

no verb French

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All Talk, No Action:
A Funeral for Verbs,
With Few Pallbearers

In Mr. Dansel's Curious Book,
Something ... Not There;
'Strangely Unappetizing'
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PARIS — The scene: a hundred or so scholars, writers and others in a packed amphitheater at the Sorbonne. The event: a funeral.

But not for a person. Mais non. Instead, an *au revoir* to a part of speech.
The verb.

The mastermind of the mock memorial service: Michel Dansel, freelance intellectual, author of books such as "The Rat, Our Brother in Darkness," as well as a dictionary of spelling errors and a guide to complaint letters.

The purpose behind his June 1 ceremony: publicity. For his latest work; for his bid for literary immortality; for his contribution to the language of Rimbaud, Flaubert and Stendahl — a 233-page novel without verbs.

"Le Train de Nulle Part," or "The Train to Nowhere." A torrent of adjectives, adverbs, interjections and funky nouns. Also heavy doses of commas, semicolons, colons — and dashes, too. The result, in the words of the publisher, the first-ever French novel without verbs, as well as "brilliant, baroque, and original."

As for the plot: descriptions of a train journey and the narrator's encounters with passengers (not the most appealing people in the world). A typical passage: "In that carriage, between the grumpy woman oozing vulgarity and the similarly asinine creature with her, the progenitor and her eczematous brat, the purple-faced fatso, the half-bald guy like a vegetarian may-bug, the verbose matinee idol and the crazy witch, no room for me."

A tough sell, even in a nation with many intellectuals and a well-known book without the letter 'e.' ("La Disparition," by Georges Perec, 1969.) A challenge, the unloading of a print run of 3,500 books. So, at the ceremony, as in the novel, gimmicks galore. Mourners, eulogies, a flowery wreath with a banner "to the defunct verb." Even a reception at a nearby café, with wine, and a buffet of meats and cheeses, just like a traditional French funeral.

So why this particular literary quirk? A challenge to tired, old ideas about language, according to 65-year-old Mr. Dansel. The written verb, in his opinion, such a boor; so pushy; so insistent on action. (Verbs in speech? No such problem.)

Mr. Dansel's manifesto, according to the book's introduction: "The verb this invader, this dictator, this usurper of our literature since always!" Then, a call to arms, "to all the followers of this new movement."

The reaction among French critics to this feat? Mostly chilly. Like the Alps in January. Brusque. Like a bistro waiter. In the monthly magazine Lire, a bible for bookworms, just an 18-line snippet, with this sentiment: "a bad paper by an 11-year-old student."

And from the British press, worse. Sneers! Scoffs! Denunciations! John Walsh in the Independent: "a jungle of similes and essences, desperate for the oxygen" of a verb. Echoes from U.S. critics. A verbless review in the Chronicle of Higher Education: "Enigmatic. Disturbing. Strangely unappetizing."

The very notion -- in the words of linguistics professor Geoffrey Pullum, on a Web site about language -- "nuts, bonkers, round the bend."

A recent interview with Mr. Dansel, in his crumpled suit, over espresso in an artsy quarter of Paris. About his book, nearly two years in the making. His long, lonely struggle against those pesky verbs -- like "a shadow boxer." His disappointment at the conservative opinions of the "small world" of French literary circles.

>*From whence the idea?*

First, Mr. Dansel's childhood in a working-class neighborhood of Paris. There, the development of "an aversion to orders and commands." Next, to college at the Sorbonne, two doctorates in literature and a focus on language, in particular an obscure, nineteenth-century French poet by the name of Tristan Corbière. Meanwhile, extensive travel around the gloomy reaches of northern Europe and an extended stint in Lapland.

Ingredients for the adult writer's interest in "the hidden side of things." Among his works, a crime novel with intellectual gangsters and philosopher policemen.

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But also, for a regular income, a slew of more mundane publications. The total tally, maybe 100 or more, according to Mr. Dandel. But the exact number? A secret. His reason? The protection of his reputation from French disdain of overly productive writers. Too pushy, too unseemly, too contrary to the spirit of the 35-hour workweek.

Hence several pseudonyms, plus one for the verbless book (Michel Thaler — Thaler, his mother's maiden name).

Back at the mock funeral, a chatty mourner: the author's elementary-school teacher, Georges Rivault. A chuckle. A revelation of a childhood secret, Mr. Dandel's weakness: spelling and grammar. Above all, "bad at verb conjugation."

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