explorations

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

INTERVIEW

"I Take Great Pleasure in Writing"

Piotr Florczyk in conversation with Lydia Davis

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.21.9.1

Lydia Davis is an American treasure, best known for her short fiction and translations of Proust, Flaubert, Blanchot, and other French classics. Born in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1947, she grew up there and in Vermont and New York. In several interviews, she mentions that music was her first love and that she played violin before switching to piano. Her writing accolades include a Whiting Award, the 2013 Man Booker International Prize, and a MacArthur Fellowship. The last one has been dubbed the "genius grant," which in Davis's case is more than appropriate. With her erudite mind and sharp pen, Davis spans multiple traditions, but, somewhat ironically, the chief trademarks of her writing are precision and brevity, both of which situate it in the flash fiction genre, of which she is one of the most acclaimed practitioners. Those new to her work could do worse than to seek out *The Collected Stories* (2009), whose pieces range in length from several sentences to half-dozen pages. The more ambitious might consider reading the stories alongside Davis's most recent publications, the two volumes of literary essays, personal sketches, introductions and talks, called—what else?—*Essays One* (2020) and *Essays Two* (2021)

Piotr Florczyk: *You've been lucky as a writer, in the sense that you've been able to resist the literary market's favoring of the novel over the short story or, to use another term, short fiction. Needless to say, publishing story collections isn't just for debut fiction writers or for poets who wish to try their hand at writing prose, but what do you see as the short fiction's role in today's literary culture?*

Lydia Davis: Perhaps it has even more of a role today—though stories have always been popular—because of our culture, which moves at a faster pace than before, with people having shorter attention spans than ever before. A story allows one to enter a fresh situation, immerse oneself in it imaginatively, and experience it vicariously. 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, and she or he can stop reading for a moment and daydream or entertain a thought, and then resume. So the story is the joint creation of writer and reader.

PF: *Languages—in addition to French and Spanish you've studied Dutch and German intermittently throughout your life—as well as a philologist's attention to individual words matter a great deal to you. Nowadays, however, the subject of one's writing seems privileged over the style; prominent writers have recently called for writers and writing to become more political as a means toward a "dismantling of white supremacy" in literature and life alike. What are your thoughts about this ages-old debate between subject and style or, dare I say, craft?*

LD: Well, the smallest shift in a word choice or piece of punctuation can drastically change the meaning of what a writer is intending to say. So attention to words and style matter a great deal in conveying meaning; if meaning is valued highly, then style, tone, and word choices matter a great deal, too. I do think there is room for all sorts of writing—a piece of writing does not have to be overtly political. But I do think certain political aims should be kept in mind, always, and certainly dismantling white supremacy would be one of them. I also think the climate crisis must now change all our priorities.

PF: *Re-reading your stories recently, I was struck by how real—un-invented—they felt, so thoroughly grounded in life and ideas. You've written elsewhere on the importance to your writing life of keeping a notebook handy—"My journal as my other mind, what I sometimes know, what I once knew"—but I'm curious, where do your stories come from?*

LD: Many of them do arise from the immediate moment of a certain day—something I hear or think of. And those stories are often written at least roughly on the spot, right then and there. Simply living, day to day, provides rich material. Complex human relations are always ongoing, and then there is the reading that one does, or the studying, which contribute more ideas, more language. But some stories are more slowly planned out—I get an idea for one and develop it in my mind over a longer period of time, perhaps making notes in the notebook as to how to approach it, and then I sit down and devote myself to writing it.

PF: *You are known to celebrate writings that are unfished, fragmented, and nontraditional (as opposed to experimental, which means something completely different). You've also worked with found material. Can you speak about your writing process?*

LD: I become excited by unfinished or fragmented writing when it reveals the writer's mind at work, when it sits on the line between polished and rudimentary, when I seem to witness it coming to life, coming into being. I suppose that is because I sense the writer being very close to the piece of writing at that point. The more polished the writing, the more distant from the writer. But it's true that many types of writing are exciting to read. A very polished—if eccentric—writer is Shirley Hazzard. One often has to read her

sentences more than once to absorb them fully. I usually come back to this answer: that one can hardly generalize about writing; there is always a contradictory example.

PF: *Many of your stories are known for their humor ("while she was eating cashews from a bowl, she also ate her hearing aid") and intelligence (not to mention for featuring commonplace things or human traits in surprising ways), which makes them fun to unpack at the sentence level, esp. since their individual parts may or may not add up to something obviously grand in the end. I'm thinking of, among others, Walser, Kafka (his Diaries!) and Beckett as models. Can you speak to your relationship with your literary elders now vs. when you were just starting out?*

LD: Well, they remain writers I admire greatly, but I don't read them as often or as closely as I did when I was a young writer. Now I am ranging more widely in my reading, exploring more actively, probably, than I was then. I like to read from earlier centuries because the language (when I'm reading untranslated English) is always surprising and refreshing. I read more history, because history reveals, again, so many surprising things, how differently people used to think, their habits which were so different from ours now. Also as relief from our culture, which is too present and insistent.

Paris, 1973

PF: *In your preface to Stendhal's memoir, The Life of Henry Brulard, you comment on the amazing immediacy of the work, in which Stendhal considers and even addresses his future readers. In fact, in your view, whenever we read, "we feel we are reading in the same moment the writer is writing, or that we cause him to speak, and as he speaks we hear him." Much of that effect stems from accuracy of description, which is also a trademark of your writing. Do you think of your readers, past, current and future, when you write and/or after the work has been published?*

LD: Yes, I do think of them. But it is a complicated phenomenon. I certainly don't write in a certain way in order to please a hypothetical reader. But somehow the idea of effective communication to a hypothetical reader has been deeply absorbed into my way of approaching writing. And then sometimes I do explicitly think, "Will this be clear to a reader?"—but that is usually at a later stage of revision, not in the first draft. And then, when I used to give face-to-face readings (will I ever do that again? It's so hard to know), I would meet actual readers, strangers to me, and hear their responses. Often, they interpret something I've written in a different way from the way I intended, or they bring personal associations to it that make it much more emotional than it was for me. So that is interesting. But as I said earlier, a written work is, in that way, a collaboration. And every reader will have a different response, equally valid.

PF: *Are there certain things you don't like about your writing? Perhaps something you are too good at and wish you weren't? I admit that my question is inspired by the husband in your early story, "A Few Things Wrong With Me," in which the wife discovers that there are things about her he "hadn't liked from the very beginning."*

LD: Actually, quick correction—it is not a husband but a boyfriend, who is breaking up with her, if I remember the end of the story. (Maybe it actually isn't clear!) Well, I'd have to say there aren't things I don't like about my writing. If there were, I would work to change them—I hope, anyway. I take great pleasure in writing, each new story is like a new discovery. It's really a discovery of what can be done starting from this or that idea or overheard remark. I revise very thoroughly, as much as is necessary. I "sit on" things for a long time to be sure they seem right to me. There are certainly stories that I feel more satisfaction with than others. Some feel more vibrant and livelier, while others are milder, or quieter. But that is all right.

PF: *In your piece about translating Blanchot's essays you mention how difficult the experience was, particularly on the paragraph level, because although you were able to follow his train of thought you found it difficult to summarize him. Consequently "Understanding became an intensely physical act" for you, but you also knew that, as a translator, you couldn't "normalize" his words to make the work more accessible. Thinking about Lawrence Venuti, I wonder, where do you stand on the debate of foreignizing vs. domesticating translated texts?*

LD: One part of the answer is that I would never deliberately foreignize, nor would I deliberately domesticate, a text. But I find that when I follow a text closely—the Proust translation is the clearest example—the text I write is in a natural sort of English but with just a slightly stiffness or formality. So it is natural English but with an edge, or tinge, of foreignness. I'm thinking of the better pieces of literature I've translated. It's true that many years ago, when I was translating more commercially—doing biographies or histories to earn a living—I would do more "domesticating." I would translate an awkwardly written book into more natural and graceful English. But those are not the sorts of translations you're asking about.

PF: *I was floored when I read, in "A Beloved Duck Gets Cooked: Form and Influences I," the opening piece of your engrossing volume Essays One, that you had first encountered Thomas Bernhard's work in an airport bookstore, which seems so unlikely today! As an acclaimed translator of—in addition to Blanchot—Flaubert, Proust and Leiris and other giants of French literature, what are your thoughts about the issue of the presence/absence of translations—the so-called 4% problem—in the US?*

LD: Oh, again, I should clarify that a little. I already knew Bernhard's novels. What I discovered in the airport bookstore was his book of tiny stories, one-paragraph stories—*The Voice Imitator*. That was a wonderful discovery. Of course I have always been sad that our culture does not seem to welcome translations of foreign literatures to the extent that it should, although there are heroic small presses who specialize in translations, like Archipelago. Unless we read other languages, we are exposed to only such a small part of world literature. Maybe that will change gradually as our own population becomes more and more diverse. We have been isolated geographically and by our size, in a way that European nations have not been. It has been to our disadvantage.

PF: *Finally, I would like to ask you about the teaching of creative writing, which is becoming more popular in Poland. The American creative writing industry—as some have dubbed it, disparagingly—gets a lot of flak for being a cash cow for universities and for churning out homogeneous poets and writers with no shot whatsoever at ever enjoying anything resembling a literary career. As a professor emerita of creative writing, what are your personal tenets of teaching creative writing?*

LD: Well, I'm afraid I am not so much in favor of it, though I have benefited from it in holding teaching positions and earning money visiting the classes of other teachers and programs. It is true that I took one writing course when I was in college—probably in the spring of 1970. And I took a summer writing workshop also somewhere in those years. So the courses existed back then, but one couldn't earn a degree in writing—which I think is better, because then one studies biology, or Shakespeare, or music theory, instead of listening endlessly to the writing of one's fellow students, which usually isn't wonderful!

PF: *We are more than a year into the Covid-19 pandemic. Has your writing practice changed because of it?*

LD: My writing practice has changed more because of the imminent or ongoing climate catastrophe than because of the pandemic, although now the two have coincided in a devastating way. For years I have felt that I shouldn't simply carry on as though nothing major were taking place. A year before the pandemic arrived, I was already beginning to plan for food shortages and other interruptions in supply chains, for instance. I started planting an extensive and intensive food garden! Now I really feel the catastrophe is descending on us, and although I won't stop writing, I will spend much more of my time working actively in my community to change the way we all approach living in this new world, trying to help make us more resilient and interdependent. I will think about rain barrels and local farmers just as much as I will about the next writing project, though the next writing project excites me too!

INTERVIEWEE'S BIO: Lydia Davis is an internationally acclaimed fiction writer, translator, and essayist. Her most recent translation, a volume of the very short stories of A.L. Snijders, is forthcoming from New Directions. She lives in upstate New York, where she serves on the governing board of her village and is developing a permaculture garden.

E-MAIL: ldavis(at)albany.edu

INTERVIEWER'S BIO: Piotr Florczyk is a doctoral candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California. He has published several poetry volumes in Poland and the United States, as well as translated numerous Polish poets into English.

E-MAIL: pflorczyk(at)hotmail.com