Notes on David Markson, *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

High Point of the American Experimental Novel

David Foster Wallace was right that this is "pretty much the high point" of the American experimental novel.

What matters isn’t the science-fiction frame, in which the narrator is the last living person; and the novel certainly isn’t somehow philosophically profound. Reviewers were also distracted by the supposed erudition of the book (the narrator remembers bits and pieces of art history and philosophy). "Wittgenstein's Mistress" doesn’t address "formidable philosophic questions" as the New York Times reviewer said. It doesn’t contain "profound investigations of epistemology," as Steven Moore says in his Afterword. (Why did the book need an Afterword? Is it that strange, that indigestible, so that even an experimental press like Dalkey Archive needs to try to explain it?) It certainly doesn’t matter that the narrator’s "cultural allusions... differ from the usual ones" by placing more emphasis on anecdotes than on the work. (How could that possibly be innovative?) And the book doesn’t succeed in "tempting the reader to equate Western civilization’s greatest works of art and philosophy with the futile messages" the narrator leaves in the streets, hoping somehow to attract some other survivor.

I haven’t found any review, except Wallace’s, which sounds right. I agree with his notion that the book is one of the best evocations of Wittgenstein’s own frame of mind, including the descriptions that are implicit in the philosophic literature from Black to the present. Markson has an uncanny ability to conjure a mental state in which a person imagines him- or herself to be the last person on Earth, a person who has been "mad" for some long, indeterminate period of time (in the novel, that is the period in which the narrator had desperately searched the world for other survivors). The book is written in short propositional sentences, with complex grammatical links, implying they are all part of one enormous logical statement -- as in the "Tractatus." The narrator mistrusts her ability to describe, remember, and recount, and she often moves rapidly back and forth between propositions about states of affairs in the world and propositions about the reliability and sense of the language in which she puts those propositions (as in the transition from the
"Tractatus" to the later work). She lives in desolate places, as Wittgenstein did, concentrating, apparently, on everyday tasks, as he apparently did. (With "apparently" being the necessary mask for the kinds of thoughts that Wittgenstein, and the narrator here, did not permit themselves.) She has unspeakable traumas in her past. She wants, above all, to say a few accurate things, which are indisputably true, and -- as in so much of Wittgenstein -- she knows she fails, again and again, although -- unlike in Wittgenstein -- we often know just how she has failed.

The concentration on the everyday here makes "The Road" look as maudlin, cheaply apocalyptic, and self-absorbed as it is, and it makes Barthes's "The Neutral" and de Certeau's "Practice of Everyday Life" seem as inflated and airy as they sometimes are.

Of many, many passages that deserve to be typed out (again Wallace is right in saying no word is wasted), here is one. The narrator has been recounting repeatedly (without realizing she's repeating herself), the fact that the actual town of Troy was tiny.

"Even if Troy itself was disappointingly small. Like little more than your ordinary city block and a few stories in height, practically.
"Although now that I remember, everything in William Shakespeare's house at Stratford-on-Avon was astonishingly tiny, too. As if only imaginary people had lived there then.
"Or perhaps it is only the past itself, which is always smaller than one had believed.
"I do wish that that last sentence had some meaning, since it certainly came close to impressing me for moment.
"There is a great deal of sadness in the Iliad in either case, incidentally." (p. 126)

The book isn't perfect; Markson succumbs to the temptation to have his narrator speculate what would happen if she wrote a novel, and those pages of metafiction -- in which we're invited to remember that we're reading an experimental prose piece on the idea of experimental writing -- do not add anything to the concerted and barely controlled voice that is the book's strength. There is no need to lift the veil of the suspension of disbelief if the entire novel is about failures of belief. At a few places, too, Markson shows off, without needing or meaning to. Those passages are helped by a few places where he has his narrator say, "Perhaps I was just showing off there." But Markson himself seems to have been unaware how academic it sounds, and how unlikely it is, that a person who does not read German, on looking through a book by Hegdger, will be struck by the recurrence of the word Dasein, which is, as philosophically inclined readers know, actually crucial to the novel's sense. That really is showing off, and it's inadvertent on Markson's part. I also think the book could have done without the very brief synopsis near the end, in which we learn facts about the narrator's family that we didn't need to know, because they do not help understand her inexorably deteriorating mental state.
But the book is astonishing, continuously, and it is also one of the most provocative readings of Wittgenstein: not because it makes claims about his claims, but because it tests our own understanding of the mental state that could have produced his writing.

[Added March 17, 2011: this review continues as the review of Markson’s "The Last Novel." That novel partly ruined this one for me.]