Notes on David Markson, *Reader’s Block*

(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!)

Representing Ruined Minds

And a Note About How Google Ruins Reading

This book is a series of short paragraphs, some a single word, few more than five lines. The paragraphs are separated by double spaces, so the book looks like poetry, or like Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, or like Rochefoucauld.

There are, principally, two kinds of entries: miscellaneous notes about artists (mainly novelists, some poets, virtually all North American or European); and author's notes about a novel he's thinking about writing. This second kind of note divides the author into at least three voices:

1. Markson, the real author, insofar as we glimpse him
2. Reader, the principal narrator, who thinks or writes "Reader's Block." He's called Reader because he's spent his life reading, and his mind is filled with thoughts about novelists.
3. Protagonist, the character in the novel that Reader is contemplating writing.

In the second kind of note, Reader imagines a Protagonist who lives next to a cemetery, near a beach, in winter, with no friends. It seems there wouldn’t ever be much of a story there: it's quite Beckettish in its stasis and emptiness. As "Reader's Block" proceeds, a contrast develops between these notes and the ones about novelists. The desultory notes about Protagonist's empty life, to which he's been driven by a lack of events, people, and meaning in his actual life, begin to seem terminally vague, uninteresting, lacking in imagination (always the cemetery, always the beach), and, for me, bathetic. They seem unintentionally more sentimental and self-indulgent than they may have been intended: I have the impression Markson thought of them as desolate, existential in the Beckett mold, with a paralysis brought on by Reader's inability to energize his imagination, which had been ruined by the "clutter" of anecdotes about novelists from his lifetime of reading. But the notes come across slightly differently--more as a reliance on a uniform kind of desolation, a weakness the author prefers to ascribe to a mind ruined by reading.

These Reader's notes on his unwritten novel have huge potential: in a couple of places he imagines characters, and then effectively drops them, and those moments can be as poignant as the deaths of characters in more developed narratives. But Markson doesn't play on that theme. He seems not to really notice it.

On the other hand, the notes about authors are consistently interesting. I think they cannot be imagined simply as "clutter" (p. 42), because they come in three or four quite distinct varieties, which indicate different directions of Reader's mind:

1. Notes about artists' deaths, about oblivion, about the ways writers are forgotten:

”Fragonard died completely forgotten."
"Nicolas de Stael committed suicide." (p. 84).

This first sort of note presents itself as Reader’s probable fate, and it fits with Protagonist's fate, since he’s pictured as a former author whose books have been forgotten.

2. Notes about genius, aspiration, and fame:

"Carlyle's Sartor Resartus was damningly abused by reviewers. Once he became famous he had it reissued. And included the reviews as an appendix.

"A very pretty poem, Mr. Pope. But you must not call is Homer." (p. 45).

This second kind of note is often about authors misappreciating other authors:

"Nothing odd will do long; Tristram Shandy did not last. Said Johnson.

"Who also determined that time was too precious to be wasted on Fielding." (pp. 161-62)

From this second kind of note we have the impression of a different Reader, one who is aggrieved, and especially misses the praise of his fellow writers. A pettier and scrappier writer than the one who collected the first kind of note.

3. Notes on the surprisingly unethical or immoral behavior of otherwise good or interesting artists: notes on infidelity, cruelty, incest, and so forth. In this third category I include the standard-format refrain, throughout the book, in the form "X was an anti-Semite," with X varying from the usual suspects (Heigedder, De Man, Wagner, Celine) to less common examples. This third category is pettier yet than the second, and indicates another side to Reader: he's sour and righteous as well as wounded and envious.

4... This listing could be multiplied: there seem to be several Readers here, who are more or less sympathetic characters, more or less reconciled to fate and oblivion. In my reading there is one other principal sort of note: the one that marks the passage of time: writers who were exact contemporaries, although they don't seem so or although they never met (Melville and Whitman); writers who lived unexpectedly long lives, or brief ones; writers who are separated much further in time than we may have thought. These notes are, for me, the most sustaining: they stretch and compress time in ways that fit the author's sense of his impending oblivion. One of the longest notes in the entire book, and one of the few which clearly identifies Markson with Reader, is this one:

"Lorenzo Ghiberti devoted twenty-eight years to the East Door of the Florence Bapistry. Michelangelo would say it could have served as the entrance to Paradise. Five hundred years later, Reader would stand staring where five of the door’s ten panels lay heaped in the muck after having been wrenched away in the Great Flood of November 4, 1966. The night before." (p. 56)

It's not clear in the typesetting of the book whether that last sentence is a separate paragraph: I hope it was.

In short, in sum: this is a book about a ruined career, and the author's impending death, but it's also about two ruined minds: the Reader's mind is "cluttered" so it can no longer work as it should; and at the same time Markson's mind is "cluttered" by unresolved and I think partly unnoticed conflicts between his ambition, his jealousy, and his acceptance of the end of his own life and his own writing.

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Appendix: on reading "Reader's Block" after Google

I wonder if we may have lost the ability to read this novel now that we have Google. I am not the ideal reader of "Reader's Block," but I'm not too far off either. On any given page there will be one or two references I don't get, and the temptation is to look them up. That's clearly not Markson's intention. Google has made it seem as if allusions are things that are to be solved, as if lacunae in memory or knowledge can be filled in by a couple minutes on a search engine. Markson wants his many allusions to authors to resonate: he clearly didn't expect people would try to look them up, and he also didn't expect readers for whom too many of these would be puzzles. He isn't showing off his erudition, bemoaning the decline of literacy, or advocating for a good classical education. He's simply inventorying his own mind, and searching for allusions on Google is absolutely not an appropriate response to the book. And yet. We have Google, and now that I've finished the book I'm going to permit myself to look up some of the many lines I don't recognize. They're tantalizing:

"Quel giorno piu non vi leggemmo avante." (p. 102)

"Que no quiero verla!" (p. 46)

"The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,  
And now I live, and now my life is done." (p. 106)

"Thesmophoriazusae." (p. 180)

"Was willst du, fremder Mensch?" (p. 180)

"O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!" (p. 156)

I have deferred looking up these and others until I finished reading, because I know that my encounter with these texts will be fresh, and incomplete -- lacking the context of the full books or poems from which they're taken -- and that in Markson's novel allusions are retrospective and ruminative, signs of a sense of culture that just can't be solved by Google.