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## **The voice of the translator and negotiating loss in Lydia Davis's *Can't and Won't***

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Lydia Davis is mostly known for her very short stories, also known as flash fiction, sudden fiction, miniatures, or, as Ricks in his Introduction to her *Collected Stories* prefers to call them “devoirs” (Ricks 2013, xx). Although her works have appeared both in collections of short stories and in poetry anthologies, Davis considers herself a short story writer, and adamantly refutes the classification of her writing as poetry. She explains:

Leaving aside whether or not some of my stories may be poetry, the problem of how to write an actual poem with line breaks still seems very interesting and mysterious. The truth is, I don't know how to do it. (McCaffery 1996, 76)

Davis is proficient in 7 languages and is an acclaimed translator of Blanchot, Hocquard, and Leiris, for which she was made Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government in 1999. Her translations of Proust's *Swann's Way* (2001) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (2005), promoted her to the ranks of Officer in 2015. Davis was awarded the Man Booker International prize for the ensemble of her work in 2013. One of her current projects is to translate into English one literary work from each of the languages her works have been translated into. She does this without any formal lessons in the languages and without the help of a dictionary.

Readers can be taken aback by Davis's cryptic, obscure, most of the time quirky prose. In "Samuel Johnson is Indignant", for example, the story is a mere subordinate clause:

**Samuel Johnson is Indignant**

that Scotland has so few trees. (Davis 2013, 353)

There are stories that dwindle into nonsense:

**Notes During Long Conversation with Mother**

For summer she needs  
pretty dress      cotton

cotton                  nottoc  
                              coontt  
                              tcoont

                              toonct  
tocnot                                  tocont

tocton  
contot (Davis, 2015,10)

Others, like the last story in the collection, are merely a few words long:

**Ph.D.**

All these years I thought I had a Ph.D.  
But I do not have a Ph.D. (Davis 2015, 283)

There is an undeniable experimental dimension to Davis's writing. However, she is not experimental just for the sake of simply trying her hand at something new, but rather because of her continual striving to find the correct forms to better express the bitter depths of emotion and despair that are part of the human condition, while at the same time capturing the paradox of how language means and does not mean. As Ricks, in the introduction to Davis's *Collected Stories*, so aptly puts it:

There are many kinds of vigilance in the art of Lydia Davis: vigilance as to how to realize things down to the very word or syllable, alive not least in the punctuation [...]; vigilance as to impure motives; vigilance when it comes to her own experimentalism, lest she become the prisoner of her own new-fashioned way of doing things; vigilance as there being no room for repeating what really matters. (Ricks, xx)

Experimentalism, often means a scarcity of emotion, but to read Davis is to be plunged into a world of feelings and the difficulty inherent in language to express these feelings. Davis's narrators can be considered

negotiators of language with all its ambiguities, its creativity and its complexity. It is this characteristic which likens them to translators, and likewise introduces the narrative voice of the translator into these stories. It is Davis as negotiator of language which is the key to understanding how her stories cohere.

Unlike other great short story writers whose genius can be appreciated upon the discovery of one short story, Davis is better understood when read by groups of stories, or by reading through an entire collection. Indeed, taken individually, her stories can be admired for their quirky humour, for how they reacquaint us with the way we cope with boredom, or our fleeting moments of guilt, or the way we fool ourselves, not to mention our little and not so little compromises with our ideals. Taken together however, the stories in *Can't and Won't* will reveal themselves to be a study on loss and how loss is negotiated. The aim of this paper is to examine the influence of translation in Davis's writing and the negotiation of this loss.

Brenden Matthews, commenting on the precision, definition, grammar and even punctuation in her stories asked Davis if that interest came out of the same impulse as translating did, or whether it was an impulse already present in her. Davis answered:

I'd say they come out of the same impulse, but there's no question that having translated all these years makes me all the more conscious of what English does and what punctuation in English does because when you translate you have the huge constraint that you have to find a way to say this thing as much like the original as you can, so you have to explore the resources of English much more, and if you're writing your own work you can fall into habits and use the same vocabulary, the same punctuation, so you don't have the same exercise in a way. (Matthews 2014)

In any short story of literary value there is a surface narrative (N1) and a deep narrative (N2). Usually, the introductory passages will give the reader clues to what to look for to have access to N2 (Blin 2008, 2011). Of course, this is not often possible with Davis, because usually all we have are one or two sentences, and the temptation is to conclude that there is only a surface narrative, amusing, often thought provoking, always puzzling. However, I will argue that a narrative coherence can be found within the collection *Can't and Won't* by examining the specificity of translation in Davis's treatment of language. In regard to the authors Davis has translated, Proust, Flaubert, Blanchot and Leiris, Cohen reminds us that all four were all less concerned with content and more concerned with

the process of their own transmission (Cohen 2010, 503). Davis herself has commented on the possible influence of these authors on her writing:

Proust was only the first of a line of writers that included Michel Leiris and Maurice Blanchot who all tended to go very deeply, very analytically into an experience. And I can't tell whether I'm drawn to them and happy translating them because I approach things the same way, or whether they have influenced me to do this even more. (Knight 1999, 530)

I will examine the voice of the translator in *Can't and Won't* by drawing a parallel between the task of the translator (to borrow an expression from Benjamin) and the minimalism in Davis's stories to explain the disappearance of content. The awkwardness of her narrators and her characters is due to their use of English, and it is almost as though we are reading a translation of English into English. As Knight explains:

It is thus that we often have the semi-impression of reading a translation of our postmodern world, where the angst, yearnings, and human failures are highlighted, the better for us to get our teeth into the human condition. (Knight 1999, 526)

## 1. Minimalism

If Davis is to be considered a minimalist author, it is not only because out of the 120 stories in *Can't and Won't*, 87 are one page or less long, and of these 87, 53 are less than 10 lines long. The most striking feature of all of them is the tight control her narrators have on their English. Edith Jarolim writes that Davis's characters "are not only out of sync with the contemporary world, but also estranged from their own language. [They] sound at times like intelligent foreigners who have learned to speak correctly but have not entirely mastered colloquialism" (in Knight & Davis 1999, 524). There is such a tight hold on emotion in her stories, that when it appears it is almost embarrassing because it pierces through with so much shining strength that we want to turn away.

It is, I believe, Davis's talent as translator and linguist that can explain her extreme attention to word order, to punctuation, to sound and to rhythm, constantly inviting us to examine the infinite subtleties of syntax. Though minimalism can, as McCaffery (1996, 62) points out, "quickly be equated with the bored-but-hyper dilemma of postmodern living", Davis is neither bored, nor hyper. She has admitted her admiration and debt to

Beckett and Kafka, but the existential angst is not so pronounced in her stories; her humor is lighter, her despair not as bleak. It is true, that like Beckett and Kafka Davis's stories deal with the plight of a world where God is absent, but her various narrative voices express more affectionate empathy than do those of her predecessors. Her attitude is affable and each word in her stories becomes an event. Like Kafka and Beckett, she clearly takes great delight in the struggles she undertakes to make language yield, and even greater pleasure in the promise and possibility of language. Her obsessional, quirky narrator shows up throughout the collection, but with slight differences, and to be attuned to the differences in this narrative voice is to begin to gain access to the emotional coherence in Davis. For, although we read Davis for the intellectual pleasure and fun her stories give us, we remember them for the psychological complexity and emotional pull of her characters. We remember them also, because, it is almost as though we are seeing language on the page.

The collection of 120 stories in *Can't and Won't* is divided up into 5 sections, within which we can find:

- 14 translations and adaptations of Flaubert's letters to his mistress, Louise Colet, which become 13 stories and one "rant",
- 28 dream sequences, which Davis explains are either her dreams or the dreams of her friends,
- 5 complaint letters, and 1 thank-you letter,
- 72 "stories" – or as Ricks classifies them: "devoirs". (Ricks 2013, xx)

Knight (1999, 526) speaks of the *difficult* (italics mine) control of Davis' sentences. There is, indeed, such a tight hold on emotion in her stories, that when it appears it takes the reader by surprise, piercing through with such power that it makes us almost want to turn away in embarrassment. Here is one of the dream sequences in the collection:

**The Child**

She is bending over her child. She can't leave her. The child is laid out in state on a table. She wants to take one more photograph of the child, probably the last. In life, the child would never sit still for a photograph. She says to herself, "I'm going to get the camera," as if saying to the child, "Don't move."

*dream*<sup>1</sup> (Davis 2015, 27)

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<sup>1</sup> The italics are Davis's. Each time the stories are adaptations of dreams or of Flaubert's letters, Davis specifies the information in italics.

The recurring theme in 33 of her “devoirs”<sup>2</sup> is death. It is also present in two of the dreams, eight of the adaptations of Flaubert, and one of the letters. Loss manifests itself in other ways throughout *Can't* and *Won't*. There is the loss of names and places, the loss of the story line, and the outright loss of content (e.g. the amount of blank page in more than half of her stories). The “defamiliarizing” effect of all 120 of them is characteristic of what happens in good translation.

The challenges of translation in general will be the starting point of this article. I will next examine the first Flaubert story in the collection as being representative of ideas found on translation in the works of Benjamin, Berman, and Venuti. I will conclude by examining the first story in the collection well as the title story, *Can't and Won't* to show how in each one of them, Davis's voice of the translator is present, whether it be, more generally in the way these stories invite us to pay attention to various questions regarding the grammar of English, or more specifically how they correspond to the problem of loss with which a translator is confronted when negotiating two languages.

## 2. The Voice of the Translator

Confronted with the untranslatability of certain concepts in the target language, a translator is constantly negotiating loss, and what cannot be captured with sufficient accuracy in one passage, will have to be made up for in another. “The Task of the Translator” by Walter Benjamin will be my starting point to establish the affinities between Davis the writer and Davis the translator. As Cohen (2010, 507) explains, for Benjamin as for Davis, “translatability consists not in the content of a work of art, its reducible ‘communication’, but on the contrary, what eludes communication”.

For Benjamin, both the original text, and the translation are “fragments” in that what is “meant” is unreachable through them:

While, namely, all individual elements of foreign languages – the words, sentences, contexts – exclude one another, these languages supplement one another in their intentions. To grasp this law, one of the fundamental laws

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<sup>2</sup> I will include in the term “devoirs”, all the entries in the collection that are not Davis's adaptations of Flaubert, dream sequences, and letters.

of the philosophy of language, is to differentiate what is meant (*das Gemeinte*) from the manner of meaning (*die Art des Meines*) in the intention. In *Brot* and *pain* what is meant is the same, the manner of meaning, on the other hand, is not. [...] The manner of meaning in them supplements itself into what is meant. In the individual, unsupplemented languages what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather it is grasped in a constant state of change until it is able to step forward from the harmony of all those manners of meaning as pure language. (Benjamin IV.1, 13-14 in Jacobs 1975, 760)<sup>3</sup>

Jacobs explains that by “pure language” Benjamin was not advocating a supreme language through which there would be manifested the materialization of truth but rather:

that which is purely language – nothing but language. “What is meant” is never something to be found independently of language nor even independently in language, in a single word or phrase, but arises rather from the mutual differentiation of the various manners of meaning. (761)

Benjamin argues that it is through translation that the “mutual differentiation” of the various manners of meaning encounter one another. If the mutual differentiation is not manifest in the translated work, the manner of meaning, or in other words, what is connoted, is not either.

## ***2.1 Davis and Flaubert***

As the translation and appropriation of Flaubert by Davis is such an essential contribution to *Can't and Won't*, it is the obvious starting point in tracing the voice of the translator.

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Carol Jacobs's article cited above for underlining the difficulty of grasping Benjamin's ideas in his complex essay because of various mistranslations on the part of Zohn whose translation non-German English speakers are dependent upon. As Jacobs points out, Zohn “maintains a significant respect for his own linguistic usage” thus ironically proving the whole point of Benjamin's article – the impossibility of doing justice to the original text if the translation depends too much on the linguistic usages of the translator. Though Jacobs praises Zohn's translation, she uses her own translations in her essay, and as De Man has highly commended her translation, of the above passages, finding the same errors in Zohn as does Jacobs, it is Jacobs's translations I have chosen for the extracts above.



I will take the first story from Flaubert, “The Cook’s Lesson”:

**The Cook’s Lesson**

*story from Flaubert*

Today I have learned a great lesson; our cook was my teacher. She is twenty-five years old and she’s French. I discovered, when I asked her, that she *did not know* that Louis Philippe is no longer king of France and we now have a republic. And yet it has been five years since he left the throne. She said the fact that he is no longer king does not interest her in the least – those were her exact words.

And I think of myself as an intelligent man! But compared to her I’m an imbecile. (Davis 2015, 9)

Davis, herself, explains her initiative of adapting her translation of extracts of Flaubert’s letters into short stories in the notes and acknowledgements at the end of the collection:

The thirteen “stories from Flaubert” and the one “rant from Flaubert” were formed from material found in letters written by Gustave Flaubert, most of them to his friend and lover Louise Colet, during the period in which he was working on *Madame Bovary*. This material, contained in *Correspondance Volume II* (ed, Jean Bruneau Editions Gallimard, 1980) and dating from 1853-54 was excerpted, translated from French, and then *slightly re-written*. My aim was to leave Flaubert’s language and content as little changed as possible, *only shaping the excerpt enough to create a balanced story, though I took liberties I thought were necessary (in one case, for instance, combining material from two letters so that two related stories were turned into one, in another case, adding some factual material to a story to give more background to the character)*. (Davis 2015, 289) (italics mine)

The italics call attention to the fact that this part of the explanatory notes blatantly contradicts what is said in the opening lines of the notes.

Why would Lydia Davis include her translations/appropriations of Flaubert in this collection of short stories and what clue can it give us as to the coherence of the text?

In an article in the *Paris Review* which Davis entitled “Notes on Translation and on Madame Bovary”, she speaks about the qualities required to be a good translator summing it up in three points. Translators must have intimate knowledge of the foreign language, even more intimate knowledge of the translating language, and be a fine writer. This last one she declares as being the most important, and the first one being the least (Davis 2011). This would imply that for her as a translator it is her competence as a writer that holds sway over the two others. But this is not as clear cut as it sounds. In these adaptations, Davis has not been faithful

to Flaubert's text and it is my belief that she has done this purposely to remedy what Lawrence Venuti terms the invisibility of the translator (Venuti 2008).

## ***2.2 The Invisibility of the Translator and "Foreignizing" Translation***

Antoine Berman, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot (who was himself a translator), Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Lawrence Venuti in their works on translation of literary works all plead for a 'foreignizing' of the translated text. Venuti explains, however, that, throughout the centuries, the trend in translating policy and practice in regard to translating into English has been to render the foreign text as fluent and as 'Englished' as possible. This is considered by those above-mentioned authors as not only a flaw, but as verging on the unethical. For Lecercle, all valid translations of great works of literature must incorporate into the final text what he terms "the remainder". In *The Violence of Language* (1990), Lecercle explains this notion to be all the variations of a language that are likely to vary from the standard dialect. Jargon, dialect, neologisms, stylistic innovations, regional expressions, clichés, permeate all language. Hence, a translation into a reified Standard English carries out an injustice by for example, erasing any trace of the manner of expressions of minorities from the translated text. This, of course, has both social and political repercussions. Venuti takes up this same argument in *The Invisibility of the Translator*:

On the one hand, translation wields enormous power in the construction of identities for foreign cultures, and hence it potentially figures in ethnic discrimination, geopolitical confrontations, colonialism, terrorism, war. On the other hand, translation enlists the foreign text in the main literary canons in the receiving culture, inscribing poetry and fiction, for example, with the various poetic, narrative, and ideological discourses that compete for cultural dominance in the translating language. (Venuti 2008, 14)

For Berman, the only way that the "cultural Other" can manifest itself is through this foreignization. Foreignizing translation "signifies the difference of the foreign text, manifesting otherness" that can never be manifested in its own terms, only in those of the translating language, and hence always encoded (Berman, 87-91 in Venuti, 16). Venuti further argues that the violence of translation resides in an activity which necessitates "the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with

values, beliefs, and representations that preexist in the translation language and culture" (Venuti, 16).

The translator hence risks finding him/herself in a no win situation, for either s/he gives in to the need to render the translation as close as possible to the reader's culture, thus reducing the original text to an approximation of what could be experienced in the original, or the translator foreignizes the text in which case "it deviates enough from native norms to stage an alienating reading experience – choosing to translate a foreign text excluded by literary canons in the receiving culture for instance, or using a marginal discourse to translate it" (Venuti, 16).

In an unforeignized fluent, fluid translation the desired aim is to make the translator as invisible as possible. The in/visibility of the translator in *Can't and Won't* however, is manifest as Davis has not only transformed these extracts of letters into *stories from Flaubert*, but by including them in her collection, she has also blatantly usurped the role of author. In all translated publications, the name of the translator at best appears at the bottom of the title page (never on the cover), and is only praised if, in fact, the translation goes unnoticed by the reader. In *Can't and Won't* however, it is Flaubert's name that appears in small letters – and Davis's that appears on the cover. The foreignizing effect is in the strangeness of these extracts from nineteenth-century letters in a twenty-first century short story collection. What Davis has done here is invert the conventional hierarchy, where the original is considered superior to the translation. This is not unlike what Lecerle is pleading for. Butler, in his critique of *The Violence of Language* explains it this way:

In Derridian thinking, violence is perpetrated by the dominating partner in a hierarchy: the 'Original' is what oppresses the merely 'Derived'. [...] For Lecerle, violence erupts from below, at least in the matter of language [...] and is the revenge of the repressed. The major term in his hierarchy is 'Langue' or Chomskyan Deep Structure and the minor term that violently subverts the rule of this oppressor he names the 'Remainder'. (Butler 1993, 70)

Davis has indeed overthrown the hierarchy of the original by adapting nineteenth-century letters into a collection of twenty-first century short stories which have revolutionized the short story form. In so doing she has given new life to the original. As for the pre-existing values, beliefs and representations in English-speaking cultures, in choosing Flaubert's letters to his mistress during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Empire she has given Flaubert a new voice, while at the same time de-familiarizing the letter-writing genre. The

paradox here is that she has made the translator present and at the same time absent. Davis explains this presence/absence this way:

There is a wonderful way in which the writer – or a translator – can be effaced by the reality or a stronger presence. The writer after all, is the scribe, the witness, and has to step back before others [...] if you're a translator you have to become the other person, the other writer if you're going to be any good. You have to speak in the voice of the other person. You can't speak in your own voice, you can't have one consistent voice that you stamp on everything you translate. (Davies in Knight, 536)

There are however other mysteries in “The Cook’s Lesson” and it leads us into the domain of truth and fiction. If this conversation between the first person narrator and the cook took place five years after Louis Philippe was no longer king, France, in fact, was no longer a republic but an empire again. Moreover, there is a defamiliarizing of English as the subordinate clause “that Louis is no longer king of France and we now have a republic”, should, in accordance to the rules of Standard English, be in the past tense. It is true, that by leaving the coordinated subordinate clause in the present tense, these are nearly the exact words of the cook, but in direct speech she would have said “does not interest **me** in the least” (instead of ‘her’). Davis’s narrator here is indeed unreliable. This is surely a fictionalized Flaubert. If the twenty-first century English speaking reader uncertain about French history must look up her dates, Flaubert the so careful writer for whom these events were part of his present, surely did not have to. Davis here is writing fiction and a detail such as this gives the reader a clue of how carefully we must go about our reading to try and discover how fragments such as this articulate into a cohesive whole.

In another appropriation of a Flaubert story, “The Exhibition”, the narrator visits an exhibition. The first paragraph reads like this:

Yesterday, in the deep snow, I went to an exhibition of savages that has come here from Le Havre. They were Kaffirs. The poor Negroes, and their manager too, looked as though they were dying of hunger. (Davis 2015,134)

In today’s politically correct culture, the designation of people as “savages” and “poor Negroes” cannot help but take the reader aback. But, as Sorlin argues, concerning the politically correct:

Like all universal language creations looking for a neutral means of communication that would favour no country and bring about universal peace, political correctness supposedly aims at protecting minorities from

taking offence. It reinvents language so as to freeze it into a unique polite and consensual version above linguistic, social and historical diversity. It shares with the other cases of "inventedness" the desire to repress both language's historical thickness and ongoingness. (Sorlin 2010, 87)

In becoming Flaubert, Davis has disappeared as translator, but in choosing not to adopt the cultural constraints of our politically correct world, she has foreignized English and brought to the fore the "cultural other".

Davis, elsewhere has described translated work as curiously unlocated, an odd nonbeing. Cohen explains that, as was the case for Benjamin, for Davis this element of nonbeing, the paradoxical "non" essence of the work of art is also what constitutes the elusive object of translation. (Cohen, 530)

We will now examine the specificity of Davis's stories in the light of this elusive object which is translation and attempt to demonstrate how this defamiliarizing of language manifests itself in the opening story and the title story of the collection and how Davis negotiates loss.

### ***2.3 "A Story of Stolen Salamis," Connotation and the Cultural Other***

"A Story of Stolen Salamis" is the opening story in the collection. If my hypothesis about the opening passage of a work giving us all the necessary clues about how a work coheres is a valid one, this opening story must be made accountable for. Here is the story:

#### **A Story of Stolen Salamis**

My son's Italian landlord in Brooklyn kept a shed out back in which he cured and smoked salamis. One night, in the midst of a wave of petty vandalism and theft, the shed was broken into and the salamis were taken. My son talked to his landlord about it the next day, commiserating over the vanished sausages. The landlord was resigned and philosophical, but corrected him. "They were not sausages. They were salamis". Then the incident was written up in one of the city's more prominent magazines as an amusing and colorful incident. In the article, the reporter called the stolen goods "sausages". My son showed the article to his landlord, who hadn't known about it. The landlord was interested and pleased that the magazine had seen fit to report the incident, but he added: "They weren't sausages. They were salamis". (Davis 2015, 3)

As Rimmon-Kenan (1983, 3-4) has explained, "Story" designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text [discourse], and reconstructed in their chronological order. But as Davis's

appropriation of Flaubert and this opening story illustrate, there is not much recoverable story – or rather the discourse and the story collapse into one.

What is recoverable is the essence of language. As Cohen (2010, 504) explains:

Davis estranges language not by setting it apart from everyday speech but by putting us in almost uncomfortable proximity to it, forcing us to hear resonances of the unknown in the most familiar scenarios.

In “The Case of the Stolen Salamis”, the landlord is upset because the theft was reported to be one of stolen sausages. Other than the tongue and cheek implicit comment on the lack of accuracy in reported speech, the story is not only about stolen salamis. The disappearance of the “cultural other” is also highlighted here. Let us consider the condescending “*Then the incident was written up in one of the city’s more prominent magazines as **an amusing and colorful incident***”. There is more connoted in this sentence than the recording of a simple news brief, for in describing the incident as “amusing and colorful”, the reporter is in fact patronizing an Italian immigrant culture, one where salamis are cured and smoked in a shed in the back. But what is additionally implicit in the story is how the cultural other is also usurped. Let us examine the story taking into consideration truth conditions and entailments.

The dictionary definition of a salami is “a well seasoned sausage”. The truth conditions in place for this utterance are: if a salami was stolen, it implies that a sausage was stolen. But a sausage stolen does not imply that it is necessarily a salami. For a native English speaker, a sausage is something eaten hot, with mashed potatoes and perhaps a cup of tea. Whereas a salami is an Italian antipasto, eaten with other antipasti before the plate of pasta. In not using the correct term, the reporter disregarded the cultural identity of the landlord. Davis has here written a story on the manner of meaning, and hence incorporated the ideas expressed in the works of the translation theorists presented above.

The landlord says the same thing, or rather nearly the same thing, twice: “They **were not** sausages. They were salamis” / “They **weren’t** sausages. They were salamis”. In the first utterance, the mistake of the reporter is expressed with more emphasis. The rules of intonation will enable a tonic accent on “not”. In the second utterance, the landlord using the contracted form loses the possibility of emphasis thus expressing himself in a resigned manner. The missing morpheme can be interpreted

as a *mise-en-abyme* of the missing identity. This same theme is taken up again and developed in the title story.

#### 2.4 “*Can’t and Won’t*” and the Intention of Language

The title story of the collection, *Can’t and Won’t* can be read on one level as a comment on the arbitrariness of literary prizes, and on another as a tongue-in-cheek comment about fiction itself. Here is the story:

##### ***Can’t and Won’t***

I was recently denied a writing prize because, they said, I was *lazy*. What they meant by *lazy* was that I used too many contractions: for instance, I would not write out in full the words *cannot* and *will not*, but instead contracted them to *can’t* and *won’t*. (Davis, 46)

The narrator tells us about a prize being denied her, because she is too *lazy*. Since the line that separates Davis the author and the narrator in her stories is a thin one, the reader, of course suspects that the reason for this might be that Davis’s stories are too short. But no, the reason given is that she uses too many contractions. As Davis’s reader knows of course, this is not the case for Lydia Davis the writer, who is very much inclined to use non-contracted forms instead of clitics. She does so in the story itself: (...*I would not write out in full*...). It is indeed one of the features that make her stories read like translations.<sup>4</sup>

The next point of interest are the two modal auxiliaries “can” and “will” in their negative forms. The modal auxiliaries are a specificity of English grammar enabling us to nuance our utterances. “Will” and “shall” are two possibilities for expressing the future in English. But “will” also expresses intention. “Would”, which is the past form of “will”, can express a conditional, a past habit, or, as it is used here, a refusal. The choice between analytic primary negation (i.e. when “not” is added to the verb and synthetic primary negation (i.e. when the verb is inflected) is not a fully interchangeable one. Huddleston and Pullum point out that synthetic

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note however, that in her translations/appropriations of Flaubert, Davis does use clitics. Davis recounts in one of her articles that she had consulted Flaubert’s letters when she was translating *Madame Bovary* to have access to a more spontaneous dimension of his personality. The clitics used in spoken English is one way of capturing this spontaneity.

forms, which are default forms, are more informal and when they are chosen by native English speakers they vehicle a sense of familiarity, intimacy, and accessibility. Analytic primary negation on the other hand, which is more formal “sounds unnatural”. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 799-803) Davis’s preference for the full forms of the auxiliaries in affirmative and negative stories is one of the reasons that her narrators sound to us so estranged.

The story about *can’t* and *won’t* is also a story about loss – a lost literary prize, but also implicitly a story again about lost morphemes. Huddleston and Pullum explain that although *n’t* is often mistaken for a reduced pronunciation of *not*, they believe that unlike *’ll* which is a clitic and thus a reduction of *will*, *n’t* is an inflection and cannot be interpreted as an equivalent of *can not* and *will not*, since, among other reasons, the full form cannot always replace the short one. For example (b) below is incorrect:

- (a) Can’t she use full forms more systematically?
- (b) \*Cannot she use full forms more systematically?

In order for (b) to be correct, I must rearrange the syntax in the following way:

- (c) Can she not use full forms more systematically?

The two modals do not function the same ways in their negative form. For with the modal *will*, *not/n’t* negate the clause that follows. For *can* however, the scope of *not* is on the modal. Whereas *She won’t use cannot and will not* means the same as *She will not use cannot and will not*, (with more of an emphasis on the negation when the full form is used) and *She can’t win literary prizes* means the same as *She cannot win literary prizes*, it does not mean the same thing as *She can not win literary prizes*. This last sentence implies that she does at times, in fact, win literary prizes.

Both Davis the translator and Davis the writer know that choosing the full form of the modal auxiliary rather than the contraction is more than a stylistic choice. A narrator who chooses *I’ll* for example instead of *I will* or *I shall* chooses a neutral form that does not imply a choice imposed upon the speaker (i.e. *I shall*) or a decision the speaker makes herself (i.e. *I will*). Morphemes are the smallest unit of meaning. Not only does Davis invite the reader to consider the weight of each individual word, she invites the reader to examine meaning at level prior to the word.



Limited space does not allow me to go into detail about the other two forms in the collection – the letters and the dream sequences. However, the same painstaking attention to detail, and the same foreignizing of English in Davis's obsessive, overly self-conscious, self-reflexive narrative voice accompanies the reader throughout.

The dream sequences which recount the recounting of dreams leave the reader with the same sensation of incompleteness we have when we try to recapture the sensation of a dream. The conducting thread is shaky, the blanks as present as what is remembered.

As for the letters, the same self-reflexive, overly self-conscious, self-correcting voice that is heard throughout the collection is heard in the complaint letters and the thank-you letter.

When asked to comment on the letter form, Davis explained:

Letter form I think allows you to take on this artificial, over pedantic or over correct voice. It's sort of like the letters to the editor you'll read in the paper sometime – a slightly absurd tone and that allows you to voice your opinion about one particular thing or another in an entertaining and extreme way and I just found it a lot of fun. (Davies in Matthews 2014)

Julian Barnes in his rather scathing criticism of Davis's translation of *Madame Bovary*, argues that translating itself, as a practice, calls for pedantry:

But then translation involves micro-pedantry as much as the full yet controlled use of the linguistic imagination. The plainest sentence is full of hazard; often the choices available seem to be between different percentages of loss. (Barnes 2010, 9)

These different percentages of loss have been remarkably negotiated. The lost translator reappears as the author, the lost author's work is rediscovered in a new form. The lost cultural identity is recognized and becomes the theme of the story. The lost morphemes are an invitation to contemplate lost meaning. A morpheme, we must remember is the smallest unit of meaning. But Davis brings the reader to consider language even beyond the smallest unit of meaning. Let us consider the last story once again.

**Ph.D.**

All these years I thought I had a Ph.D.  
But I do not have a Ph.D. (Davis 2015, 283)

In the title the periods of the abbreviation are exaggeratedly enlarged, calling to our attention the missing letters. Could this story be one on “having” and “being”? Perhaps the narrator has never taken a Ph.D. or has failed it. But this seems unlikely, as she would most probably know this. Perhaps the narrator went to a university such as Oxford, where the doctoral degree is designated by the abbreviation DPhil. Or, perhaps she is interpreting Ph.D. as Doctor in Philosophy, in which case she is realizing that the more correct verb is “be”. Thus what is connoted is “I am a Ph.D.” Again, we are confronted with missing letters. It is perhaps just a coincidence that “letter” in French is “lettre”, which is a homonym for “l’être”, which translates as “being.”

For Benjamin, language is to be compared to broken fragments of a vessel:

[T]he translation must [...] lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the manner of meaning [...] of the original, to make both recognizable as the broken part of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken part of a vessel. (Benjamin in Jacobs, 762)

Davis’s use of “letters” – Flaubert’s, Davis’s, as well as the morphemes or here the missing letters of an abbreviation – are a constant throughout the work. The fragmented texts in their foreignized English articulate together like the broken fragments of Benjamin’s vessel to remind us of how words can’t and won’t mean; they won’t mean, because very often they can’t. This articulation is also a stunning demonstration of how translating what is connoted – Benjamin’s “manner of meaning” – will always remain the supreme challenge of the translator.

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THE VOICE OF THE TRANSLATOR AND  
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