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“Experimental [sic] Fiction and its Static Reception”

*Vanishing Point*

David Markson

Shoemaker & Hoard

191 pages, \$22.50 paper

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by Jeff Bursey

There is often truth in an author’s belief that reviewers are hostile to invention. Dale Peck, with his jeremiads in *Hatchet Jobs: Writings on Contemporary Fiction* on the works of DeLillo, Pynchon, Faulkner, William Gaddis and Rick Moody, presents the spectacle of one angry man in a rope pull against Titans. *The London Review of Books*, proud to be heterodox when it comes to political and social issues, is staid in its opinions concerning fiction, while the *Times Literary Supplement* also disappoints. Middlebrow writers such as E. Annie Proulx, Louis de Bernières and Roddy Doyle are brand names reviewers respect, and the tiny portion of criticism tucked into a 600-word encapsulation of their latest effort keeps intact the front that the write-up isn’t an advertisement. Most reviewers choose to rehash the plot instead of mounting an argument with the work. The late Frederick Karl offered a handy distinction on the current reception of novels: “Fiction has been Balkanized, with most reviewers and critics taking up the cudgels for the conventional and the easily comprehended; while in the universities and among academic readers there is greater acceptance of the more intractable fiction of the Mega-Novelists.” In the mainstream media, writers who push the form of the novel are called experimental—e.g., Harry Mathews, Joseph McElroy and David Markson—and get little extended attention. When they are noticed, it’s often by a Dale Peck.

As with *Reader’s Block* (1996) and *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), Markson almost entirely rejects plot in his latest novel, presenting material in the form of notes written on index cards. (The same approach is found in *Reader’s Block*, where the characters are ‘Reader’ and ‘Protagonist,’ and in *This Is Not a Novel*, where the character is called ‘Writer.’) The only figure presented in *Vanishing Point* is ‘Author.’ The first line reads: “Author has finally started to put his notes into manuscript form.” What follows is a series of quotations mainly connected to history and art. Here is a representative sequence:

Schmucks with Underwoods, Jack Warner called writers.

Four different horses were shot out from under Ney at Waterloo.

I do not write for the public.

Said Hopkins.

I am not a poet by trade; I am a professor of Latin.

Said Housman.

A seminonfictional semifiction.

Obstinately cross-referential and of cryptic interconnective syntax.  
Probably by this point more than apparent—or surely for the attentive reader.

As should be Author's experiment to see how little of his own presence he can get away with throughout.

Author would like to give out little, but his health is frequently mentioned: "In fact why has Author now and again even found himself taking a nap, which he cannot recall having ever done before in his entire adult life?" The preceding is a modest complaint, but not so the nagging apprehension about why he scuffs his feet. His memory has been affected—"Forgetting by now that Freida Lawrence's brother was Baron Manfred von Richthofen"—and this indicates, when put together with Author's half-hearted admission that he "probably ought to see a neurologist" about his missteps, that he is deteriorating. Near the end, notes are repeated from earlier pages, and there is talk of light, of legends, of a wasted life. At the close are remarks made to "Dad" to which there are no responses. *Vanishing Point* ends with the word *selah*, glossed as "pause, or rest."

The quotations are often mordant one-liners on morbidity and failure, and on the reputations of works and their creators. Author presents details of Camus's death after recording that a painting by Matisse had hung upside down for six weeks before anyone noticed. Or he will present this kind of opinion: "Translator's English, John Wain called Susan Sontag's prose." At times the cryptic notes prompt the reader to search for the source of an obscure quote, or they give pleasure with the sparkly bits of information which Author has kept like a crow. "Diderot, who was known to gesticulate excessively in conversation—and was seen to slap Catherine the Great repeatedly on the thighs. At which the empress was merely amused." Occasionally, we get Markson's wit, as in this entry: "*Wittgenstein's Vienna. Wittgenstein's Nephew. Wittgenstein's Ladder. Wittgenstein's Poker.*" This list of published books leaves out Markson's novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), and thereby cleverly calls attention to it.

While the bulk of *Vanishing Point* is entertaining, gradually it is shown that night is descending on the note-maker. When the speech of one of Author's children is given in the last pages, we are pulled out of the fiction we were immersed in—the interior musings of Author—and brought into a more subtle fiction, in which Author is a character who may be mentally disoriented, possibly catatonic, and might have only imagined that he was putting his notes "into manuscript form." The narrator, until now almost invisible, forces the reader to re-examine the novel and search for any hints earlier in the book that this is how things would turn out. It's a risky move, and Markson handles it adroitly. His frail, aging Author, shuffling mental index cards on which the culture and history of the western world has been boiled down, becomes a post-modernist emblem when the narrative undercuts his authority.

Confounding an audience is a risk writers need to take, though it's no great blessing if this means one is labelled experimental. Gabriel Josipovici's essay, "Conclusion: From the Other Side of the Fence, or True Confessions of an Experimentalist," from *The Mirror of Criticism* (1983), sets out that burden, and his words can be taken as encouragement to those who don't want to write another predictable narrative that doesn't contribute to the advancement of literature:

“It is a shock to any artist who has only thought of getting things ‘right’, of pinning down that elusive feeling which is the source and end of all creative activity, to wake up one morning and find himself labelled ‘experimental’. Yet that is what happened to me.... [M]ost other reviews I received for those two novels, *Migrations* and *The Air We Breathe*, seemed to share the same assumptions: there are writers and there are experimental writers; the ‘experimental’ is a sub-branch of fiction, rather like teenage romances or science fiction perhaps, but differing from them in being specifically highbrow, and, like other highbrow activities, such as abstract painting and classical music, it is totally unconnected with the real world; however, we should tolerate this for the health of art (and to show how tolerant we are).... [F]iction reviewers still see themselves as somehow the guardians of the point of view of the man in the street.”

Many authors, certainly Markson’s Author, would agree with all that. Too many reviewers would acknowledge the accuracy of the last statement, and, unfortunately, see little wrong with it.

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