposed to be keeping himself out, Author has to make more appearances in order to build up to his ultimate absence. After this crescendo of impending death, another voice enters the text in a way unprecedented in Markson's post-*Springer's Progress* work.

While Markson included quotations from his children in *This Is Not a Novel*, these appeared in the same form as every other bit of text and unattributed quotation in the book. Here a voice addresses Markson, speaks to Author, and it appears in quotation marks. It is as if Author has begun to fall away and this other voice replaces him in the text:

"Dad? Dad? Say something." (190)

"Dad? Please? You can't just sit there and stare. Talk to us. Answer us, Dad. We love you, you know?" (191)

"Dad? We truly want to bring the children. But they won't understand at all, if you just sit and don't say anything. They'll be frightened. Dad?" (191)

"Oh, Dad. Oh, Dad." (191)

What seems to be happening here is that one of Author's children discovers him after he has died only moments before and talks to him, only to discover that he is dead. While the entrance of this voice into Author's text does indicate that he has been superseded after a fashion, Author still has the last word. Or at this point, do we have to say it is Markson if Author is dead? In either case,

that final word is "*Selah*" (191). Earlier Author defines this word: "*Selah*, which marks the ends of verses in the Psalms, but the Hebrew meaning of which is unknown. And probably indicates no more than pause, or rest" (178).²⁶ Author also provides his own definition: "*Selah*. Absolutely, all the illimitable connotations of Einstein's cosmic *Oy, vey* Author hereby personally endows it with—a terminal desolation and despair" (178). Earlier Author reports, "Alleged of Einstein, when he was given the news of Hiroshima: *Oy vey*" (125).²⁷ It is this feeling of 'desolation and despair' that comes from a horrifically keen sense of existential responsibility that Markson seeks to evoke at the end of *Vanishing Point*. While the use of atomic weapons has changed the world in ways too numerous to specify here, Markson's allusion to Einstein specifically focuses our attention on the scientist's feelings. In this way, the allusion is appropriate. Markson feels himself drawing nearer to an eventuality that he has always known was unavoidable, but for which there is no effective preparation.

This depiction of Author's death is upsetting because of the connection between he and Markson that he set the precedent for with Reader, continues through Writer, and maintains in the present book. While we often invest in characters and react emotionally when the plot calls for their demise, Author's death operates on another level as well. Especially in light of the two previous books, we can't help but think of the actual David Markson not only dying but also meditating on his death to the point that he generates this bleak simulation of it. In my discussion of Writer, I made reference to radical readings of Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and explored how Markson challenged these notions about the insignificance of the writer. While

²⁶ The OED defines *Selah* as "A Hebrew word, occurring frequently at the end of a verse in the Psalter [...]; supposed to be a musical or liturgical direction of some kind, perhaps indicating pause or rest."

²⁷ After hearing a radio report on August 6, 1945, Einstein reflected silently for a few moments, and then remarked only, "Oy, vey" (Kamenetzky).

Markson is in some ways denying the author's death in a figurative or literary-critical sense, in a more literal way, he is, in fact, confronting that eventuality in his later work.

Markson ends on a somber note to say the least, but his return to fiction to explore his own death marks an important shift in his work. While Markson has undertaken an extended project of literary innovation and rebellion, here, at what may be the end of his career and the end of his life, he moves a bit closer to the novel form once again. While *Vanishing Point* may not look like most novels that we are familiar with, it performs one of the functions that we usually expect novels, and literature more generally, to fulfill. Beyond providing an entertaining reading experience, the book also serves as a means for Markson to understand his own (anticipated) experience by representing and narrativizing it. On some level, this is what we look for in literature, an indication of how better to handle what lies ahead. While literature is often (explicitly) about itself, it is also about experience. Ronald Sukenick has argued: "The novelist accommodates to the ongoing flow of experience, smashing anything that impedes his sense of it, even if it happens to be the novel. Especially if it happens to be the novel" (40). Markson also expounds this idea, using visual art as his model. One of his epigraphs for *Vanishing Point* comes from Willem De Kooning:

Every so often, a painter has to destroy painting
Cézanne did it. Picasso did it with cubism. Then
Pollock did it. He busted our idea of a picture
all to hell.

Markson has and hopefully will continue to bust our idea of the novel all to hell.

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APPENDIX A

DAVID MARKSON: LETTER TO THE AUTHOR, 9 FEB. 2004

Dear Ben Underwood - Forgive the scrawl. You've caught me at a busy time - ancient & sick - but I sincerely appreciate your interest in my work. I'll answer as I can, below. But good grief - put your address on letters! I'd tossed out the envelope - among other junk - and had to go back to the basement to retrieve it!

364 B Barber St Athens, GA 30601

February 2, 2004

Dear Mr. Markson, your fourth-grade teacher should be spanked!

To get off to an honest start, I'm an ardent admirer of your work. I'm a graduate student at The University of Georgia, and I'm writing my Master's thesis this semester. I'm focusing on *This Is Not a Novel*, but I'm also discussing, at least briefly, all your other books as well (except for your study of Lowry, which doesn't fit into my project).

I know that as a grad student you wrote to Malcolm Lowry for guidance in your work on *Under the Volcano*. Knowing that gave me the courage to write this letter. Usually I'm very timid about talking to people whose work I admire, be it literary, visual, or musical. I imagine that over the years you've received a great many letters from students referring to your initial contact with Lowry and asking for a similar kind of aid, but I hope that nonetheless you wouldn't mind offering a helping hand to me.

I've listed a few questions below and I'd appreciate any sort of answers that you're willing to supply. *Vanishing Point* is fantastic. I look forward to your future books.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Ben Underwood

Ben Underwood

- 1. What are your feelings about Robbe-Grillet? *None. I read one book, about two centuries ago, and cannot remember it at all.*
- 2. Did the idea for *Reader's Block* evolve from the preparation work you did for *Wittgenstein's Mistress*? *I did no "preparation" for *W's M.* (simply had an idea about someone alone in the world. That is an old interview on the web, I'm told - from 1990 - interviewed by Joseph Tabbi - in which I talk in more detail.*
- 3. Whose idea was it to label *Reader's Block* a novel on its cover? Was that your idea or was it a later addition from you or your publisher? *This has nothing to do with anything. Publisher of *Pabel* a novel when they fear its nature is ambiguous. Or that ~~its~~ its title is confusing.*
- 4. Why *The Evening Gown* on the cover of *This Is Not a Novel* instead of the more obvious choice? *Probably because the more obvious choice - the *Magnette* about the Pipe - was too obvious. But again, this has nothing to do with the book itself. - It's mainly design, promotion, sales, etc.*
- 5. Whose idea was it to prominently display the message "this is not a novel" across the bottoms of every page of that text? *Obviously, some damned-fool designer. I hated it, but it was too late to shoot the guy. Again though, what does that matter? Future editions will surely be different.*
- 6. Who controls the lists of your other works in your books, you or your publishers? Why the shift to including your earlier "Entertainments" after *Wittgenstein's Mistress*? *I don't know what you mean, "controls." Obviously, I'm the one who doesn't want those three old crime tales listed with my important work, and so I call them merely "entertainments."*
- 7. How did *This Is Not a Novel* come to be listed in the "Novels" category in *Vanishing Point*? *Obviously because it is a novel - and the title is of course playful. (Country the latest, *Vanishing Point*, there are now seven novels all told.)*

Forgive my ~~seemingly~~ ^{seemingly} annoyance re that last - but nothing in questions 3, 4, 5, 6 or 7 ~~has~~ ^{has} anything to do with the books themselves - with what is written on the page! I hope you are hardly going to focus on irrelevant matters like those in your thesis? Who would care, years later, what the front cover of - oh, say, The Great Gatsby - or Moby Dick - ^{looked like} in the beginning? Or what its typography was like?

Again, again, again - I apologize. I do wish you well, and all cheers on your work. Take care - and don't think of me as an old proach.

Yours -

David Markson

2/9/04

P.S. Your #7 still dumbfounds me. Whatever its title, how could This Is Not a Novel possibly belong in a different category from Pynchon's BLUE 4/ or Vainishing Point? The style, methods, materials, etc., are virtually identical in all three, no? They're practically a trilogy. But again, who cares about lists, etc., which are peripheral (external) to the books themselves?!

APPENDIX B

DAVID MARKSON: LETTER TO THE AUTHOR, 20 FEB. 2004

Dear Ben - Aquin, a scrawl (2/20/04). Your letter deserves half a dozen pages in return, but I'm just not up to it - just not well here, damnit, & without even the energy to take the covers off the 40+-year-old typewriter. I regret it. Your letter has altered my view of you radically for the better (I'd obviously been dubious) and I truly wish I could offer you more than I'm getting to be able to do here. Forgive in advance, eh?

364B Barber Street
Athens, GA 30601

February 14, 2004

Dear Mr. Markson,

Without question, my fourth-grade teacher deserves a spanking. Not only did she teach me nothing about letter writing, but she was also an intolerable witch. Honestly, coming of age in the era of email, I could probably count the number of letters I've written on my fingers. In any case, thanks for hunting down the envelope last time. I'm enclosing an SASE as an act of penance.

Thank you for your responses. I feel like I should give you some explanation of what I'm up to because I think the questions I asked gave you a skewed view of my intentions. I imagine I would have been just as mystified as to why some kid would be more interested in genre labels than the actual books he's writing about.

I seem to have misrepresented myself to a certain extent. Most of my thesis is devoted to the text of your books. However, I see access to what is written on the page as hopelessly imbricated with how that text is packaged, presented, categorized, and marketed. At a certain point, one can, hopefully, cut through this clutter to get to the text itself, but I'm not sure to what extent it's ever possible to read a book without one's ideas about it being influenced by such peripheral matters. Admittedly, this view is the result of my academic training, which has often encouraged me to use things like genre labels, ex post facto historical literary periods, and/or so-called literary schools/movements as tools to guide my thinking about a text.

One of the reason's that I was so excited by *Reader's Block* (the first of your books I encountered) and *This Is Not a Novel* is that they blatantly defy my ability to use such a limiting approach. That's why I do spend a good bit of time in the thesis explaining why the literary-critical apparatus that I'm expected to use in such a project doesn't work. In doing this, I'm trying my best not to slip into too much attention to formal matters. I guess my questions to you were mostly about such things because I have my own notions of what the books are about, and I'm a little sheepish about parading them before you.

I have to admit I'm a little surprised that you don't want the crime novels listed with your other work. I make the case in the thesis, although apparently you would disagree, that those Entertainments are important, in the same way that Picasso's early realistic work was an important stage in his development. Also, from what I can tell, evidence of your propensity for witty tongue-in-cheek literary innovation and parody is apparent even in *Miss Doll*, *Go Home*. Most of the commentators on your work consider *Dingus Magee* your first important novel, perhaps because of your deft deconstruction of American frontier mythology and the western genre. But in *Miss Doll* you're playing with a tradition usually considered high literature: the formal features of Faulknerian Modernism. I don't think that the distinction between *Miss Doll* and the subsequent works

I think I can honestly say that this sort of thing has never entered my mind when reading - in spite of my own MB. If it truly does enter yours then fight it - (indeed, dismiss it all - entirely). It's got to be easier than you seem to think.
Read the books! Screw classroom /for critical bullshit.

No. Picasso was painting when he did the early work. I was trying to make just trying to make a buck. *Miss Doll* was a screwup. First, when I made it into a novel, I used the dying approach. As I long did so because it was the easiest method I could think of.

(continuing from opposite) Yes, I had a little fun. And yes, it's OK to write the Faulknerian parody, etc. And maybe, yes, sure, I had some facility. But it's still all lightweight trivia!

I would never have used those tinny materials for a serious book - & would surely have worked infinitely harder, also. Was it Pound who said much of the value of a work lies in what it cost? The "entertainments" cost very very very little - *Miss Doll* the least. Taint "cheating," it's quality. Would you have ever heard of D.H. Lawrence if I'd written only that sort of stuff?!

