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On the Meaning of the Oil Spill

by Pierre David

THE OIL SPILL. IT'S BECOME A CALAMITY AND A JOKE. WE WATCH, daily, as plumes of underground crude billow up through the blackened depths of the Gulf of Mexico, infecting our marshes and wetlands, killing fish and fowl. It's unclear what to make of the disaster: No one can do anything; everything is being done; soon, in July or August, order will be restored. This is what the administration and British Petroleum keep telling us, and maybe it's true, but none of that can erase the symbol of powerlessness. The oil spill has become a symbol of what cannot be stopped.

The president's critics have pounced on him for not showing enough sympathy with the people of the Gulf or taking charge or being Teddy Roosevelt. In other words, they want some theater. They want him to lie: Everything is under control. I feel your pain.

But the president doesn't emote (at least, in public); nor does he like to say that the buck stops with him. Everyone knows that. That's the point of running for president. So you can be the person with whom the buck stops.

That said, the president and his senior lieutenants and their array of allies and subordinates on Capitol Hill and the media sound, well, crazy. We're told that the president is "furious" with BP and that he wants answers and that progress is being made. We're told all these things only after the president has been told that the people — voters — want them told to them. It feels as if the country is taking part in a dress rehearsal for a crisis that has not yet happened. In the event that a real crisis takes place, this is how you can expect the White House to react.

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Vanishing Point

by David Markson

DAVID MARKSON PASSED AWAY THIS MONTH, AND IT'S WORTH recalling what was possibly his best novel, "Vanishing Point," published in 2004. Markson was not a writer known for his plots or character development, so it should come as no surprise that "Vanishing Point," which follows Markson's 2001 "This Is Not a Novel," is largely devoid of plot or characters. Still — and herein lies that peculiar Marksonian genius — the book is a work of art, and it tells us things we didn't know, and it enriches us, and it makes us a little more human, complicated — three-dimensional.

"Vanishing Point" revolves around an author known simply as Author. Author's sole action, his purpose, his entire being, is devoted to writing a novel. He does this by cobbling together thoughts that have been scribbled on note cards that are jammed into shoeboxes. There is no apparent logic or order to this process. It simply happens, much the way Markson's own novels happen, with an apparent chaos that ultimately yields to structure and clarity.

Rest assured, the novel builds, in its own, strange way, and it leads us places we did not expect to go, and the end is — how to put this? — traumatic, unexpected.

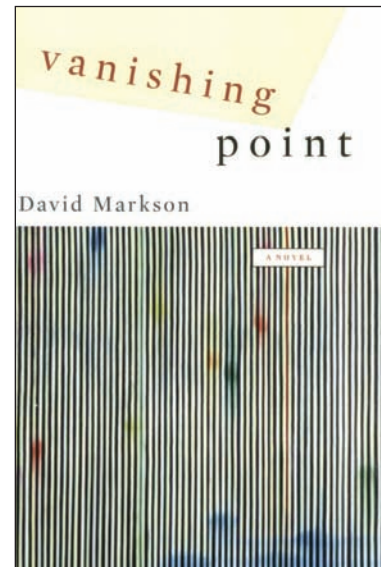
This is what distinguishes Markson from so many contemporary authors who have been infected with post-modernism or post-structuralism or whatever trendy, post-conventional nonsense is now being pedaled at English departments at the country's most prestigious universities. He believes in endings. And middles. And beginnings. His novels may not always read this way, but that's the author's (not Author's) artistry at work. That's just one of the games he likes to play, to exploit our expectations and then invert those expectations and give us something we wanted but did not imagine possible.

Markson was born in Albany, and he went to Union College, in Schenectady, and then he migrated south, to New York, to Greenwich Village. In New York, he befriended the likes of Jack Kerouac and Conrad Aiken, and he was something of a bridge to a place that no longer is, a place, the Village, that was truly bohemian and countercultural and infused with books, paintings, music and, of course, alcohol and tobacco and self-indulgence.

It's hard for Americans to imagine this kind of place today. The role of the book, and, of course, the writer, was infinitely greater then. Ideas mattered, not the way they did in, say, Europe, but in a distinctly American way that was concerned with the plight of the American idea. The writer at the heart of "Vanishing Point" is a creator, a generator of ideas, but he is also a function of a society that does not take kindly to creation. Creation, after all, is disruption, an overturning of a previous order. But Author cannot help it. His ideas, etched in his boxloads of cards, simply happen, spontaneously, which is to say: His ideas are his own. (Most people's ideas, Markson seems to be saying, are not their own, although they may believe, erroneously, that they are.) This is a great accomplishment, but also

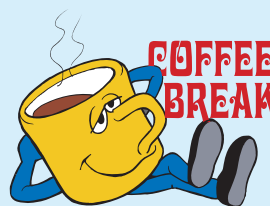
mystifying and deeply upsetting. How much easier things would be if Author could simply spout thoughts and observations that he had already heard or seen — even better, if he could spout these copycat ideas while convinced that he was making a contribution. But making a contribution, altering the way we conceive of the world, if only a bit, is necessarily alienating: It puts the creator, Author, at odds with his fellows. It makes him lonely.

Markson must have been aware, toward the end of his life, that he was one of a handful of writers doing the kind of work he was doing. For one thing, people don't think as much as they once did. There's no time for that, and no point. We are an increasingly point-driven world, a civilization that is driven by short- and medium-term goals, and anything beyond that middling reach is irrelevant. For another thing, people don't read novels the way they used to. The novel, as Markson understood, had (or has) a central role to play in the life of the nation. With David Markson no longer among us, one wonders who will ask these questions now? —PD



UNDOING:

- is a mechanism of defense that attempts to neutralize or undo a harmful or troubling act
- is a psychopharmacological process
- is a manifestation of an obsessive-compulsive neurosis
- is the process of reversing a judicial decision through intimidation



ANSWER: A.
Undoing is an unconscious process to erase a harmful or guilt-related event or action. There is no such process in psychopharmacology, nor does it have anything to do with obsessive-compulsive actions.



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On the Meaning of the Oil Spill

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A few observations that seem to have eluded the punditocracy: First, Americans increasingly expect their government to do more than it can possibly do. Washington has a hard enough time fighting wars, regulating financial markets and educating children, to say nothing of paving roads and building the occasional bridge. Surely, it's in no position to plug a hole a mile beneath the surface of the ocean. Democrats and Republicans know this, but when the opposition is in power, both parties are quick to accuse the other of a dereliction of duty. Pathetic.

Second, this is an environmental crisis, not a war or an earthquake or a tsunami. People are not dying (the initial loss of life, at the Deepwater Horizon platform, notwithstanding). All of which is to say that the comparisons with Hurricane Katrina are off base. People died in New Orleans. (Why, exactly, these deaths took place, and whom is to blame, can and will be debated endlessly.) This loss of life makes Katrina more devastating than the oil spill. We are supposed to care more about people than birds, rivers, etc. Environmentalists have obscured this distinction.

Third, this oil spill is no longer an oil spill. It's a political phenomenon, which is to say that not only is it a liability for Democrats and an opportunity for Republicans, but a metaphor, a figure of speech — a symbol. In case President Obama or the Congress or the media or the professional opinion-spouters have failed to notice, America is in the middle of a protracted conversation about the role of the state, and the relationship between that state and the people. The president has made his inclinations known; so, too, has the Congress. Polls suggest that a majority of voters don't share those views. Just how deep the opposition runs won't be clear until the November elections. Are Americans, the vast majority of Americans, genuinely worried about the scope of government? Or is the spike in ant-government sentiment merely an "astro-turf" movement, a fabrication, a televised myth, care of the Republican National Committee? We will find out in the coming months.

The bottom line is that the oil spill is both much worse and not nearly as bad as it's been made out to be. The political and even economic implications are extensive and will be felt, in many ways, for years to come. But the losses that have been suffered, while terrible and inexcusable, are not the tragedy some have made them

out to be. Haiti was a tragedy. So was Sri Lanka and Thailand in the wake of the tsunami. So was the ninth ward of New Orleans. No doubt, there's something very wrong with a company and a government that have proven so hopelessly inept. No doubt, the public rage is justified. But only to a point. News reports indicate that it will take decades to repair the damage. That's awful. But less awful than, say, the families that were scattered across Louisiana and Texas in the wake of Katrina. Certainly, we're still capable of making those kinds of distinctions, yes? —PD

LEGALIZING MARIJUANA HAS ITS CONSEQUENCES

In November Californians will vote on a ballot measure to legalize, tax, and regulate marijuana.

The state's debate over legalizing the drug has made national headlines. A lot of attention has been paid to the story, in part, because 14 states and the District of Columbia already allow the use of medical marijuana, and because California is considering full legalization.

The nation remains largely divided over the issue. According to a Gallup poll last fall, 44 percent of the American public favors legalization — up from 36 percent at the same time the year before. Perhaps not surprisingly, The Field Poll found that number to be slightly higher among residents in western states, many of which already permit the use of marijuana for medical purposes. Even more interesting, 56 percent of western residents support full legalization.

There are myriad issues for Californians to consider — from economic ramifications to law enforcement — and in the lead up to November's election both sides are pulling out all the stops. But opposition to the proposed law has come from some surprising sources. As it turns out, many existing medical marijuana businesses have raised concerns about how dispensaries might be affected by a legal — but highly regulated — system.

The owner of one Sacramento medical marijuana clinic, for instance, told his local CBS affiliate he lacks confidence in the state government to effectively regulate a legal drug system. He already faces high liability insurance, high workers' compensation insurance and higher rent because of the risks associated with his business, and he suspects broader legalization will lead to even more burdensome regulations and fees.

This view is certainly shared by others in the drug industry. The New York Times reported on concerns growers and sellers of marijuana have about the ballot initiative. Warren Edson is a lawyer in Denver, CO, where the medical marijuana business has been growing by leaps and bounds over the past year. Many of his clients also worry how full legalization might impact issues like workers' compensation, taxes, and safety regulations. As Edson told The Times, "There's this real Al Capone fear that they're going to get our guys, not on marijuana, but on something else."

Freedom always costs something. But when it comes to drug legalization, Californians are asking just how much.

— Sabrina Leigh Schaeffer

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