



The Kenyon Review

Almost No Center

Almost No Memory by Lydia Davis; Break It Down by Lydia Davis; The End of the Story by Lydia Davis

Review by: Patricia Vigderman

The Kenyon Review, New Series, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), pp. 152-159

Published by: [Kenyon College](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4337896>

Accessed: 25/05/2013 08:37

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Kenyon College is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Kenyon Review*.

Patricia Vigderman

ALMOST NO CENTER



review

Almost No Memory. By Lydia Davis. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. 194 pp. \$21.

Break It Down. By Lydia Davis. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986. 177 pp. \$14.95.

The End of the Story. By Lydia Davis. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1995. 231 pp. \$20.

Where does life leave off and art begin? Or, rather, how can you catch the moment of transformation, when autobiography is suddenly fiction? It's like the view out the airplane window on takeoff—the way it's suddenly in a different dimension from the one you're in. You can never catch the moment when the mess on the runways and the ugly maintenance buildings become fascinating toys in a suddenly revealed pattern. Spread out below, your former context expands, revealing highways as ribbons of red and yellow light, suburban swimming pools as scattered blue squares and discs. Like the jump into fiction, it's a bit of a joke: it could be magic, but it's just a bunch of physical principles the viewer has to make sense of. The pleasure of literature, of course, is the way the joke takes shape in language. Sharing Jane Austen's observations is indistinguishable from the delight of following the turns of her

sentences. Her comedy catches the invisible moment when logic and emotion meet. For the reader, the imperceptible bump of crossing that moment is endlessly fascinating, and makes her fiction inexhaustible. It's a self-delighting experience.

Like Austen almost two centuries ago, Lydia Davis is looking very closely at the material of her own life, and her examination is likewise sharply observant, funny, and after much bigger fish than her relatively modest output suggests. "The Race of the Patient Motorcyclists" in her latest collection of fiction, *Almost No Memory*, has in the background a biblical murmur (the race is not to the swift . . .) as the story offers a deadpan account of a motorcycle race in which the object is to cross the finish line last. The bikes are presented with all the accoutrements of their thrilling and speedy culture: "white leather seats and armrests... mahogany inlays... pairs of antlers on their prows. All these accessories," the narrator remarks, "make them so exciting that it is hard not to drive them very fast." However, in this race the values are inverted as Davis sports with American culture: experienced racers know not to drink beer as a way of slowing down; instead, "they listen to radios, watch small portable televisions, and read magazines and light books" (189) as they slowly move forward. This is a sort of meditation competition, in which the winner is someone who already finds it too simple to "harden himself to win a race for the swift." More difficult is to "steel his nerves to the pace of the slug, the snail, so slow that by comparison the crab moves as a galloping horse and the butterfly a bolt of lightening." The final (non)sentence describes the challenge of this race in language that echoes with myth:

To inure himself to look about at the visible world with a wonderful potential for speed between his legs, and yet to advance so slowly that any change in position is almost imperceptible, and the world, too, is unchanging but for the light cast by the traveling sun, which itself seems, by the end of the slow day, to have been shot from a swift bow. (191)

Gone are the small portable television and light books. Davis challenges the true warrior to such slowness that speed becomes a property of nature rather than culture, and the treasures of the visible world turn out to be hidden in time, not in space.

Making patience a value opens the doors of perception, defamiliarizing the ordinary world, the rational self. Her fiction asks how we say what we say, feel what we feel, know what we know—and how we know

who is doing the saying, feeling, knowing. With wit, detachment, and control, she opens a wide interior landscape for the reader who wants to meet her there.

Davis offers as well the risk of asking what a story is, anyway. Her novel *The End of the Story* is an account of the breakup of a love affair that is simultaneously the writing of a novel about the end of a love affair. "The Center of the Story," in *Almost No Memory*, begins, "A woman has written a story that has a hurricane in it, and a hurricane usually promises to be interesting" (35). It's a story about shape and purpose, in art and in life. It follows the way her shifting, decentering attention creates a center out of any given moment's disparate elements—like the President or her Trinidadian landlady, both of whom are considered for inclusion in the story. "She will probably take out the President and the landlady," the final version says,

but leave in the Bible and the hurricane. Perhaps if she takes out things that are not interesting, or do not belong in the story for other reasons, this will give it more of a center, since as soon as there is less in a story, more of it must be in the center. (36)

The logic is a joke, of course, but the joke keeps illuminating the task at hand, which is "not an easy story to write, because it was about religion" (35). Close to the literal center of this story is a sick friend who tells her he's "experienced the truth of what he had been taught long ago, that blasphemy proved one's belief in God" (37). Similarly, she's questioning the whole idea of story, or narrative, and yet that questioning itself proves there is such a thing. The last paragraph gathers the hurricane, the sick friend, and the experience of being in church into the suggestion that there may be no center at all, or that "there is a center but the center is empty, either because she has not yet found what belongs there or because it is meant to be empty" (40). But how on earth do you make art out of emptiness? How do you attend to "things that are not interesting"?

These are urgent formal questions and, of course, religious questions. The story called "What Was Interesting" turns its title into a sort of Zen koan. Davis turns the narrative problems of telling a story into a meditation on the unresolvability of feeling. Her narrative elements are simple: "a woman, slightly drunk, but not too drunk to discuss a plan for the summer, was put into a cab and told to go home by her lover, the man with whom she thought she was going to discuss this plan" (70). Even as the

story details quite closely, almost moment by moment, the woman's anger, disappointment, self-pity, despair, and relief (not omitting her alcohol consumption), the reader shares a playfulness with the narrator, a complicitous engagement with both the struggling woman and the struggling storyteller. The story should be interesting, says the narrator earnestly, because an affair is more interesting than no affair, and a difficult affair more so than an easy one. The assertion of storytelling rules is mocked in the next sentence, though, by another: "the idea of a key is more interesting than the idea of a cab..." And then suddenly the sentence slides into the unbearable pain of love's instability:

. . . and the idea of something lost and then found is more interesting than the idea of already knowing where she was, that is, in the cab and then at home, though it was true that in a more general way she certainly did not know where she was with him, what he expected from her and what he expected would happen to them. (72-73)

The story describes a guy who's charming and impossible, and keeps the reader involved both with Davis's language and with the nameless woman, both close to her and simultaneously at a bit of a distance. Are we in a story or making up a story? Thinking about what's interesting or already caught up in it? In an earlier passage Davis says, "At a certain point in her angry thinking she decided she had to give up the idea of a summer plan with him.... And now she drank more to give vent to her disappointment" (72). The diction brings to mind Grace Paley, whose self-delighting language is also inseparable from the intensity with which her characters suffer the little disturbances of man. The illogic of the woman's behavior is the wonderful illogic of language.

"What cannot be expressed logically, one is tempted to say" says J. Hillis Miller (succumbing to temptation), "...we then tell stories about" (74). Miller's discussion of narrative uncertainty implies a frustration at "some implacable law that is not so much psychological or social as linguistic" (72). Lydia Davis's fiction (like Paley's) reframes uncertainty so that narrative embodies the serious play that language is. The play with logic and illogic widens into a comedy of the brain itself. In the title story of her 1986 collection *Break It Down*, a short but intense love affair is recounted from the man's point of view in passionate detail, but as if he were trying to get control over his pain by breaking it down into the dollar cost of its moments. The stories are simultaneously fooling around with

implacable laws and honoring them; the transparency and nontransparency of language is Davis's subject.

These experiments with translating autobiographically intense feeling into linguistic observation have European models more contemporary than Austen—and Davis knows them well, having had a distinguished career as a translator from French. Translation itself is an intense relationship, and hers includes writers like Michel Leiris, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault. Leiris's four-volume self-exploratory *Rules of the Game* is a patient transcribing of the world's effect on the self, with the writer's goal of transmitting "into the head or heart of another person the concretions that have been deposited by his present or past life in the depths of his own head or heart and that have had value only for him until then." This communication, Leiris says, makes those concretions more valuable—their circulation brings them back "a little more magical, like the shields of the Northwest American Indians, which are endowed with greater and greater value the more often they have been the object of ceremonial exchanges" (13-14). In this project, language itself is concrete, substantial: its mishearings and associations are as much a part of his material world as the things they designate (or misdesignate). In the telling of his present or past life, language takes on the solidity of anthropological artifacts; a word has as much possibility for concretion into self as the toy or song or footwarmer it's attached to.

Davis's, too, is a writing of patience, stopping to look at everything, to gather it up and try the surfaces against each other. Her fiction is as much about the ritual of writing as about life's big moments—even when it's not directly about the actual work of writing. The story called "St. Martin" offers an array of valuable concretions and explores how they are gathered into fictional form. On the surface it's a simple account of nine or ten months spent caretaking a house and two dogs in southern France. Her sentences are often very long—little journeys exploring the experience of being there:

We would walk, and return with burrs in our socks and scratches on our legs and arms where we had pushed through the brambles to get up into the forest, and go out again the next day and walk, and the dogs always trusted that we were setting out in a certain direction for a reason and then returning home for a reason, but in the forest, which seemed so endless, there was hardly a distinguishing feature that could be taken as a destination for a walk, and we were simply walking, watching the sameness pass on both sides, the thorny,

scrubby oaks growing densely together along the dusty track that ran quite straight until it came to a gentle bend and perhaps a slight rise and then ran straight again. (52-53)

Like the story itself, which recounts the seasons passing and the life in the farmhouse, it's hard to say precisely where this sentence happens. Burrs, socks, scratches—any sense of a goal dissolves first in the dogs' trust, and then in the forest itself. Simply walking and sameness, but it's the simplicity of breathing, mindless and mindful at the same time, vaguely affectionate toward the nondescriptness of the oaks and the barest variations in the path.

The life here is told in the first-person plural, an unseen but intimate "we" that emerges in details of the relationship, such as when one is aware of the other throwing pebbles from the gravel into an urn: "One would be working and hear the dull click, over and over, of a pebble striking the urn and the more resonant pock of the pebble landing inside the urn, and would know the other was outside" (52). The very specificity of the sentence reveals the intensity of the intimacy. Or the time they ran completely out of money and food, but found an onion and some pastry crust mix and managed to make an onion pie for supper, only as they were eating the first two pieces, talking, they forgot about the rest of it and it burned. It's life lived in the pleasures and observations of the moment, and in its losses. The one plot thread (besides the passing of time) concerns the dogs, one of whom they lose. It's a bit of a joke about narrative, though, because at the end of the first paragraph the story mentions that the owners of the house "probably never quite forgave us for what happened to one of the dogs" (46). Like the gun in the first act, or a letter that lies unopened for a couple of chapters, the question about the dog is quite casually left lying around. Unlike the gun and the letter, though, it leads to no real resolution. We never actually find out what happened to the dog, and in spite of how bad "they" feel about him, he's forgotten at the end in the layering of life—a woman showing them her hand covered with dirt from digging in the ground, behind her "a man leading another man back into his garden to give him some herbs" (64). The story ends with the song of the first nightingale. It's about attentiveness, not plot.

Davis is creating form for a narrative of attentiveness, and her stories are shaped by a variety of experimental techniques. They are about relationships and interrelations and the ways they go wrong and recover...or don't recover. Their centers can be glimpsed only from a corner

of the eye, precisely because so much that is not interesting has been removed. "Foucault and Pencil" is narrated in the first person, but the "I" has been removed—along with any other pronouns and both definite and indefinite articles. "Sat down to read Foucault with pencil in hand. Knocked over glass of water onto waiting-room floor," it begins. The terseness of the tone works as both counterpoint to and guiding thread into a fabric that weaves together the inherent difficulties of language and of love relationships. Sitting on the subway, Foucault and pencil still in hand, the narrator thinks about the argument about travel that was the topic of the visit to the therapist:

. . . argument itself became form of travel, each sentence carrying arguers on to next sentence, next sentence on to next, and in the end, arguers were not where they had started, were also tired from traveling and spending so long face-to-face in each other's company. (10)

Sentences are a journey and a form of interaction. They are at once the conveyance and the experience of being in company. The motion is simultaneously literal and metaphorical, as it is a few paragraphs later, when the narrator is reading Foucault (in French) and comes to an understanding about the difficulty of his sentences. They are, she says carefully,

harder to understand when sentence was long and noun identifying subject of sentence was left back at beginning, replaced by male or female pronoun, when forgot what noun pronoun replaced and had only pronoun for company traveling through sentence. (11)

The sentence itself has become the journey, the pronoun the only company, and—as in an argument—the main topic seems far in the past. The humor here is wonderfully layered—the specific frustrations of Foucault's style blended with the comicalness of gendered nouns—but it's also part of a pattern in which the loneliness of the journey and the comforts of reading and understanding cannot be separated from each other. Where Leiris examines the material properties of words (for example, the watery associations he has with Moses's name—*Moïse* in French—derives from a simple misunderstanding about the diaeresis over the i), Davis conjures grammar itself into a world of motion and emotion.

Finally, her wit is more like a Zen master's than like Jane Austen's: her patient attentiveness implies laughter that is more about acceptance than irony. In "Examples of Confusion" the narrator mistakes a paper bag

Patricia Vigderman

for a dead animal on the road, and catches the moment when she is feeling sad for the paper bag. "All day the clock answers my questions about the time very well," she says later, "and so, wondering what the title of that book was, I look at the face of the clock for an answer" (186). The continual surprise (and recognition) of being with her in these very ordinary and very unsettling moments is the deep pleasure of this art. As Leiris's image of the Northwest Indian coppers suggests, their circulation seems magical because the communication seems mutual. It comes from the reader's delighted assent to the linguistic shape of her moments—the invisible shift of dimension that gives the stories their elusive centers.

Works Cited

- Leiris, Michel. *Scratches*. (Part I, *Rules of the Game*). Tr. Lydia Davis. New York: Paragon House, 1991.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Narrative." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.

Patricia Vigderman's essays and reviews have appeared in the Boston Review, Nation, New York Times, Parabola, and other publications. She teaches film and creative writing at Kenyon College.