



Evans, J. (2022) Positioning Lydia Davis. *Post45*.

Publisher's URL: <https://post45.org/2022/06/positioning-lydia-davis/>

This is the Author Accepted Manuscript.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/273812/>

Deposited on: 29 June 2022

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Positioning Lydia Davis

One of the difficulties of positioning Lydia Davis is that, when speaking of the genres that she writes in, mentioning only one of them obscures the others. She's not a translator who also writes stories and essays, nor is she an essayist who just happens to write stories, nor is she a short story writer who sometimes writes essays and translations. She is all of these together. (Even writing this, her novel has dropped out of my discussion.) I'm reminded of the Davis story "Trying to Learn," which begins:

I am trying to learn that this playful man who teases me is the same as that serious man talking money to me so seriously he does not even see me anymore and that patient man offering me advice in times of trouble and that angry man slamming the door as he leaves the house.ⁱ

In this story, Davis highlights the problem of trying to understand someone through one encounter with them, or one aspect of their personality. In this sentence, the different men are all, in fact, the same man at different times but acting in different ways. The speaker appears to dissociate them from each other, but at the same time, is aware that they are the same person. Davis the short story writer, Davis the novelist, Davis the translator, and Davis the essayist are, I would argue, similar: each is somewhat different but at the same time the same person, and it's tempting to try not to reconcile them. The fact that Davis works in different genres makes her seem slippery as a writer: what is she? How can we refer to her easily?

I first read Lydia Davis in an issue of *McSweeney's* from around 2000 that I picked up after reading Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The story was "Translation Exercise #1: Marie Curie, Honorable Woman," which recounts the life story of Marie Curie through a series of vignettes that are written in what feels like a literal translation of a French text.ⁱⁱ I've written about this story elsewhere and explored the layers of intertextuality, creation and rewriting involved in it,ⁱⁱⁱ but at the time I first read it I didn't know who Davis was, and it was just, for me, an interesting story in a literary journal. I continued to pay attention to *McSweeney's* for a few more years, and when *McSweeney's* Books released Davis's *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* in 2001, I bought a copy. Yet I remember getting along more, or becoming interested in writing about Davis, with *Almost No Memory* from 1997, which I read in 2004, after having read her translations of Maurice Blanchot in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*.^{iv} I would also have been aware, though had not read, her 2002 translation of Proust's *The Way by Swann's* at this point.

I trace this encounter with Davis as it predates the *Collected Stories* of 2009, after which it became much easier to talk about Davis as a writer that other people might have heard of. Certainly, when I began my PhD in 2007, on Davis, I remember having to explain who she was whenever anyone asked me who I was working on. This was something I remember sharing with other doctoral students working on experimental women writers, who were also similarly unknown to other people not working in that area. In some ways, I could point to the recent Proust retranslation and say she had translated the first volume, or that she had translated several works by Blanchot. These two more familiar French (and dead white male) writers would help people orientate Davis, but by referring to the translations, it would obscure her own literary work, which by the mid-2000s included six short story collections (four with major presses) and a novel.

It wasn't only me who had this difficulty with Davis. In his *New Yorker* review of the *Collected Stories*, James Wood mentions that when he first read Davis, she was known as the translator of Blanchot and Michel Leiris.^v Here, again, the reference to two better known French (male) authors helps to position Davis as a writer, but obscures the variety of her work. Wood also mentions that people compared her to the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, who he says "she does and doesn't" sound like.^{vi} Perhaps the person who made this comparison with Bernhard was thinking of his short short story collection, *The Voice Imitator*,^{vii} in which all the stories are less than one page, and do, indeed, bring to mind Davis's work as I look at them now, rather than his novels, which, to my mind, sound quite different from Davis's work.

In the introduction to an interview with Davis for a book of interviews with innovative American writers — itself yet another term to describe what Davis does — Larry McCaffery begins by noting that "Lydia Davis is probably as well known for her translations of the works of several French avant-gardists ... as for her own fiction."^{viii} McCaffery, like Wood, mentions Blanchot and Leiris here, but in a footnote also mentions Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault and Georges Simenon, none of whom are particularly avant-gardist as writers, but who do help to position Davis as an important translator from French. McCaffery spends much of his introduction trying to position Davis in relation to other, mostly American writers, and lists, at various points: Kathy Acker, William Vollman, Lyn Hejinian, Ann Beattie, Mary Robison, Frederick Barthelme, Raymond Carver, Beckett, Nabokov, Joyce, Kafka (he does not include a first name for these four), Russell Edson, Jane Bowles, and Grace Paley. While some of these can be placed as avant garde or innovative writers, others are more obviously known as minimalists, and some (those who, interestingly, McCaffery doesn't give a first name) are linked to high modernism, while Edson is a prose poet, and

Bowles and Paley are known for their short stories. It's an odd, quite varied mix, although one that does give a sense of the variety of Davis's work.

These examples demonstrate one of the problems of talking about Davis, at least before the *Collected Stories*: she was often little known outside of a small group of readers, and so she had to be positioned in relation to other writers rather than her own work. This is, practically, something we often do when discussing authors — we say that they're a bit like this other author (and, here, problematically, Davis is often compared to more well-known male authors, which maintains a male-dominated approach to literature), or they're part of this group, or, once they're better known, they wrote this well-known book. Yet Davis's work didn't, and generally still doesn't, really fit in with any other obvious group of writers that would allow a shorthand reference to describe her work. It's tempting to read her writing as part of postmodernism, as Paul McDonald does.^{ix} In my own book on Davis, I sidestepped this issue, suggesting it as a future area of study, though I also noted the similarities between her work and postmodernism.^x Yet Davis is also distinct from many of the postmodernist writers, as she acknowledges,^{xi} and postmodernism has become something of a past moment in literary terms: key authors like John Barth, Donald Barthelme, even Thomas Pynchon, seem to belong to the twentieth rather than twenty-first century. Davis was early on characterised as a “postexperimental” writer,^{xii} and this term does suit some, if not all of her stories. Marjorie Perloff does go on to explain that Davis, unlike some experimental writers, never seems to let go of referents in her writing, and it is true that her work is, often, grounded in everyday experiences^{xiii}. “Postexperimental,” though, seems as provisional as any other label for Davis: it works for some stories, but not all.

Another reason for the difficulty of positioning Davis as a writer is the genres she works in: the short short story or microfiction (for lack of better terms), translation, and the essay — a genre that has become more connected to her in recent years with the publication of *Essays I*

and 2, and of which I am still only partially familiar. While she has written a novel, *The End of the Story* (1997), it also feels less characteristic of her work than her stories. The novel has become the dominant textual form in Anglo-American literature, yet Davis is seldom discussed as a novelist, as most of her output is not novelistic.

Further complicating matters is that her stories are published in a variety of journals, some of which are often considered poetry journals. Davis even has a page on the Poetry Foundation website.^{xiv} Does this make her a poet? The page itself begins: “Lydia Davis is a short story writer, novelist, and translator.” This is true, but also it ignores the essays (which are mentioned later), and asks the reader to question why she is included in a database of American *poets* if she is not a poet, and if she is a poet, why this isn’t mentioned in the first sentence of her profile on the webpage. The only “poem” it links to is “A Position at the University,” which is published in her *Collected Stories*.^{xv} I don’t know if generically I would call this text a poem. It could, I suppose, be read as a prose poem, but at the same time it could, equally, be a story. Her text — and here I am purposely using this term as I’m unsure of genre — “A Mown Lawn” was published in *The Best American Poetry 2001*,^{xvi} while others, including “The Thirteenth Woman” and “In the Garment District,” were included in *Great American Prose Poems*.^{xvii} What, then, are these texts? If they’re published as poetry, are they poetry? But Davis publishes them as stories. We may wish to argue that genre is a construct in the reader’s mind, with genres built up from experience reading other texts, and that may make some readers read Davis’s texts as poems, but, equally, paratexts also influence understandings of genre, so that if a writer publishes texts as stories then we tend to assume that they have chosen that term for some reason. Davis does acknowledge that she is interested in writing “without boundaries” and “confusing the distinctions” in discussion with McCaffery.^{xviii} Her writing is at once poetry and story, at least for those texts that we read as stories — it’s not clear if this is applicable to the essays, novels or

translations. The generic slipperiness of what are conventionally called, and what Davis calls, her stories is another contributing factor to the difficulty in positioning Davis as a writer. It is sometimes hard to know what these short pieces are, and as such it's hard to talk about them. The fact that they are sometimes published alongside writing that is conventionally called poetry suggests that they, too, might be poetry. There is a certain instability in the genre of text that eludes description, which is both interesting and innovative, but also makes it hard to quickly and easily speak about her work.

Long after I began thinking about Davis's work in a scholarly way, and trying to deal with this notion of genre and how, when writing about Davis, to position her work so that readers would be able to fit her into their own understanding of contemporary literature, I came across a mention of Davis in a piece by Eileen Myles as a "prose writer in the poetry world."^{xix} This immediately made sense to me, and helps to explain the ways in which Davis's stories can be read as poems or stories. At the same time, it also highlights the social nature of writing: Davis was read by poets, among poets, and was part of their world. Which, from the outside, looks like being a poet. In the same piece, Myles has another, interesting observation about Davis: "even for Lydia Davis, genre is like gender in the poetry world."^{xx} Myles explains this by saying that genre is what you think you're doing, in a similar way to the performative understanding of gender.^{xxi} Davis's stories are thus stories, as that's what she calls them, but they can be read as poems, or with poetic characteristics. Stories and poems are not mutually exclusive, and the wavering between genres can be part of the interest they generate.

Even now, though, this discussion continues to exclude other genres Davis writes in: the essay and translations. As with Davis's stories, it's also worth noting how Davis refers to her own work in paratexts to those stories. Returning to that issue of *McSweeney's* where I first encountered Davis, in the "Contributors" section it tells me that she is the author of three

books, and “the translator of numerous books from the French,” and that she is working “ever so slowly” on a translation of Proust. Here she gives her translations almost the same standing as her stories, as they come second but they’re an important part of her authorial identity. The author’s biography in the Serpent’s Tail edition of *Break It Down* tells us that she has won awards for her writing and her translations.^{xxii} The order is reversed in her translation of Leiris’s *Scratches*: here her translations are mentioned first, following by reference to *Break It Down* and *The End of the Story*.^{xxiii} Even the *Collected Stories* mentions her translations. These paratexts, then, suggest that Davis wants to be read as a writer who translates or a translator who writes, and who views these activities as equally important. While paratexts are often commercial, that is, they attract readers to the books through establishing the authority and credentials of the writer or translator, they do also help shape the ways in which we read, and speak about, Davis.

It seems, then, that the difficulty of positioning Lydia Davis’s work is partly because the work crosses boundaries, being published both as prose and poetry, but also includes multiple genres. It’s not *easy* to discuss a writer who does more than one thing. But then, we should know from reading Davis that discussing people is never easy. She sums up the problem in “A Position at the University”: “when others describe me this way [as having a position at the university], they appear to describe me completely, whereas in fact they do not describe me completely.”^{xxiv} Describing Davis’s writing in any one way offers an entry point to it, but at the same time does not describe it completely. The complexity and variety of her work, which are among its strengths, make it hard to position her as a writer; but then, positioning her as a writer should take into account that complexity and variety, rather than finding an easy label.

Jonathan Evans is Senior Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK. He is the author of *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis* (2016). He is currently Principal Investigator on the Fund for International Collaboration and ESRC funded project ‘Towards diversity, equality and sustainability in streaming.’

ⁱ Lydia Davis, *Collected Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 214.

ⁱⁱ Lydia Davis, “Translation Exercise #1: Marie Curie, Honorable Woman,” *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*, 5 (2000), 139-151.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Evans, *The Many Voices of Lydia Davis: Translation, Intertextuality, Rewriting* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 110-125.

^{iv} Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, trans. by Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lamberton, ed. by George Quasha (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1999).

^v James Wood, “Songs of Myself,” *New Yorker* (Oct. 19, 2009), 88-91.

^{vi} Wood, “Songs of Myself,” 88.

^{vii} Thomas Bernhard, *The Voice Imitator*, trans. by Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

^{viii} Larry McCaffery, “Deliberately, Terribly Neutral: An Interview with Lydia Davis,” *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 59.

^{ix} Paul McDonald, *Lydia Davis: a study* (London: Greenwich Exchange), 25-27.

^x Evans, 6.

^{xi} McCaffery, 66.

^{xii} Marjorie Perloff, “Fiction as a Language Game: The Hermeneutic Parables of Lydia Davis and Maxine Chernoff,” *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fiction*, ed. by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 212.

^{xiii} Perloff, 212.

^{xiv} Poetry Foundation, Lydia Davis (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lydia-davis>)

^{xv} Lydia Davis, “A Position at the University,” *Collected Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 299.

^{xvi} Robert Hass and David Lehman, Eds, *The Best American Poetry 2001* (New York: Scribner Poetry).

^{xvii} David Lehman, Ed., *Great American Prose Poems* (New York: Scribner Poetry).

^{xviii} McCaffery, 76.

^{xix} Eileen Myles, *I must be living twice: new and selected poems 1975-2014* (London: Tuskar Rock Press, 2016), 345.

^{xx} Myles, 345.

^{xxi} See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1991) as one of the originators of this way of thinking about gender.

^{xxii} Lydia Davis, *Break It Down* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1996). This is the first British edition of the book.

^{xxiii} Michel Leiris, *Scratches* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

^{xxiv} Davis, *Collected Stories*, 299.