An interview with Lydia Davis

Lydia Davis is the author of one novel and seven story collections. Her recent publications include Can’t and Won’t (Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 2014), The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis (Hamish Hamilton, 2010), a chapbook entitled The Cows (Sarabande Press, 2010), and a new translation of Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (Viking Penguin, 2011). She has translated the works of many French writers, as well as the short stories of Dutch author A.L. Snijders. In 2013 she was awarded Man Booker International Prize.

Harlequin: Christopher Ricks’s introduction to your Collected Stories lists some of the descriptors that your shorter work has evoked, including “stories”, “anecdotes”, “miniatures”, “essays”, “jokes”, “parables”, “fables”; even “texts”, “aphorisms” and “prayers”. This matter of classification seems to be a preoccupation whenever your work is discussed, particularly when it is introduced to new readers. Is there anything you find interesting or meaningful in these attempts of taxonomy, and are there some labels you prefer to others?

Lydia Davis: I think the discussion of how to label the stories is a useful one, because it causes us all to think about what these different categories mean and how we use them. I like to think that all my stories sit somewhere on a continuum, some closer to poem, others closer to traditional short story, some very close to prose poem, etc. (At one end of the continuum would be my one novel, really a “very long story”.)

There are a few terms that cover all of the stories, I think, though even that may be open to question. I simply call them stories, or sometimes pieces (for convenience). Some practitioners in other times and places have called what they wrote “short prose pieces”, which I like quite a lot, since it is an accurate, general description. I also like “very short story” again, plainly and accurately descriptive. I am not so fond of the “flashier” terms, such as…”flash fiction”.

H: Do you remember the first thing you read which opened up the possibilities of very short stories to you?

LD: Yes, although I should qualify that by saying I had read Kafka’s Parables and Paradoxes long before, yet I did not see them as models for me of the sort of
story I could write, perhaps because they were “classics” – beyond reach. Still, they may have planted the idea. It was only many years later, when I read the very short stories – which he calls poems – of Russell Edson that I saw the possibilities of the form for me. Part of the reason these stories seemed more available to me, something I could try, was that not all of them were successful. But it may also have had to do with their weird, nonsensical, yet emotionally urgent content, which seemed to say that anything was allowed.

H: Do you think there is anything about contemporary ways of thinking, the contemporary relationship we have with art and reading in particular, that gives rise to the short prose form? We hear so often about how busy we are, also about how the world and all its concerns seem so open and accessible, that the contemporary unit of communication is now “the sound bite”, the Tweet, etc. Though you started writing in the 70s, do you see your shorter work as being related to this situation?

LD: Maybe the contemporary situation encourages me to go on writing in the very short form – though I have to say that I also write very long, digressive, even recursive stories. I began writing the very shortest stories – those with just a title and a line or two or three – when I was translating Proust’s very long sentences with their complex syntax. Clearly, I did this in reaction to the work of reconstructing his sentences in English – though I loved that work. I myself don’t Tweet, though I can see the attraction of it, but by temperament I do tend to alternate between being very quick, multi-tasking, and then on the other hand being very thorough, painstaking, and slow over certain kinds of work, or just standing still and looking at something for a long time.

H: Many of your stories explore the human propensity for speculation, for second-guessing everything, even and especially our own instincts. In many ways their emotional complexity seems to reflect the true state of consciousness before our actions represent us one way or the other. Is getting at this truth central to your writing?

LD: That is an interesting idea, that those characters represent “consciousness-before-action”. It is hard to pinpoint exactly what is central to my writing, since I have never sat down and identified what I wanted to do with my writing or what should be central to it. It has been important to me not to think too hard or deliberately about what I want to do with my writing. But of course one’s writing reflects one’s self, and it is true that I do a lot of thinking – about life, about how to live, about ethics, politics, animals rights, and so on and so forth. So that would be reflected in what I choose to write about and how I write about it. And that thinking character would naturally show up in the stories.
H: Does the fact that many of your characters exhibit this kind of philosophical introspection in some way prevent them from inhabiting longer pieces? Fitzgerald’s mantra that “action is character” seems more relevant to longer works, novels wherein the mechanics of plot traditionally drive the narrative forward. It seems that in so much short fiction, this mantra is replaced by some notion that the deliberation of action, the apprehension of a character at the precipice of some important decision, can be understood as an event in its own right.

LD: Well, since I brought up my one novel earlier, *The End of the Story*, which has as its central character the same introspective person, who in fact does act, in her own way, I’d have to say no, it doesn’t prevent them from inhabiting longer pieces. And I think of Beckett’s comically introspective, brooding, second-guessing, hesitant characters who certainly take action in their own way in his novels. Was it Watt who shifted pebbles from pocket to pocket in certain mathematical combinations, in what seems in memory to have been a very long passage in the book? But you may have in mind more “action-packed” novels. I also like to think of Goncharov’s Oblomov, though it has been years since I read it. There’s a character who cannot make himself take any decisive action. That sort of character probably does appeal to me. Two other favorite characters, though these are certainly very active, without actually achieving much in the end, are Flaubert’s two retired clerks, Bouvard and Pécuchet.

H: But where Beckett’s characters could be said to be striving towards a state of isolation, the characters in your work seem more to be trying to puzzle out their position in the world in relation to other people (or to animals or objects); there’s a real sense of enquiry into how an individual can relate to the world around them.

LD: Well, that is an ongoing preoccupation of mine: how to conduct one’s life, how to live in the right way, do the right thing, in smaller and larger contexts. Not that I always do the right thing, mind you. But I like to puzzle over what it is. This involves not just morals and ethics, but also logic, of course – I like applying logic to moral and ethical questions.

H: A few of your stories take the form of something akin to odes in addressing some of life’s monolithic subjects: “Mothers”, “Lost Things”, “Money”. There is often an amusing clash between what is inherently true and what is inherently silly about these things, an observational conjunction one might expect from an alien life form with a good sense of humour, experiencing things for the very first
time. Do you consciously imagine yourself in a heightened state of naivety to approach these kinds of stories?

**LD:** Or an alien life form with no sense of humor but also very little understanding of what he/she observes. I don’t consciously imagine myself in a heightened state of naivety, but it is probably true that I slip into a persona who narrates from a very “pure” position, purely observing, almost scientifically observing, rather than bringing a set of preconceived ideas to whatever it is she is examining.

**H:** On the subject of animal rights, you wrote a chapbook in 2011 about watching three cows grazing in a field outside your house. You called it *The Cows*, which seems the purest word for cows, related to “moo-cows” and distinct from “cattle” and “bovine”. That relationship between compassion and objectivity is played out in what for most of the text is a series of observations about their behaviour in the field. From a reader’s perspective, thinking about animal rights in relation to the story creeps in slowly; did it happen that way during the writing process?

**LD:** Interesting, what you say, about thoughts about animal rights creeping in slowly. After it was done, published, I wondered if that would be the case. It did not happen exactly that way in the writing of it – the way it unfolded was a little different. For one thing, the piece was not written all at once, but over two or three years. I would look out the window, or stand by the road, and if I happened to observe something that interested me about the cows, I would write it down. I did not plan in advance to write the piece; but at a certain point, I had so many of these observations that I saw that it would be good to gather them and put them in order.

My preoccupation with animal rights came long before that. My sympathy for the cows or cattle confined in feed lots is strong and deep, and it certainly determined the way I looked at and thought about the cows across the road, who had exactly the life they should have and could enjoy, except for the very end. They had freedom, which is a wonderful thing to see. Or relative freedom – freedom and safety. (Absolute freedom – freedom to roam the roads and hills – would have been dangerous and difficult for them. But that’s another subject.)

So “The Cows” is really just an appreciation of the cows in themselves, as they are, all their qualities, and also the interest of looking at them, looking at anything, really – perspective, foreshortening, colors, contrasts of light and dark. I did realize, after it was done, that it might also lead people to think about the lives of animals, especially “food animals.”
H: Can you tell us a little about your latest collection, *Can’t and Won’t*?

LD: Well, it has more stories in it than any previous volume – 122, I think. And it consists of several kinds or categories of stories: “everyday” stories – stories about daily life; “dream” stories – stories composed from night dreams and also dream-like waking experiences; “stories from Flaubert” – stories which I shaped out of anecdotes that Flaubert related in his letters; “letters of complaint” – there are five of them, and they all start from real complaints that I have, but are written in a rather exaggerated, sometimes hysterical manner; the very-very short stories I mentioned earlier, which I started writing when I was translating Proust; and other odd stories that don’t necessarily fit into any category.

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