Notes on Will Eaves, *The Absent Therapist*

(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!)

The Difference Between Fragments and Parts

"The Absent Therapist" is divided into paragraph- and page-long sections of prose, which are not connected to one another. They usually ask to be read as snatches of overheard dialogue. The book is therefore a puzzle in reading, and a reader needs to find a strategy of reading that will make sense of the whole, or of Eaves’s idea of fragmentation. Here are three strategies of reading, each one of which, I think, doesn’t work and has to be partly or wholly set aside as the reading progresses. In the end, I think the book raises interesting questions about what counts as a fragment, either at the scale of a page-long portion of text, or at the scale of the book itself.

1. The short sections actually tie together, and the book is an elaborate puzzle.

Nicholas Lezard, in "The Guardian," said "for a while I thought I was going to have to keep track" of the voices, "that there was an underlying order making this a very complex work indeed... but after a while I decided, as I suspect you will, to sit back and let it all wash over me instead" (Feb. 11, 2014). I did the same, but after about 30 pages (a quarter of the book) I realized I wasn’t usually supposed to be identifying individual voices. But Eaves puts in several teases -- recurring contexts, recurring names -- so it takes a while before a reader can be reasonably sure this is not a puzzle on the order of Jennifer Egan’s "A Visit from the Goon Squad." It isn’t clear why Eaves doesn’t make it obvious whether or not this is a puzzle: some sections do connect, some speakers do repeat, so the invitation to read carefully and figure out the connections is itself repeated, until the reader finally sees that it isn’t necessary. I do not understand that decision, unless he wanted simply to tease and distract his readers: an interest that does not fit well with the book’s content.

2. The book proposes something about the disconnection and fragmentation of modern life.

Once it’s clear that the book is not merely interwoven stories, or rather that few of them are interwoven, and that the book isn’t a single plot entangled in separate sections, the question becomes the resonance or disparity between the sections. Is this, then, a book more about dissociation, about the alienation of speakers from one another? Is it an Oulipean effort to describe a single place or time? Or possibly just the remnants of other projects that might have cohered? For me, these sorts of questions began to predominate around the halfway mark, because I was thinking more of the assembly of disparate sections than of the connections between sections. The problem with this reading, for me, is that it makes the book trivial: there is no special accomplishment in demonstrating the disconnection of life by presenting disconnected pieces of it.

3. The book is a cross-section of contemporary society.

A third possibility is that the book is an ethnographic or social commentary, and that Eaves’s choice of topics for his speakers is itself the central point of the book. A fair amount of "The
Absent Therapist" is about the condition of modern society: it has lots of politics, and an entire chapter (one-fifth of the book) on the US; there are also ruminations on inequality, artificial intelligence, and other scientific and philosophic topics. The book's title also points that way. Yet the book can't be mainly an attempt at a snapshot of contemporary life, because many sections are about people's private lives, misunderstandings, arguments, and the stuff of everyday conversation.

4. The sections themselves.

What I'm left with is a meditation on the sections themselves, their unity or lack of it, their differences and resonances. What matters, in the end, is how Eaves thinks of the idea of the excerpt, the section, the fragment. The plurality of sections in this book -- there are on the order of 150 of them, more than one per page -- are self-contained, polished short stories, more like flash fiction or prose poems than fragments of overheard dialogue. Very few of them end unexpectedly, as overheard conversations tend to do. Most, and especially the longer ones, give the impression of being very carefully and patiently crafted so they could work as free-standing microfiction.

One example will have to do. Here is a section, in full, from p. 108:

"There were once two contestants in the final of a TV game show and the winner sportingly shared his prize with the runner-up -- a dramatic gesture the audience loved. I happened to know the winner's boyfriend, who watched events unfold at home with mounting horror. He was in debt and could have done with more of that money. He didn't dispute the winner's right to do with it as he pleased. He just couldn't imagine behaving like that himself. They had a row. It wasn't the money that split them. It was something the boyfriend let slip, in his cups, about the winner's start in life, which the winner didn't much like."

There are eight sentences here. Every one reverses or surprises. The last one has a surprise ("the winner's start in life") which is itself modified by the qualifier "much." The paragraph compresses as many nuances, changes of tack, and subtleties as it can. It is very carefully and skilfully done, and so are many, or most, of the sections in this book.

But that brings me to the point: why write a book of disconnected parts, when each one of those parts is itself a model of coherence and unity? It would have been more consistent if the sections were actually fragments, or else parts of an incomplete whole, as in Père's "Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris." Eaves's book implies that the world is disconnected, disharmonious, and fragmentary, but that harmony and even unity exist in small units everywhere. It is, I think, too easy an idea. If the world is disconnected, either in the way it appears here, then individual moments of it can probably not be imagined as lapidary, aesthetically pleasing objects. (I prefer Markson's "Wittgenstein's Mistress" as a model of a world in fragments.) Another way to put this would be to say Eaves's book does not have fragments, in the Romantic sense (from Novalis), butunities.

(The opposite of this book would be an enormous novel in which the individual scenes are seldom complete or unified, things unravel, events and characters and ideas become vertiginously complex and fragmentary, and yet the prose continues uninterrupted: something like "Infinite Jest."