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Blocks to, and building blocks of, narrativity: Fragments, anecdotes, and narrative lines in David Markson's *Reader's block*

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Abstract: David Markson's *Reader's block* (1996) consists of 193 pages of quotations, anecdotes, names, and fragments. The book bears the paratext "A novel," and the work has indeed been read as a narrative whole, in which "an aging author [...] contemplates the writing of a novel." By being out of ordinary and therefore worth of telling, the anecdotes or curiosities seemingly fulfill the requirements of a "natural" narrative as defined by Monika Fludernik (1996). However, a mass of such mini-narratives, mixed with even more fragmentary texts, seems to defy narrativity (and tellability). In my reading, the ostensive block to narrativity also functions as its very building block. Thanks to polysemy, *block* can relate to a block of a city, of stone at a gravesite, of text on a printed page, and of index cards. The seemingly dispersed fragments begin to gravitate around these semantic blocks and yield discrete but intertwining narrative lines. The very text claiming to deal with blockages performatively, as a finished book, testifies to the opposite: the mass of texts and plans proves that the ability to work on writing is not lost. Blocks that obstruct also construct, and the demediated novelistic medium still mediates as a form and repurposed content.

Keywords: David Markson, *Reader's block*, narrativity, collage, fragment, experimental literature, demediation

A man will turn over half a library to make one book, Johnson said. (Markson 2007b: 61)

David Markson's *Reader's block* (1996) consists of 193 pages of quotations, anecdotes, and textual fragments. The book bears the paratext "A novel," and the work has indeed been read as a narrative whole, in which, according to the blurb, "an aging author [...] contemplates the writing of a novel." By being out of ordinary and therefore worthy of telling, the anecdotes or curiosities seemingly fulfill the requirements of a "natural" narrative as defined by Monika Fludernik

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(1996). But a mass of such mini narratives, mixed with even more fragmentary texts, such as single words or names, seems to defy narrativity (and tellability for that matter). This tension can be theoretically relieved or contained with theories of textual collage and fragment, extreme or unnatural narration, generic frames, and conceptual art (see Elias 2005: 336–351; Tabbi 1997; Palleau-Papin 2011: 246–300; Duplay 2013; Berry 2005).

While accounting for these valid critical takes, I suggest still another approach. In my reading of Markson's novel, the ostensive block to narrativity also functions as its very building block. I thus turn the blocks upside down, as it were, and tentatively use the hindrance as an aid, the constraint as an enabler. Thanks to polysemy, *block* can relate to a block of a city, of stone at a gravesite, of text on a printed page, and of index cards, to name but a few. Sections of a city or graveyard, headstones or slabs on a grave, and writing surfaces on which the notes forming the novel's text are inscribed do figure prominently in the story-world of *Reader's block*. The novel's seemingly dispersed fragments begin to gravitate around these semantic blocks and yield discrete but intertwining narrative lines.

Most people know writer's block – from their own painful experience or from paradoxically verbose descriptions of others. The “periodic lack of inspiration afflicting creative writers” (*Writer's block*) is commonly known both as a psychological state and as a cultural commonplace. It can vary from a short-term difficulty to a lasting ailment. The block in both cases obstructs the flow of creativity and the stream of words.

But is there reader's block? Yes, at least nominally, for David Markson's novel bears that very title. The case is not, however, as simple as that. In Markson's work, Reader is not a reader in the usual sense of the word, but rather a writer, a novelist in the midst of collecting materials for a new novel *by reading*. That Reader-Writer is by no means blocked in his collecting and sorting of those textual ingredients. In fact, the project under preparation might as well be the one that we are holding in our hands, that is, the novel *Reader's block*. Thus, the very text claiming to deal with blocks performatively, as a finished book, testifies to the opposite: the mass of texts and plans proves that the ability to work on writing is by no means lost.

There also exists a conceptual reader's block in the sense that we can postulate the existence of such a state, analogous to the hapless condition in an author. To take reader's block seriously, without collapsing the concept with writer's block, we could imagine a hindered, obstructed, or stalled reader. Reader's block, in this conception, clogs the intake of stream of words and thus halts any possibility of (creative) reception, for any reason. The act of reading, then, ceases to proceed and stays put for an indefinite period of time. Mathieu Duplay

interprets reader's block in Markson as a physical impossibility, as blindness, and not only as a hermeneutical crisis (Duplay 2013). That is only partly accurate, for it ignores the polysemy of the keyword. To study carefully the functions of blocks in Markson's novel may keep at least its reading going and even build continuing interest in that work.

The ends and end of writing characterize David Markson's art. Judged by its titles, Markson's literary output spans from mourner's lines at gravesite (*Epitaph for a tramp*, 1959) to a novelist's final published words (*The last novel*, 2007). Marked by death at both ends, Markson's oeuvre gravitates towards stagnation, yields to the pull of the tomb, and fades out into silence. Markson started his career as a crime novelist, publishing his first work in the 1950s and continuing in that genre for two other books in the 1960s. He also wrote a western or anti-western (*The ballad of Dingus Magee*, 1965) and a late modernist gothic tale (*Going down*, 1970). Markson's next novel, *Springer's progress* (1977), is more relevant to my article's topic, since it features, as a protagonist, a writer suffering from writer's block. He finally copes with his ailment by writing a novel titled *Springer's progress*.

The metafictional and self-conscious experimentation of *Springer's progress* is turned into a fragmentary monologue in his next novel, *Wittgenstein's mistress* (1988). The monologist is a female painter who is either mad or actually the world's last surviving person. Her aphoristic style resembles that of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, although the content of her utterances mainly relate to Western cultural figures, not to the relationship between, and limits of, language and philosophy.

Markson's late novels can be seen as combining the subject matter of *Springer's progress* with the minimalism of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. The action, if there is any, in the last four novels (*Reader's block*, 1996; *This is not a novel*, 2001; *Vanishing point* 2004; and *The last novel*, 2007) can be encapsulated in Markson's own words: "I have characters sitting alone in a bedroom with a head full of everything he's [the author-figure] ever read" (KCKW Bookworm Interview: David Markson). The quotes, anecdotes, and pieces of historical information display glimpses of the lives and especially deaths of literary, artistic, or other famous people. Simultaneously, the preparation of the novel is being carried out. Both kinds of texts – notes and plans – are present in the book's pages and the reader is to find or make narrative out of that material.

1 Blocks to narrativity

Writer's block means, basically, that an author is incapable of writing, that no text comes into existence from her writing implement. A simple analogue to reader's block, in its apparent meaning, is less than perfect. The *block* in the title *Reader's block* points to narrativity rather than to the act of narrating. Reader "narrates" mainly in the form of collecting found texts, rewriting them and arranging them in some order. In other words, text is being produced or rather gathered, without perceptible blockages to the flow of materials in the work's pages. In that sense narration continues, if only in the sense of hoarding fragments (that would or would not eventually evolve into a polished, novel-length narrative). In addition to that, there are Reader's notes on constructing some basic element of the novel in preparation, including Protagonist and his physical environment, that together form a narrative of their coming into imaged existence.

Narrativity is a contested, fuzzy, but useful term, whose meaning has gradually moved from the textual basis of classical structuralist narratology toward postclassical emphasis on readers, cognition, and culture in transaction with narrative (Abbott 2014: par. 3). In the former delineation, narrativity can be defined as "the quality of being narrative, the set of properties characterizing narratives and distinguishing them from non-narratives [...]. It also designates the set of optional features that make narratives more prototypically narrative-like, more immediately identified, processed, and interpreted as narratives." (Prince 2005: 387) Narrativity can hence be thought of as an absolute kind or a relative degree. These options tie in with the text-type conception of narrative in that they are defined in terms of text-internal criteria.

The problem of narrativity can also be approached from the angle of modes, as Marie-Laure Ryan does. She makes a distinction between simple, complex, figural, and instrumental narrativity. Three of these are relevant to *Reader's block*. Simple narrativity relates to such single-problem and linear plot stories as anecdotes and fairy-tales. A great number of the textual segments or fragments in *Reader's block* are anecdotal, ranging from curious one-liners to more sustained (paragraph-length) tales of the unexpected or the quite interesting. The figural narrativity of lyric, historiographic, or philosophical texts relates to the form of non-prosaic, dispersed layout and the content (and sources) of the textual segments in *Reader's block*. The pseudo-lyric quality of Markson's book is suggested by its graphic presentation and supported by its discontinuous yet repetitive structuring of textual units. However, it would not be right to call *Reader's block* a lyric work, even less a lyric novel. The narrativity of *Reader's block* is weak in the sense theorized by Brian McHale that it is not persistent as a whole or equally sustained throughout the work (cf. McHale 2001: 164–165). The lack of coherence,

nevertheless, does not link *Reader's block* to poetry. Rather, it relates to experimental prose writing (for narrativity in unnatural or experimental stories, see Richardson 2015: 52–55).

Reader's block comprises a collection of short quotations (without quotation marks), anecdotes, historical trivia, single words, and names (usually in pairs or groups of three). This kind of triad is not atypical in Markson: “Raskolnikov. Bloom. Mr. Kurtz.” (Markson 2007b: 21) In addition to these categories, there are a number of recurring declarative statements (in the plain form of “X was an anti-Semite” and “Y committed suicide”). Brought together, these bits of text gain the status of a collection of fragments, morsels removed from their original context and arranged according to some principle, however loose.

The fragmentariness of Markson's work is further emphasized by its layout. The pieces of text are set separately, aphorism-like, with line breaks obstructing possible narrative flow (or continuity) and diminishing temptation to find one. The following constellation of text bits is by no means exceptional in *Reader's block*:

Freud.

Joseph Beuys was a Stuka pilot in World War II.

Monet, visiting London: This brown thing? This is your Turner?

René Descartes was born in a hayfield. (Markson 2007b: 13)

Clearly, there is no narrative continuity in these kinds of seemingly coincidental juxtapositions of texts. Not at least line by line. Hence, the textual strategy of Markson's work appears to block narrative flow by abruptly “jump cutting” from one fragment to another. However, zooming out from the constraints of a single page, we may find fragmentariness form patterns or connecting lines. They may be vague, but still they can be interpreted as pointing to a number of directions or areas of signification where elements of narrative may begin to develop. Or, put in another way, the separate-seeming fragments form, when traversing the constraints of a single page, possible lines of narrative across the book.

These areas or types of fragments include, death (through suicide or Holocaust), anti-Semitism, art world, the element of coincidence or surprise, and generally things that are worth telling due to their exceptionality or unlikelihood.

Many of these pieces of text are mini- or nano-narratives or at least microfictions in their own right (cf. Nelles 2012: 87–89). But do the fragments dealing with roughly the same (very general) subjects that belong to the usual stock of literary themes (life, love, death, art, nature) form, taken together, some sort of larger and more or less unified narrative whole? Not exactly. Rather, the general subject

matters reinforce aspects of the narrative line that is *not* formed by quotations or found material.

2 Building blocks of narrativity

The result of all the various fragments brought together in *Reader's block* is, as the book's penultimate entry has it, "Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage." (Markson 2007b: 193)¹ The fate of this constellation may not be as cruel as the novel's very last entry implies: "Wastebasket" (Markson 2007b: 193). At least not for the reason implied by the entry.

I suggest that rather than lacking narrativity, *Reader's block* has an abundance of it, even to a degree of overkill. By this I mean that the majority of the fragments could be interpreted as springing from the same source as naturally occurring, spontaneous conversational storytelling. The high cultural anecdotes and facts in *Reader's block* are by no means the stock topics of everyday speech situations and "natural" narratives as theorized by Monika Fludernik (1996) but they are, nevertheless, motivated by the exceptional, out of ordinary turns of event that are therefore worth of telling. For instance:

Petrarch sometimes wrote letters to long-dead authors. He was also a dedicated hunter of classic manuscripts. Once, after discovering some previously unknown works of Cicero, he wrote Cicero the news. (Markson 2007b: 28)

The literary, artistic, or historical pieces in *Reader's block* do not directly relate to experience, personal or somebody else's, which is one of the genres of spontaneous conversation (that is, oral type of storytelling) (Fludernik 1996: 56–58). Nor are they always precisely narrative reports (of the speaker's doings), but other persons' acts or states of being (especially at their extreme sides, birth and death). What they resemble more is, hence, anecdotes, however minimal.

The mass of different kinds of text segments, ranging from single words to paragraph-long accounts and deriving from various sources, may seem to defy any possibility of a narrative whole or even lower-scale narrativity. However, due to its very heterogeneity, *Reader's block* does feature an abundance of local narrative cases. Most of the found or retold segments could be categorized as

¹ As is customary of *Reader's block*, the entry recurs elsewhere in the novel as well: verbatim (Markson 2007b: 140) and in the interrogative form (Markson 2007b: 14). The declarative litany of four also appears in *This is not a novel*, supplemented with the statement: "Self-evident enough to scarcely need Writer's say-so" (Markson 2001: 128). The same list can be found in *Vanishing point* (Markson 2004: 12) and *The last novel* (Markson 2007a: 8) as well.

anecdotal asides, curiosities, or factoids. They are all extraordinary, even bizarre, or at least nontrivial. They thus resemble conversational storytelling, in which something unexpected or interesting to the assumed addressee is required in order to motivate the very act of narrating (cf. Fludernik 1996: 63–64). Although they are markedly written notes and not to be framed with an oral storytelling situation, the anecdotal parts of *Reader's block* resemble natural narrative on the basic level of having a “point” (Fludernik 1996: 29, 63, 75, 81). As a more specific text type, albeit a far cry from the highbrow content of the segments, the curiosities bring to mind *Ripley's believe it or not* panels in their gathering of accounts of unusual facts from different walks of life. In fact, many of Markson's anecdotes or factoids are so unusual that they could well be supplemented with an exclamation mark, in the classic Ripley fashion.

I propose that noteworthiness informs all text segments in *Reader's block*, not merely the obvious anecdotes. Even the one-word fragments are, literally, noteworthy because Reader has noted them while reading and made notes on his index cards. All textual material in the novel has thus been worthy of a note.

Interlaced with the materials drawn from history books, documents, or various forms of folklore there runs, in *Reader's block*, a series of original pieces of text relating to the composition of a novel, to the basic constituents of narrative. These text segments seem to derive from a working diary of a novelist planning to compose a new book. Some 20 percent of the novel's text consists of entries dealing with the protagonist's possible living conditions, his past, health, social relations and so on. Taken together, these working notes of how to construct the protagonist in the future performatively do portray him, his life-world, and his life-story in the present, albeit sketchily.

Reader's block can be read as an exercise or experiment in ripping the novelistic form to its essentials, or rather, even ridding it of those ostensible requisites. Still, in Markson's work, the vital ingredients are fairly discernible, including setting, descriptive sequences, symbols (of death, in particular), and notably three characters and their storylines. There is an anonymous first-person narrator, who articulates the novel's opening lines. There is also Reader, a character who is a professional writer and who has created a character called Protagonist for his planned novel. In addition to these, the novel features dozens of historical or fictitious characters by mentioning them in anecdotes or lists. The narrative line of Reader dreaming up Protagonist is easily discernible as a continuous and even chronologically spun tale. Along with that narrative line, the disconnected-seeming fragments are exposed to the forces of noteworthiness and motivation that compel or attract them to comprehensible patterns. Some tensions, however, remain, and they are due to the objects in the storyworld rather than to their fragmentary presentation.

3 Blocks: objects that obstruct and construct

There are mentions of blocking objects in the notes for the storyworld of the novel in preparation. They relate to Protagonist and his immediate physical surrounding (room and house) as it is sketched. The initial setting in which Protagonist is to appear in the planned novel (and *does* appear in *Reader's block*) resembles a place where a person has recently moved in:

Protagonist first seen poised abstractedly amid a kind of transitory disarray? Cartons heaped and piled?

Innumerable books, Reader presumably means? (Markson 2007b: 15)

Protagonist's apartment itself brings to mind a cul-de-sac or a final retreat:

[...] Protagonist's entrance in the rear, a sort of basement? Possibly what had once been an indoor garage?

[....]

In this house the same initial impermanence, the same cartons. (Markson 2007b: 21)

The peculiarities of the apartment and Protagonist's disorganized decor further reinforce the sense of being blocked:

[...] the entrance at the top of the stairs has been sealed. In effect, the stairs now mount to nowhere.

Protagonist has set up the first of his unpacked books on some of the steps. (Markson 2007b: 41)

The piles of cartons partially block the passage to the stairs leading to the blocked door. These are signs of poverty, of turned down possibilities, unlike in the famous *Fiddler on the roof* song, "If I were a rich man," where the counterfactual staircase leading nowhere is there for showing off Tevye the Dairyman's imagined affluence. Protagonist and his poverty are being designed and constructed in the course of *Reader's block*, whereas the poor Tevye is shown to dream up a wealthy life for himself in a series of conditional lines.

The piled cartons are not just any boxes. More precisely, the contents of these blocking objects is not insignificant. The cartons are filled with books or vinyl records, that is, reproduced and stored writing or sound (Markson 2007b: 37). The boxes, hefty with tightly stacked media objects, block Protagonist's way but they also deserve the epithet "reader's block," since the act of reception is obstructed by the act of packing. The hefty materiality of printed volumes and vinyls function as dumb containers of visual and sonic information, rather than as its seemingly immaterial mediators. The closed books closed in cartons are doubly unavailable for communicative purposes. This twofold closure, however, does open up to at

least two directions – media and art form – and via them to the construction of *Reader's block*.

The books closed in boxes are unreadable for the simple reason that there is nothing visible to be read or judged by, not even the proverbial cover. Under normal media circumstances, “[t]he object of a book is to be read, to be taken up and on and in by a subject” (Stewart 2011: 93). This is certainly the case in the imagined scenario of Protagonist’s household as well. However, the novel also presents another way of looking at the boxes in the same setting. The motif of visual arts and sculpture in connection with the moving boxes is introduced with the notes on “abstractedly” poised cartons (Markson 2007b: 47) and “[c]artons like an impermanent sculpture of found objects” (Markson 2007b: 59, 155). In the art world, treated – and very often mistreated – books are known as “book art, book sculpture, book objects, not-books, dummy books, book-works; books found, appropriated, altered, distressed” (Stewart 2011: 17). In most of these cases, “the found book, once adopted from the archive of print circulation, is then ‘adapted’ to some new protocol of museum display” (Stewart 2011: 18). Garrett Stewart suggests the term “bibliobject” for covering many of these cases (Stewart 2011: 31).

The cardboard boxes filled with books in *Reader's block* are not bibliobjects in the sense that they are not meant to be displayed in an actual museum. However, the cartons to some extent resemble book-works in their tampering with and cancellation of the medium’s functioning so that the books are at least “detexted” in the process, to use Stewart’s terms (Stewart 2011: 25). Stewart calls this phenomenon *demediation*, or “*the process, carried out in whatever primary medium of its own, by which a transmitted image or text is stalled or cancelled over the obtruded fact of its own neutralized mediality in one aspect or another*” (Stewart 2011: 102; emphasis in original). In other words, demediation blocks the book’s ability to convey linguistic messages; what remains functional is the material support only (Stewart 2011: 236).

One could say that the remediating alteration of books into sculpture-like objects, from verbal to visual art, cancels or forgets (some of) the message transmission functions or abilities of the print medium. It is also, so to speak, a matter of dementing (in the sense of causing an entity to lose its capacities), and hence demediating the previous message form.

The books and records closed in boxes are media objects whose communicative and poetic functions have been cancelled, at least temporarily. The flow and circulation of information inherent in the codex and the vinyl disc has ceased and they have become storage media put away for storage.

On the other hand, the boxes “[o]n a stairway ending at a sealed-off door” (Markson 2007b: 59, 155) block Protagonist’s way to the shut-out entrance. In

spite of these multiple hindrances, of overdetermined obstructions, the cartons also function as building blocks of sculptural work; the disarray in Protagonist's apartment is emphatically linked with visual artistic design. Michelangelo famously stated that every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it. According to this Renaissance thinking, the work can hence be found waiting in the existing material. In the Modernist context, ready-made objects with non-art function can be turned into art works or into their parts. Instead of precious blocks of marble, items made of cardboard or other everyday material may function as artistic substance. As a demediating take on Michelangelo's dictum, Protagonist's boxes have already existing artworks hidden and shut inside them. That also functions as a metaphor for *Reader's block*, which harbors inside it and is made of the stuff that is, fundamentally, printed matter. Those textual segments participate in the dialectics of obstruction and construction sketched above. The sheer number and variety of fragments hinder interpretive pursuits and may even bring reading to a standstill. Conversely, the reused and repurposed materials are the very prerequisite of the book to be read and its narratives to be discerned.²

2 David Shields's influential and controversial *Reality hunger* (2010) uses the same method as Markson but situates it in the nonfictional genre of manifesto. The manifesto tends to be a rhetorically heightened text type, so the difference between *Reader's block* and *Reality hunger* is clearly *nominal* (that is, designated by their paratexts) rather than ontological. The two works even share some of their raw materials. This comes about in three basic ways: by independently drawing from the same sources; by Shields using a source via Markson; and by Shields quoting Markson's own discourse. That largely the same textual materials yield, or at least make it justifiable to categorize the books as belonging to, two different genres points to the ambiguous nature of collage itself.

Shields devotes one chapter (*chapter 1*) of *Reality hunger* to collage, giving over 60 quotations or his own reflections (#312 through #374) on the subject. The paragraph (or section) #314 reads: "Collage is a demonstration of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it" (Shields 2011: 112). This quotation could be read, in connection with collages using (at least partly) the same components, reversely as well: collage demonstrates how the one becomes many. The forces or tensions of the materials are not resolved when they are framed and labeled as one unity, for they are as transient and malleable as the acts of outlining and naming. Hence the porous boundary between fiction and nonfiction, between novel and manifesto, or between narrative and non-narrative. In Shields's "own" words, "Nonfiction, qua label, is nothing more or less than a very flexible (easily breakable) frame that allows you to pull the thing away from narrative and toward contemplation [...]" (Shields 2011: 124; #371). In my "own" appropriation: fiction, qua label, is nothing more or less than a very flexible (easily breakable) frame that allows you to pull the thing away from contemplation and toward narrative.

4 Blocks for the dead and the living

Protagonist and his immediate physical surrounding (room and house) are filled with dead ends and media objects out of use – blocked communication in the senses of connection and transmission. The same tendency applies to the sketched environment outside his house, to his neighborhood.

Protagonist's home block, his living surroundings, is almost literally a dead part of town or at least it closely relates to death:

Protagonist living near a disused cemetery, perhaps?

A sense somehow of total retreat? Abandonment? (Markson 2007b: 14)

Where precisely would Protagonist live, if near a derelict cemetery? Possibly some sort of structure just within the grounds themselves?

That building abandoned also? Protagonist possibly stealing electricity through wires connected to the base of a streetlamp outside?

Reader sees a red brick building, in fact. Fairly small and falling into ruin, but of two stories. (Markson 2007b: 15–16)

In accommodations at a derelict graveyard? Where nobody comes, where nobody calls? (Markson 2007b: 192)

If a cemetery by definition functions on the principle that it is inhabited by the dead and visited by mourners, Protagonist's neighboring graveyard is dysfunctional in both aspects. Like a book shut tight and made unreadable is demediated, the novel's cemetery is blocked from the intended use. Nevertheless, the architecture of the graveyard still relates to the constructive meanings of blocks, even as an abandoned and therefore expired structure. Cemetery is a city of the dead, with a grid of streets structuring the area into blocks. The graves inside the blocks are lots, with memorials or headstones on them rising like townhouse fronts. Those cemetery constructions are typically made of blocks of stone, as are slabs, sealing, as it were, the gravesite like a lid on a carton.

In *Reader's block*, there is a definite affinity between the gravestones and books (inside or outside a box), as in "Nothing now, but Protagonist's books. Those, and the graves of strangers." (Markson 2007b: 20) The codex-shaped headstone bears inscription – at least the name of the deceased person and an epitaph –, which could be thought of as the equivalents of the customary introductory paratexts (author and epigraph) of a book.

The derelict cemetery, as imagined by Reader, is not completely deserted, and it does not merely function as the setting for Protagonist's solitary ruminations of gravestones and their inscriptions. Reader conjures a lone woman who visits at one of the graves (Markson 2007b: 59). The ambiguous wording in the

subsequent mentions of the woman make her a spectral figure, an even more ethereal entity than an ordinary literary character: “Protagonist nodded hello to the woman from the grave in passing on the street yesterday” (Markson 2007b: 63; cf. also 69, 70, 100). The woman appears, rhetorically, as if from behind the grave, as an apparition of sorts.

That the dead have characteristics of the living and that the live entities seem to be assembled from lifeless parts relates to the block as the constructing principle in the Markson novel. Besides the cemetery setting and props, *Reader's block* is permeated with the styles of death, from natural or violent causes – suicides, diseases, accidents, executions – of authors, artists, and composers. The fragments on suicide count well over a hundred, as do the ones on antisemitism. The latter category adds to the (potential) number of “death sentences.” Protagonist himself has cancer, as does Reader (Markson 2007b: 127, 161). A skull is not only a *memento mori*, a reminder of inevitable death, in the novel; rather, life is seen, as it were, through its empty eye sockets. The dead vision is encapsulated in the following double *vanitas* arrangement: “Protagonist has it [a skull]. On a windowsill. On the windowsill of the window that looks out onto the graves.” (Markson 2007b: 163) There is only a short step from this vista to Joseph Tabbi's conclusion that “Reader's ‘block,’ insofar as it represents a finished work, is also a tombstone” (Tabbi 1997: 757). This can be seen as a corollary of the obstruction/construction dyad. In *Reader's block*, death – the final blockade – brings fiction into existence. Matters of death and dead matter are the stuff that Reader's work is made of.

5 Reader's block of index cards

Finally, there is a more concrete (or literal instead of literary) way of reading the block of *Reader's block*. The block can be interpreted as an actual pile of paper sheets or, more precisely, index cards. The novel is being prepared in the form of notes written on separate file cards, and they are then shuffled or arranged in a certain order. What we encounter in *Reader's block* is the order of those cards printed in the novel's pages. Reader's (that is, the author figure's) block of cards is *Reader's block* the novel.

Markson did work on his last four novels by “scribbling the notes on three-by-five-inch index cards” which he collected in “shoebox tops” and which he later put “into manuscript form” (KCKW Bookworm Interview: David Markson). Reader and Markson are not exceptional in their method of preparing or writing a novel. Perhaps the most famous author using index cards as a writing surface is Vladimir Nabokov, many of whose novels, including *Lolita* and *Pale fire*, were

composed in that manner. Nabokov's posthumous novel *The original of Laura (Dying is fun)* (2009) has even been published in facsimile form, so that the meticulously reproduced index cards that accompany the transcribed text are perforated and thus removable from the pages. The cards can then be shuffled and rearranged in different orders, as the author himself did.

Roland Barthes's last lecture course at Collège de France (1978–1980) deals with the preparation of the novel, charting authors' creative process from the initial desire via planning to actual writing. One of the course sessions is dedicated to the practices and levels of notation. Barthes sums up the paradox of writing preparatory notes: "someone who devoted himself entirely to *Notatio* would end up refusing to invest in any other sort of writing activity (even if he thought of *Notatio* as the preparation for a work)" (Barthes 2011: 91). However, authors' practices point to another kind of paradox. Reader's and Nabokov's index cards turned into published books of fiction. Barthes's posthumously published lecture notes not only present the theoretical survey of novelistic preparation but also his eight-page plan for the novel *Vita nova* in facsimile. The activity of notation that seems to evade its development into fiction turns out to be both a prerequisite of creative writing and its very essence. This accords with Barthes's reading of Baudelaire's hashish vision of intense feelings and ideas as a lived but unwritten novel: in "the dense proliferation of Notations, lies the Novel" (Barthes 2011: 93).

These curious transformations (from the private and incomplete to the public and generically fragmentary) are possible because even personal notes, due to the capacity of writing, communicate to others as well: "you can 'write for yourself' [...] but you're already copying for someone else, with the view to external communication, social integration [...]" (Barthes 2011: 92).

To sum up my reading of *Reader's block*, blocks, in various senses of the word, both obstruct and construct the novel's narrative lines. Blocks exist as objects and concepts in the novel's storyworld and can be seen as organizing the work's ostensibly detached text fragments into distinct but interlacing narrative lines. A novel experimenting with textual assemblage or collage, *Reader's block* studies narrativity by challenging the cohesion of traditional story and novelistic form. Instead of lacking narrativity, *Reader's block* has an excess of it, for most of the fragments are mini-narratives in their own right. This overkill at least seemingly cancels the novel's functioning as a narrative whole, but it also problematizes the novel as a medium. The blocked narrative flow and the various blocks within the novel's storyworld relate to the demediated quality of *Reader's block* as a novel. However, one of the paradoxes of Markson's work is that it can be read as a novel, that the demediated medium still mediates, both formally and on the level of repurposed content.

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