

# “A Novel Against the Novel”: David Markson’s Antinovelistic Tetralogy

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**Abstract:** The antinovel is a niche genre which positions itself radically and emphatically against what might be called the conventional novel. It chooses to dispense with such novelistic devices as linear plot, cause-and-effect relation of events, richly delineated setting, verisimilitude and characterisation. Instead, the antinovel favours anti-mimetic strategies, fragmentation, digression and repetition. This article examines the generic status of David Markson’s tetralogy composed of *Reader’s Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004) and *The Last Novel* (2007). Although each book contains the word “novel” either in its title or subtitle, a case is made for classifying them all as antinovels as theorized by Jean-Paul Sartre, J. A. Cuddon, M. H. Abrams and others. A critical and historical introduction to the genre is followed by a commentary on the thematic and formal structure of the tetralogy and a detailed consideration of its antinovelistic elements – the renunciation of plot and character, the prominence of metafiction, and fragmentary construction.

**Keywords:** novel, antinovel, experimental literature, fragmentary writing, metafiction

The antinovel is an elusive, precarious and contested category. Although its origins go back to 1633, when French author Charles Sorel subtitled his novel *Le berger extravagant* “anti-roman,” the term did not enjoy considerable popularity with critics except in the 1950s and 60s in France – at the heyday of the *nouveau roman*. In a much-quoted preface to Nathalie Sarraute’s *Portrait d’un inconnu* (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre numbers the book among the “tough and totally negative works which one might call anti-novels.” He goes on to describe those “strange” and unclassifiable works as evidence

not so much of the crisis of the novel but rather of the novel's shift towards "reflecting on itself" (Jefferson 1984, 194). In contemporary Anglophone criticism the antinovel is a virtually extinct critical concept, even in the domain of experimental literature. The recently published *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), by far the most comprehensive study in the field, completely ignores the antinovel, which may only boast a single entry, where it is mentioned in passing as a text "made up of fragments" (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 2012, 479). That definition is a very apt description of a tetralogy by the contemporary American novelist David Markson, which is composed of *Reader's Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004) and *The Last Novel* (2007). I want to argue that Markson's fragmentary books could all be classified as textbook examples of this rather forgotten literary category. In order to point to certain analogies, I shall examine the distinctive features and the rationale (or politics) of the antinovel as a genre. I will begin by formulating a definition of this obscure notion and outlining its relationship with the novel.

Longer discussions of the antinovel in English can only be found in dictionaries of literary terms. Oxford's brief entry defines it as "a form of experimental fiction that dispenses with certain traditional elements of novel-writing like the analysis of characters' states of mind or the unfolding of a sequential plot" (Baldick 2008, 17). J. A. Cuddon indicates that the antinovel is not concerned with "creat[ing] an illusion of realism" but rather with "establish[ing] its own conventions." To the list of characteristic features of the genre Cuddon adds "experiments with vocabulary, punctuation and syntax, variations of time sequence" as well as "alternative endings and beginnings." Among the most "extreme" devices he lists "detachable pages; pages which can be shuffled like cards; coloured pages; blank pages; collage effects [and] drawings" (Cuddon 1998, 43). For a more detailed treatment of the genre one must turn to French literary criticism. In "Pourquoi l'antiroman?" (2011), Pierre-Olivier Brodeur distinguishes between two distinct understandings of the term: Gérard Genette's narrow conception of the genre as featuring a Quixotic hero unable to differentiate between fiction and reality, and Sartre's much more inclusive - and popular - approach, which points to a negativity towards the conventional novel and self-reflexivity as the antinovel's defining qualities (Brodeur 2011, 28-29). Brodeur notes the curious fate of this eclectic genre - informed by pastiche, parody, polyphony and meta-

fiction – whose "expansion was accompanied by its virtual dissolution," as a result of which "confusion reigns" as for its current condition (30, 28).

Part of the reason for the confusion is the antinovel's indeterminate position in relation to the novel. On the one hand, the relationship appears to be highly antagonistic. Brodeur describes the antinovel's attitude towards its mother genre as "marked by an essential violence and aggressiveness"; instead of commenting on other works, this inherently confrontational genre chooses to "attack" them (30). In their seminal *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham speak of the antinovel's "deliberately negative construction," which echoes Sartre's proclamation of negativity as a constitutive element of the antinovel – evident in the very prefix "anti-" (1999, 195). The rationale for this radical rejection of the conventional novel is often a disenchantment with its limitations and its artificiality. In his manifesto "Une voix pour le roman future" (1963), Alain Robbe-Grillet sets the *nouveau roman* against the deceptively ordered fiction of a Balzac, whose narrative progression he dismisses as a gimmick and whose logic he considers out of touch with human experience.<sup>1</sup> He announces the need for "radical change" in the face of "the destitution of the old myths of 'depth'" and the "stagnation" of literature, which appears to have overlooked that disillusionment (Robbe-Grillet 1989, 17, 23).<sup>2</sup> Not only does the antinovel violently attack its enemy, it also – Sartre points out – does so cunningly. It retains the "outlines of the novel" (telling a story about a fictive character) "only the better to deceive us": "the aim is to pit the novel against itself, to destroy it under our very eyes (at the same time as it would seem to be erected), to write the novel of a novel that does not, that cannot develop" (Sartre 1955, 40).

Whereas the above remarks indicate that the antinovel has a radically different set of objectives from that of the novel, several French critics have

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<sup>1</sup> Robbe-Grillet may be echoing here the famous passage from Virginia Woolf's essay "Modern Fiction" (1921), written in reaction to the writing of H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennet and John Galsworthy: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?" (Woolf 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ann Jefferson locates daring formal innovations in "a developing tradition in twentieth-century fiction whereby the burden of realism is gradually shifted from content to form." The adoption of new form is an attempt to reflect more faithfully either the "organization of society" or the "structure and patterns of human consciousness" (Jefferson 1984, 3).

recently disputed that claim. Ugo Dionne and Francis Gingras argue that although unarguably many features of the antinovel are irreconcilable with the older conventions of the novel, the very gesture of flouting convention is inherent in the novel. “The salutary rejection of worn-out ideas” is not, they maintain, an “exclusive, occasional feat of rebellious geniuses” but rather “a constant of the genre.” Dionne and Gingras conclude that “in the light of the history of the genre, our ‘old novels’ are (always) already antinovels” (2006, 6; translation mine). In a different article, Dionne emphasises the interpenetration of the two categories: “one would need a very wise person to determine where one begins and the other stops, where the boundary lies between these two ‘genres’ which may perhaps, from the outset, be one” (158, translation mine). A similar argument is advanced by Áron Kibédi Varga in an earlier paper, whose title summarises its main point – “Le roman est un anti-roman” (1982). Brodeur also concurs with the idea that the antinovel is difficult to sustain as a category distinct from the novel. “The antinovelistic demolition,” he points out, “is always a proposition to reconstruct the novel with new foundations” (2011, 31; translation mine). The confusion around the status of this unstable category could be attributed to what Brodeur refers to as the central paradox of the antinovel – “the desire to be a novel against the novel” (31).

After outlining the theoretical background of the antinovel, I wish to offer a concise overview of some of the more noted works that have frequently been highlighted as antinovels. The invariable prime example of the genre – at least in Anglophone criticism – is Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), with its self-consciousness and digressive structure on the one hand, and its blank and black pages as well jokey graphs, on the other. The first major artistic movement to breed an abundance of works driven by the antinovelistic impulse was Modernism. Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914), Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931), James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938) and *Molloy* (1951) feature as textbook examples of antinovels in numerous dictionaries of literary terms. Despite the profusion of Modernist antinovels, it is the *nouveau roman* which remains the literary current whose tenets were most in line with those of the genre. It is not coincidental that the very concept of the antinovel was revived (if not simply born) to accommodate the various departures from the standard

novelistic techniques as practised by Robbe-Grillet,<sup>3</sup> Sarraute, Michel Butor and Claude Simon: the use of repetition, omission and contradiction, the rejection of narrativisation and of the *telos* of reading. Most importantly perhaps, the *nouveau roman* postulated the abandonment of the compromised notions of plot and character. Sarraute, a practitioner as well as a theoretician of the movement, compares the former to a “bandage” wrapped around the character, which lends them an “impression of coherence and life” as well as “the rigidity of a mummy” (Jefferson 1984, 115-16). The most resonant examples of the plotless and characterless products of the *nouveau roman* are Sarraute’s *Tropismes* (1939), Robbe-Grillet’s *The Voyeur* (1955) and *Jealousy* (1957), Butor’s *La Modification* (1957) and Simon’s *La route des Flandres* (1967).

*The A to Z of Postmodernist Literature and Theater* includes the antinovel as one of the key concepts of postmodernism, since “the principles on which it is based draw attention to the fictionality of the text.” Among the anti-novelistic devices redolent of the postmodernist are the uses of “permutational structures” (the procedural or combinatory writing as practised by the OuLiPo group), renarration and denarration (multiplying variations of what has already been described or unsaying the already said), the mixture of fantasy and fabulation, and the privileging of narrative and language instead of verisimilitude (Mason 2007, 10-11). Many of those techniques are the staple diet of the fiction of such American writers as Robert Coover, John Barth and the so called surfictionists – Donald Barthelme, Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick. The paucity of British contributions to experimental writing in the second half of the twentieth century – ferociously attacked in Gabriel Josipovici’s much-discussed *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010) – remains a puzzle in view of British literature’s particularly rich Modernist legacy. The only British writers of note that took up antinovelistic projects were B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose. In the twenty-first century some of the distinctive devices of the antinovel have been incorporated by works that combined a critical and commercial success: Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) (experiments with the layout of the page), David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both* (2014) (playing with the order of the constitutive parts), Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005)

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<sup>3</sup> Robbe-Grillet, whose works were frequently analysed as examples of the antinovel (most notably in Alfred Cismaru’s “Alain Robbe-Grillet and the Anti-Novel”), did not identify with this label (Brodeur 2011, 29).

(rejection of psychological realism), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) (extensive use of visual material).

Whereas the above-listed texts manage to employ certain signature techniques of the antinovel, they do so in a way that does not contest their status as novels. For all their formal innovativeness, they still express – to a larger or lesser extent – the novel's traditional interest in plot and character. Their fragmentariness does not preclude a necessary degree of coherence; their self-reflexivity does not wreck their referential layer. In the end, despite the self-imposed obstacles and complications, they all succeed in conveying a story, however tangled or unconventional, set in a specific context (or multiple contexts – as is the case with the Mitchell and the Smith).<sup>4</sup> A rare example of a contemporary writer who chose to do without the safety nets of plot and character was David Markson (1927-2010). Markson's most acclaimed work is *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), which David Foster Wallace called "pretty much the high point of experimental fiction [in America]" (qtd. in Dempsey). Admired by fellow writers (including Kurt Vonnegut and Zadie Smith), he never became a widely recognisable name in the literary world, earning the reputation of the most talented "unknown and under-appreciated" writer of his generation (Markson 2005).<sup>5</sup> His four last novels – *Reader's Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004) and *The Last Novel* (2007) – are based on a very similar (and very distinctive) structure, which legitimises treating them as a tetralogy (against the narrator's explicit wish not to lump them together).<sup>6</sup> They are all 150- to 200-page-long collections of loosely connected facts or anecdotes about the life or work of some of the world's most famous artists, philosophers, scientists and historical figures.<sup>7</sup> The length of a single entry ranges from one word

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<sup>4</sup> *Cloud Atlas* has six distinct settings ranging from the nineteenth-century America to a post-apocalyptic future, whereas *How to Be Both* is set both in the fifteenth-century Italy and the contemporary Britain.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Dempsey in *The Guardian's* obituary argues that Markson's fiction "runs against the grain of a generally upbeat US culture" and places it in the "great tradition of nay-saying American writing, which goes back at least as far as Herman Melville."

<sup>6</sup> A passage in *The Last Novel* reads: "Wondering if there is any viable way to convince critics never to use the word *tetralogy* without also adding that each volume can be readily read by itself?" (Markson 2007, 161).

<sup>7</sup> Françoise Palleau-Papin notes that Markson's narrators are interested in "famous creators" – "in their whole lives, from birth to death, with a predilection for the end of a life" (2011, 248).

(such as “Jedwabne”<sup>8</sup>) to six lines. A typical component of Markson’s tetralogy is like one of the following (all examples are from *Reader’s Block*):

The first lectures on Shakespeare at a British university were given at Oxford, by one William Hawkins, in 1751. In Latin. (Markson 1996, 32)

Hegel, Schelling, and Holderlin were roommates while studying theology. (34)

It is only the man whose intellect is clouded by his sexual impulses who could give the name of the fair sex to that undersized, narrow-shouldered, broad-hipped and short-legged race.  
Said Schopenhauer. (138)

May I kiss the hand that wrote *Ulysses*?  
No, it did lots of other things too. (49)

Where was Jesus between the ages of twelve and twenty-nine? (82)

26 Piazza di Spagna. (12)

The first two entries could be described as curiosities – interesting, and not widely known, facts, which may augment the reader’s erudition. The third is an example of one of several hundred quotations – amusing, surprising or (as is the case here) shocking. The next entry is an instance of a great number of unacknowledged quotations, which may encourage the reader to look them up on the Internet and find out more about their context. The fifth passage represents a question apparently posed by the nameless narrator – an expression of an individual’s curiosity or interest, which, however, is likely to arouse the reader’s interest as well. The last is one of a group of cryptic entries which prompt the most attentive readers to use a search engine in order to determine their meaning.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jedwabne is a small town in Eastern Poland notorious for a pogrom against the Jewish minority in 1941.

<sup>9</sup> 26 Piazza di Spagna is the address of the house in Rome where John Keats died in 1821.

Although at times the arrangement of entries appears to be entirely random, there are numerous instances where they have been clearly ordered in a deliberate sequence.<sup>10</sup> The recurrence of certain kinds of facts throughout individual books makes it possible to indicate some of the tetralogy's central themes, which include aging, death and suicide, artistic creation, the fickleness of artistic reputation as well as anti-Semitism and the Holocaust (hence the reference to Jedwabne).<sup>11</sup> Each work employs certain recurrent lines, which function like a refrain. There are also several lines which feature prominently across the entire tetralogy:

Old. Tired. Sick. Alone. Broke.

Nobody comes. Nobody calls.

*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage.

The first three accentuate the sense of the narrators' increasing isolation and their fear of death. The last is one of many metafictional comments on the form of Markson's writing. The use of recurrent lines and motifs prompts Laura Sims to compare the structure of the tetralogy to that of the fugue.<sup>12</sup> This kind of composition poses a challenge for the reader, who must "remain attentive and active ... constantly connecting the lines/ fragments/ quotations not only with their immediate neighbors, but also with lines from previous books" (65). Joseph Tabbi also stresses the need for reader involvement in Markson's "interactive" fiction: "for a narrative to develop at all," he argues, "significant connections need to form in a reader's mind" (Tabbi 1997, 766-67). The critic sees Markson's "nonsequential method" of fragmented units that touch on a given subject only to proceed to another and then return from a different angle as indebted to the style of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was an important figure in the novelist's earlier

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<sup>10</sup> At the end of *Reader's Block*, there is a list of 54 entries consisting of the names of literary protagonists who committed suicide.

<sup>11</sup> *Reader's Block* contains 86 entries following the format, "X was an anti-Semite."

<sup>12</sup> Palleau-Papin draws a similar comparison in her discussion of Markson's previous novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, which she calls "a hypernovel in the form of a fugue" (2011, xxxvi).

mentioned novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Another quality which Markson shares with the Austrian-British philosopher is the technique of developing meaning "not through a linear plot, argument, or 'narrative progression' ... but in ways that are cumulative" (Tabbi 1997, 750-51).<sup>13</sup>

Alongside the tetralogy's fragmentariness, its rejection of a linear plot and characterisation stands as the most radical challenge to the novel and the strongest argument for classifying it as antinovelistic. Although each individual book employs characters – referred to in short entries interspersed with the anecdotal passages – who in some way develop, the use of quasi-plot and quasi-characters appears to be motivated by what Sartre calls the wish to keep the "outlines of the novel," whose aim is to "destroy it under our very eyes" (1955, 40). *Reader's Block* features an anonymous first-person narrator whose voice could be that of Markson himself, a character named Reader, who is, however, a writer working on a novel, and a character called Protagonist, who is being sketched by Reader.<sup>14</sup> At the end, Protagonist commits two alternative imaginary suicides, while the fate of Reader remains unresolved. The book contains several entries in which Reader is thinking aloud about how autobiographical his novel is going to be and to what extent Protagonist should be modelled on him. Those ruminations sound like Markson's own, since a lot of information referring to his past and current situation is applicable to Markson as well. That autobiographical reading is further legitimised by the antepenultimate entry, which contains Friedrich Nietzsche's remark that "in the end one experiences only one's self" (1996, 193).

In *This Is Not a Novel* Reader has been replaced by Writer as the author figure. Most Writer-centred entries focus on his weariness, headaches and depression; some call his very existence into doubt ("Does Writer even exist?/ In a book without characters?") (Markson 2001, 11). The book contains references to 49 famous people who died of different kinds of cancer, which prepares the ground for the confession made on the final page – "Writer's cancer" (167). *Vanishing Point*, referred to by Françoise Palleau-Papin as "a testament in the form of a novel" (Markson 2004, 252), features Author,

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<sup>13</sup> Markson's method relying on "connectivity" – the capacity for establishing links between numerous fragments – is regarded by Tabbi as a *signum temporis* – "appropriate to an era committed to virtuality" (1997, 768).

<sup>14</sup> The confusion about the notions of a "reader" and a "writer" is partly clarified by the epigraph from Jorge Luis Borges: "First and foremost, I think of myself as a reader" (Markson 1996, 5).

who seems to be preparing to start writing a novel but is, in fact, endlessly procrastinating.<sup>15</sup> His health is in progressive decline, which leads to his presumed death on the last page. Nonetheless, in *The Last Novel* the author figure is reborn under the name of Novelist. It is repeatedly implied that Novelist is the author of the previous parts of the tetralogy; at one point a reference is made to the common critical charge that Markson “has lately appeared to be writing the same book over and over” (Markson 2007, 104), which many readers (also the sympathetic ones) could not categorically deny. One of the final entries of the tetralogy – “*Access to Roof for Emergency Only*” – may be interpreted as an indication that Novelist committed suicide like the 54 literary protagonists referenced in *Reader’s Block*. *The Last Novel* did indeed turn out to be Markson’s last, coming out three years before his death.

The title of the last book as well as the metafictional references to the earlier parts situate it unambiguously as the final chord of Markson’s fugue. However, despite Palleau-Papin’s insistence that the books are not “interchangeable” and that the tetralogy enacts a “progression” (2011, 247), it is very difficult to demonstrate any gradual or sustained narrative development. It is true that certain exact phrases, themes or motifs recur – like the already mentioned preoccupation with suicide in the first and last books – but those returns do not necessarily advance any long-term argument but rather provide further illustrations or examples. The claim to character development would be even harder to defend, since any progression that could be traced is that towards ill health and death, which, as a matter of fact, occurs at the end of two successive books. Although the lack of plot and characterisation in the traditional sense is evidently one of the objectives of Markson’s work, the tiresome repetitiveness of the author-figures and the occasional monotony of their ongoing concern with death and suicide may be regarded as a weakness of the tetralogy and an illustration of some of the potential pitfalls of such extended (roughly 700 pages in total) antinovelistic projects.

If Markson’s dismantling of plot and characterisation has certain shortcomings, the tetralogy’s programmatic (and exuberant) self-reflexivity remains arguably its greatest asset. Metafictional entries – though far less numerous than the factual ones – constitute an important strand in the four consecutive books. One of the first such comments to feature in the first part

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<sup>15</sup> Nathalie Sarraute’s *Entre la vie et la mort* features a similar author-protagonist, who declares to be working on his new novel but is not until – at one point – an exasperated reader comes up to him and says, “Why don’t you write? You only ever talk about it” (Jefferson 1984, 83).

of the tetralogy is the question "What is a novel in any case?" (13), which underlies much of the self-conscious content of the entire work – concerned, for the most part, with attempting to find, or rather create, a category for the emerging text. Several metafictional passages recur from *Reader's Block* to *The Last Novel*:

A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel?

A seminonfictional semifiction?

Obstinately cross-referential and of cryptic interconnective syntax.

The first addresses the indeterminacy of the novel as a genre, echoing the unanswered question about what the concept actually entails. While conceding that each of Markson's books is a novel "minus much of the novel," it insists on its status as one. The question arising here is about what is meant to form that novelistic core which guarantees Markson's books their generic category despite their evident deviations.

*This Is Not a Novel*, the most overtly self-reflexive book in the series, opens with a sequence of statements that, when placed alongside one another, could be read as Markson's (anti-)novelistic manifesto. It begins with the entry "A novel with no intimation of story whatsoever, Writer would like to contrive./ And with no characters. None" (Markson 2001, 2), and is followed by the following characteristics: "Plotless. Characterless" (3); "Actionless ... with no *sequence of events* ... with no indicated *passage of time*" (4, original italics); "with no *setting*./ With no so-called furniture.... without *description*" (5); "with no social themes, i.e., no picture of society./ No depiction of contemporary manners and/or morals"; "Categorically, with no politics" (7); "entirely without symbols" (8); and "without even a subject" (9). The last entry is followed by two dissenting voices: José Ortega y Gasset's remark that "there is no work of art without a subject" and E. M. Forster's that "a novel tells a story." They, in turn, are confronted with a comment by American baseball player Dizzy Dean: "If you can do it, it ain't bragging" (10). This juxtaposition of original entries with the carefully selected quotations is among the most skilful and effective examples of Markson's signature technique. The Dizzy Dean quote, which is repeated on the book's last page, could be interpreted

as the author's announcement that his ambition is not only to formulate a certain idea of the novel but also to realise it – to cite Sartre – “under our very eyes.”

*This Is Not a Novel* also contains a scattered list of alternative categories that it could be said to fit, for those who will insist that indeed, as a Dizzy Dean might put it, a novel it ain't. Among the fourteen propositions of generic classifications are “a sequence of cantos” (Markson 2001, 23), “a mural of sorts” (36), “an autobiography” (53), “a polyphonic opera” (73), “a classic tragedy” (171) and a “synthetic personal *Finnegans Wake*” (185).<sup>16</sup> The last entry invites a rather daring (if not insolent) comparison between Markson's work and Joyce's experimental classic. A similarly self-enhancing parallel – this time with Pablo Picasso – is suggested by the juxtaposition of the two following units, which are placed eight pages apart:

You can actually draw so beautifully. Why do you spend your time making all these queer things?

Picasso: That's why. (Markson 2004, 156)

Writer has actually written some relatively traditional novels.

Why is he spending his time doing this sort of thing?

That's why. (164)

The rationale behind the decision to abandon convention is, Markson asserts, artistic development. Once a set of skills has been mastered, a new direction has to be found in order for one's art not to stagnate and become stale. Experimentation emerges here not as a shattering of convention or tradition but as an attempt to take a step further and push their boundaries. It poses a challenge by remaining oriented towards a possible future rather than emulating the canon. That forward-looking disposition of innovative art is asserted by Markson's confrontation of a remark that could have been made by one of his friends – “Listen, I bought your latest book. But I quit after about six pages. That's all there is, those little things?” – with a quotation from another sportsman, the hockey player Wayne Gretzky: “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it's been” (Markson 2007, 155).

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<sup>16</sup> Laura Sims argues that the list was inserted by Markson “in sarcastic response to the reviewer who called *Reader's Block* ‘not a novel’” (2008, 64).

Being in tune with the *Zeitgeist* and searching for new ways of expression is bound to baffle the less discerning. That is why the tetralogy abounds in more or less direct charges formulated against critics, mostly targeting their laziness, carelessness and lack of foresight. The inability to notice a work of genius is exemplified by the following entry from *Reader's Block*: "Nothing odd will do long; *Tristram Shandy* did not last./ Said Johnson" (Markson 1996, 161). Doctor Johnson, often considered – alongside John Dryden – to have been the founder of literary criticism, emerges as the archetypal critic who gets it wrong. The inability to appreciate a masterpiece is also widespread among experimental artists themselves, which Markson demonstrates by quoting numerous dismissive remarks by fellow writers, including Virginia Woolf's notorious assessment of *Ulysses* as "an illiterate, underbred book" (Markson 1996, 26). The mutual incomprehension of artists is also humorously signalled by two ruminations from *Vanishing Point*: "What Giotto would make of a Gerhard Richter canvas" and "What Balzac would make of a novel like Author's" (Markson 2004, 145, 147).

What are contemporary readers supposed to make of a tetralogy like Markson's? Should they take his word for it and see it as – despite all its affronts to the genre – a novel? After all, each book in the series either contains the word "novel" as part of its title or features it in the subtitle. The word "antinovel," by contrast, is conspicuously absent from the entire series, even though it could be classified as its quintessential example – in the establishment of its own conventions, the foregrounding of its own textuality and in what Brodeur calls the essential paradox of the antinovel – "the desire to be a novel against the novel." The ambition to reconcile the wish to be included within a given category and the wish to distance oneself from its kernel requires that one should position oneself at the borderline. And this is where Markson and the antinovel position themselves towards the novel. Rather than remaining at that border, the antinovel aims to push it ever further, which ensures its fluid shape despite its enduring and inflexible commitment to re-inventing – rather than destroying – the form of the novel.

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