

# explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

## REVIEW

**Lydia Davis. 2019. *Essays One*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Lydia Davis. 2021. *Essays Two*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Lydia Davis. 2009. *The Collected Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.**

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*Jacek Gutorow (University of Opole)*

ORCID: 0000-0002-7053-7829

In a short conversation with Piotr Florczyk, published in this issue of *Explorations*, Lydia Davis remarks: “Reading, in a way, is more active than watching an episode or a movie on television or on a device. The writer is the one supplying the words on the page, but the reader is the one forming the images in his or her mind.” Such a readerly – and of course writerly – alertness informs much of what we can find in Davis's three books that have been recently published by the New York publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux (the *Collected Stories* volume, originally published in 2009, has been re-issued in a new format). It can be easily noticed that the stories – witty, minimalist, elaborately constructed – as well as the critical essays, with their subjects ranging from the mechanics of sentence revision to the interpretation of the Bible, call for active involvement. The reader often feels invited to co-write and even countersign texts. And there are many surprises on the way. Very often we follow Davis not knowing what may come next (this is particularly true of her short stories) and one must admit such a postponement of the reader's knowledge is a highly rewarding experience. As far as narrative fiction is concerned, we come across plain realistic tales but we are also led into surrealistic, almost Kafkaesque hallucinations. In the critical volumes, standard essays are followed by impressionistic observations and meticulous analyses in the best tradition of close reading, and these are interspersed with reviews, commentaries, personal notes and interviews – a real cornucopia of styles and forms. Importantly, though, there is a sense of unaffectedness and ease permeating Davis's texts. When at one moment she notices: “The book came about quite naturally” (*Essays One ix*), we feel that this statement stands true with almost all of her writings.

Davis's narrative works are sometimes classified as flash fiction, a vague and not very helpful term which refers to minimalist prose units. Her stories are often one-paragraph long, some of them not going beyond one or two sentences. Davis has an absolute control over the form – in *The Collected Stories* (over 700 pages) there are no unnecessary phrases and words, let alone motifs or incidents, and the texts are precise up to the point of vertigo. The exactness has an ironic edge to it, of course. Davis constantly highlights the absurdity of logic and its claims to human life. Reviewers have noticed that one of her main themes is failed communication, and that is certainly true of most of her stories. It

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might be added that communication problems are also linguistic and point to a palpable tension between grammar and passion. The friction is felt everywhere in Davis's stories. She likes to begin with a simple motif and let it be modified by means of repetitions and slight variations which gradually exhaust and undo the rationale of a story – in the end we are often left with the inert (and precise) movement of words, images and incidents that either vanish into thin air or take us back to the point of departure. The narratives – all dealing with everyday situations, ostensibly trivial and insignificant – move between despair and irony. They are open-ended and ambivalent. The repetitiveness and farcical pseudo-seriousness may remind some readers of Beckett's novels and short stories. Like Beckett (especially the Beckett of *Watt* and the novelistic trilogy), Davis manages to demonstrate how logical arguments turn against themselves, with an abyss of absurdity lurking from behind transparent sentences and conclusions.

Beckett is just one of many literary masters mentioned by Davis. In the two critical collections there are passages devoted almost entirely to literary and artistic influences. Indeed, both volumes contain lists of authors and painters whose works were important to the American writer and opened her to other voices, tones and idiolects. This is a fascinating read. Four of the texts in *Essays One* are subtitled “Forms and Influences” and constitute a kind of intellectual and imaginative self-portrait of the artist as a teenager and a young woman. We have glimpses of Davis's childhood and youth interspersed with accounts of her first attempts at writing narrative fiction and immersing herself in the works of such authors as Hemingway, Kafka or Bernhardt – I'm choosing the names almost at random as the list is quite long and includes (for instance) contemporary American poets, French prose writers translated by Davis into English and some authors most of us have never heard of. In the first volume there are also interesting essays about visual artists: Joan Mitchell (Davis concludes the text with a praise of art as the realm of the “unexplained and unsolved”), Joseph Cornell (the artist whose mesmerizing boxes bring to mind some of Davis's one-paragraph stories), Alan Cote and, surprisingly, several Dutch photographers whose pictures are analyzed in detail and with contagious vigor. At one moment Davis depicts contemporary paintings as products of the artists' exploring sensibilities: “the painting changes, becomes active in determining its own evolution, refuses certain solutions, suggests others, evolves in unexpected directions” (*Essays One* 273). This reads as a credo and a manifesto, and it is quite possible that Davis describes here her own idea of writing as an imaginative enterprise.

*Essays Two* is thematically more unified than the first volume (although it is still varied in terms of tone and form). With the exception of the last text, a collection of loose vignettes on the history and cultural diversity of the city of Arles, the book deals almost solely with the art and craft of literary translation. At the beginning of the opening essay “Twenty One Pleasures of Translating (and a Silver Lining)” Davis writes: “I have had two literary occupations, and preoccupations, all my adult life, both evidently necessary to me, each probably enhancing the other—writing and translating. And this is one of the differences between them: in translation, you are writing, yes, but not only writing—you are also solving, or trying to solve, a set problem not of your own creation. The problem can't be evaded, as it can in your own writing, and it may haunt you later” (5). The puzzle-like aspect of literary translation is examined throughout the subsequent texts in the volume (the haunting element is there, too). Davis's are celebrated translations of several French classics from Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*) to Proust and Michel Leiris, and in her essays she concentrates on these authors. We have also very interesting and

competent pieces about translating from Spanish, Dutch, Norwegian and Gascon – yes, Davis has translated from all these languages – plus a sequence of three essays about “translating from English into English” (modernizing Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* or translating a children's book written in Scots and Northern English dialects). The essays are definitely engaging and thought-provoking. As a translator, Davis is scrupulous, factual, both accurate and inventive in her lexical, phraseological and syntactical propositions. She definitely knows her job and after a few pages we know we can trust her. One can easily see why the practice and even the very idea of translation is so essential to her. It is not just about finding accurate equivalents of original words and phrases. At stake is also a cognitive and existential challenge as well as an effort of opening oneself to other languages and ways of thinking. At one moment Davis quotes Guy Davenport's dictum about Wittgenstein: “we read to multiply our experiences” (124). Now think how rewarding it is to read *and* translate in this spirit.

As already hinted, Davis's stories and essays are like crossword puzzles or rebuses that require decoding or even double decoding. One reading is definitely not enough. It seems that much depends on our willingness to follow language wherever it takes us. It is also a question of readerly faith. “Thirty Recommendations for Good Writing Habits” (a kind of manifesto included in *Essays One*) ends with a piece of advice: “maintain humility with regard to language and writing” (262). This might be one of the most useful lessons we can draw from Davis's books.

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**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Jacek Gutorow is Professor of American and British Literature at the University of Opole. His academic interests concern American and British modernism; he also writes extensively on contemporary Polish literature. He is the author of seven critical books, most recently *Peknięty kryształ. Szkice o modernistach (The Flawed Crystal. Essays on the Modernists, 2019)*, and seven books of poems. He has translated American and British poets (Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, David Jones, Charles Tomlinson, Simon Armitage, Mark Ford and others). At the moment he is working on a critical study of Henry James and a volume of essays devoted to the European modernist writers.

E-MAIL: [gutorow@uni.opole.pl](mailto:gutorow@uni.opole.pl)