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Lynn Blin

- 1 Maurice Blanchot wrote in *The Space of Literature*, « the need to write is linked to the approach toward this point at which nothing can be done with words² ». Lydia Davis, who translated Blanchot, is mostly known for her short, short-stories. Though her work is not confined to short pieces, in each collection, they make up from 50-75% of the stories. Virtually ignored during her first years as a writer, it is only when Dave Eggers published her collection, *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* in 2000 that she started to gain attention — attention that continued to grow into a genuine interest and acclaim which was concretized when she won the Man Booker International Prize in 2013 for the ensemble of her works. Like Alice Munro, her writing has elevated the short story genre into the ranks of great literature. This paper will discuss her story « How I Know What I Like » from her 2015 collection *Can't and Won't*. If Davis' style might, on a first reading, lead one to find it too stark, too experimental, too repetitive, too quirky, too self-reflexive, too sparse of character, too short on story, closer reading opens up new vistas. Davis, in fact, lets us see the underbelly of language. In one story, « Local Obits », extracts of obituaries from the local paper become the pretense for a story:

Marion, 100, was a homemaker her entire life. She enjoyed playing cards at the Senior Center and going on her many trips to Colorado. She always looked for the good in people.

Nellie, 79, was employed at the former Snow White-Laundry. She enjoyed playing bingo, doing puzzles, and spending time with family. She is predeceased by a brother, eight sisters, and one boy she helped to raise.

John, 73, died suddenly, after being stricken while driving in Grafton. He was an avid farmer who enjoyed hunting.

Clyde, 90, served in the Navy during WWII and was a meat cutter by trade. He was a member of the American Legion, the Stephentown Fire Company, the Tamrac Twirlers, the Quadrille Square Dance Club, and the Albany Camera Club³.

- 2 In the 68 extracts of obituaries from the local paper, Davis demonstrates how language can fail, how it resists when called upon to express loss, or to capture a life. Yet, it is in the repetition of the seeming banality of these lives that life's very fragility and beauty come to the fore. It is in the accumulation of these rather frail tributes to loved ones that the reader becomes profoundly moved. Void of any sentimentality, it is through the information non-conveyed, the *nothing* that these fragments of lives lived, arouse in the reader great emotion.
- 3 Through analysis of her story « How I Know What I Like », I will attempt to show how what is missing story-wise, character-wise, place-wise etc., is more than amply made up for by Davis' keen awareness of the workings of language. Language itself becomes a character and the main source of action. Her stories are to be read down to the very morpheme. Repetition is never gratuitous, and what may seem to be little more than an amusing aphorism or anecdote reveals itself to be a reflection on language⁴.
- 4 How do we account for the fact, that in this fragment-like text, this *devoir*, as Sir Christopher Ricks has termed her stories⁵, we have the kernel of something that is at the very heart of what makes a short story great?
- 5 Davis comes to the short story with her talent as a translator, her intuition as a linguist, and her love for Samuel Beckett and Kafka. In an interview with C.B.C.'s Eleanor Wachtel, she explains how as a thirteen-year old, she copied out lines of Beckett's *Malone Dies* to understand how the sentences functioned, and then tacked them on the wall. Davis comments, « There was so little content, such focus, such plain language, no attempt at lyricism or flowery language⁶. »
- 6 If the reading experience of a Davis story may well be fleeting, the lasting effect is indelible. Jonathan Franzen comments:
- She has the sensitivity to track the stuff that is so evanescent, it flies right by the rest of us. But as it does so, it leaves enough of a trace that when you read her you do it with a sense of recognition⁷.
- 7 Davis' close attention to language undoubtedly stems in large part from her work as a translator⁸. Paul De Man in one of his lessons on Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* explains:
- We think we are at ease in our language, we feel a coziness, a familiarity, a shelter in the language we call our own in which we think we are not alienated. What translation reveals is that this alienation is at its strongest in our own original language — that our own original language within which we are engaged is disarticulated in a way which imposes upon us a particular attention⁹.
- 8 Davis' stories with so little content are a constant reminder of how we do not pay enough attention to language. Indeed, the reading of a Davis story can give us an idea of alienation, and it is thus that we might get the impression of reading a translation of English into English.
- 9 Benjamin further explains that meaning is always displaced with regards to the meaning it initially intended¹⁰. Davis brings to the fore this displacement of meaning in her short stories. Though she does play with language, in stories such as « The Language of Things in the House », where, for example, the cat jumping down onto the bathroom tiles, reminds her of the Italian expression *va bene*¹¹, the outstanding feature of her writing is how she plays with the notion of Standard English. The narrative voice we most often encounter is one who expresses itself in an English that is almost over-

correct as though she were drawing attention to the limits of what is called Standard English, which is defined by Trudgill as:

that variety of English which is usually used in print and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety that is usually spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations. The difference between standard and non-standard, it should be noted, has nothing in principle to do with difference between formal and colloquial language, or with concepts of 'bad language'. Standard English has colloquial as well as formal variants [...]¹².

- 10 Davis very often uses the full forms of verbs rather than the more informal contracted forms, and though she works with the American idiom, her stories are not conversational. This often gives the impression of a foreignization of English. The standardization of English is often taken to almost an extreme, inviting the reader to explore how language means and does not mean.

Events and Non-events and the Making of a Short Story

- 11 Though Davis' works have also been included in poetry anthologies, and she recognizes why they have, she herself does not view them as poems, firmly categorizing them as short stories. One of course might reasonably question the similarity between the short short-story and a prose poem. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines prose poem as « a poem that is written on the page like prose, but that has rhythm, images and patterns of sound¹³. »
- 12 Davis' works, on the other hand, can be defined as pieces of prose whose brevity and experiments with form are reminiscent of poetry, but which remain resolutely in the category of prose fiction because of her concern for plot, the way she introduces surprise, and her attention to the way her stories end. In regards to plot, one of her very first inspirations as a fiction writer was Beckett's treatment of action. Davis explains her surprise and admiration in *Malone Dies*¹⁴, where the plot development centres around the dropping of a pencil and how she had never imagined anything like that before¹⁵.
- 13 Also, and perhaps more importantly, in opting for the classification of her works as fiction is the coherence of a narrative voice — that distant, quirky, oft times obsessional voice that the Davis reader becomes acquainted with when reading her works within collections and not only when they are published individually in anthologies.
- 14 In « How I Know What I Like », the familiar narrative voice rings out loud and clear, and the inspiration Davis found for plot in Beckett can be detected if we examine this story as an exploration of a non-event.
- 15 What makes a story a story? John Culbert comments: « in order for there to be a story, there has to be a change of state. In most stories the reader's interest is sustained by the events as they play out in a narrated sequence¹⁶ ». Interestingly enough, « change of state » has the same linguistic definition as an event. The SIL glossary of linguistic terms defines *event* and *non-event* in the following terms:
- Event is a kind of information in discourse that (1) actually occurs; (2) is overt; (3) occurs at the *now* point on the time line.

A non-event is conveyed by: (1) Negatives (Nothing is described as having occurred.); (2) Questions (Nothing is described as having occurred.); (3) Modal expressions (No claim is made in a modal expression that anything occurred.); (4) Expressions containing verbs in projected time (Nothing is described as having yet occurred.); (5) Expressions containing non-overt verbs (see, feel, hear etc.); (6) Flashbacks and previews (They don't occur at the *now* point of the narrative.) In other words, « No claim is made that anything has occurred¹⁷.

- 16 Thus, the non-event dimension of the story comes to the fore because of the verbs *like*, and *be* which are non-overt verbs, and the modal *might* because of the virtual dimension of modal auxiliaries.
- 17 Though there is not much being played out in her stories, there are changes of state. In « How I Know What I Like » the change comes to be through a progression of uncertainty. From the short, concise ten-word three-sentence reasoning in the first version, to a 36-word six-sentence exploration of what is becoming a state of ever evolving doubt, the distant narrative voice and the equally remote *she* in the story are constant reminders that in a Lydia Davis' fiction the main character, and the main action are almost always centered on language.

Function Words, Punctuation, Repetition and Narrative Voices

- 18 If there is one thing that Facebook has accomplished, it is the rendering of the verb *like*, if not meaningless, at least emptied of any force it might have had. If Lydia Davis were to have a Facebook page, instead of a photo, I imagine she could use this short story as her background page.
- 19 In « How I Know What I Like », the preposition of comparison *like* and the verb *like* combine with a hammering repetition of the same idea to take the reader on a psychoanalytical and philosophical inquiry into the concept of desire. The brevity of the text enables me to copy it out in whole below:

How I Know What I Like

(Six Versions)

She likes it. She is like me. Therefore, I might like it.

She is like me. She likes the things I like. She likes this. So I might like it.

I like it. I show it to her. She likes it. She is like me. Therefore, I might really like it.

I think I like it. I show it to her. She likes it. She is like me. Therefore, I might really like it.

I think I like it. I show it to her. (She is like me. She likes the things I like.) She likes it. So I might really like it.

I like it. I show it to her. She likes it. (She says the other one is « just plain awful ».)

She is like me. She likes the things I like. So I might really like it¹⁸.

- 20 An examination of function words — the preposition *like*, the conjunction *so*, and the adverb *therefore*, as well as the degree adverb *really* and the modal auxiliary *might* will help us understand Davis' preoccupations in the construction of her literary texts.
- 21 Function words usually go unnoticed, but linguists working on developing software for semantic analysis discovered that in analysing the essays of people suffering from trauma, for instance, the study of their style was revealed, not through the analysis of nouns, adjectives, and verbs which are content lexemes – but in the study of their use of function words:

Instead of analysing the content of their essays by focussing on the nouns, regular verbs, and adjectives, we asked the programme to focus on the words that reveal writing style. Writing style, we were learning, was generally revealed through function words, including prepositions, pronouns, articles, and a small number of similar short common words¹⁹.

- 22 Pennebaker goes on to call them 'stealth' words, which have the following characteristics. They are:
- Used at a very high rate
 - Short and hard to detect
 - Processed in the brain differently than content words
 - Very, very social²⁰.
- 23 The preposition *like* establishes comparison of equality between a primary term and a secondary term ²¹. Here, the primary term in the repeated sentence *She is like me* is always *she* and the secondary term *me*. When prepositional *like* phrases are predicative, something that is said of the primary term is also said of the secondary. Equality is expressed and is interpreted as resemblance. But the sphere of resemblance is not specified here, other than in the vaguest expression of « things liked », which are designated either by the definite pronoun *it*, the deictic pronoun *this*, or the definite pronouns *one*. And as for the referent to *she*, it is absent. Considered as grammatical elements of cohesion in a text ²², the pronouns as they are used here, draw our attention to other elements that contribute to the construction of text, such as layout and space, information deficit, repetition, and rhythm. Davis, like the other grand virtuoso of the short story, Alice Munro, plays with the prescriptive rules of grammar to not only invite us to become aware of these rules, and to consider what happens when these rules are bent, but also to establish the authority of the reader in the creative act of fiction.
- 24 The verb *like* functions in what is known as an *experiencer and stimulus mode*. Huddleston and Pullum explain that experiencer and stimulus prototypically appear in situations of emotional feeling. The experiencer *she* is the one who feels, while the stimulus is the second argument. We notice again that each of the six versions ends with a linguistic « non-event » because the modal *might*, in *might like it*, or *might really like it* expresses only a virtual possibility.
- 25 Throughout this story, the conjunction *so* alternates with the adverb *therefore*, which also has the linking function of a conjunction when it is not introduced by *and*. *So* can be paraphrased by *since that is the case*, or *it follows from what precedes*. *So* can be said to create a link between cause and effect, in which case the first term in the comparison is the cause that provokes the effect, thus expressing the idea of congruence.
- 26 *Therefore*, on the other hand, introduces a logical deduction paraphraseable by *we can logically conclude*. Moreover, instead of the cause and effect for *so*, *therefore* can introduce a consequence or a result²³. *Therefore* is mostly used in academic English, whereas *so* belongs to oral English. If in oral English, *therefore* is often replaced by *so*, the different steps to arrive at a logical deduction in academic writing demands *therefore*.
- 27 *Therefore* and *so* are what Huddleston and Pullum term impure connectives, because they do more than simply connect²⁴. In our story, they connect but they also announce the expression of effect or the logical conclusion of *she is like me*. Davis' narrator is using two different registers, a formal academic one with *therefore*, and a more informal oral one with *so*. Ironically, however, we note that with each new version, the steps

used to arrive at the conclusion are more numerous, the demonstration evidently more complex. But instead of *therefore*, more conducive to a logical demonstration, the narrator chooses the more casual *so*.

- 28 To be noted as well is the use of parentheses in the subtitle: in version 5, to repeat information already given in version 2 and to be repeated in version 6; and in version 6 to introduce another comparison.
- 29 The function of parentheses, according to standard grammar rules « is to present that element as extraneous to a minimal interpretation of the text, as inessential material that can be omitted without affecting the well-formedness and without any serious loss of information. Parentheses provide an elaboration, illustration, refinement, of, or comment on, the content of the accompanying text²⁵ ».
- 30 The redundancy of the information in the subtitle (the text is so brief, the reader can easily see there are six versions), and the obvious repetition of information make this grammar rule self-obvious. The new information — the implicit comparison in *She says the other one is just plain awful* however invites us to look beyond the strict grammar rule on parentheses given in the grammar books. In fact, other studies on punctuation have demonstrated how parentheses in literary texts, precisely because they set the segment apart from the rest, signal a source of information that is vital in regards to interpreting the text. In Alice Munro's short stories, for example, as Corinne Bigot (2015)²⁶ and Blin (2015)²⁷ have explained, the text between brackets can allow for another narrative voice to be heard.
- 31 The study of polyphony in fiction is a key element in explaining and justifying critical interpretations that may often seem rather far-fetched in comparison to the surface story of the narrative. Simply by the way they typographically stand out on the page, a parenthesized element draws attention to itself. As for being extraneous information to the minimal understanding of a text, it is only the unserious reader who would ever be satisfied with that level of grasping a literary text. For close readers, elaboration, illustration, refinement of, or comment on the content, are some of the very tools needed to gain critical insight.
- 32 A further examination of the use of parentheses in this story invites a reflection on the effect and result of parentheses. Repetition not being one of the uses of parentheses mentioned above, what purpose does the repeated information serve in this story? The new information in version 5 can be interpreted simultaneously as: (1) an elaboration (direct speech with only the adjective phrase within inverted commas introducing another point of view); (2) a refinement (another object of comparison is introduced, thus moving the story forward. So it can reasonably be considered as vital to even a minimal comprehension of the text); and (3) a commentary (not only by the anonymous *she*, but also of another narrative voice, which I identify as the author herself drawing attention to how she is present in the construction). Even if we consider how I, myself, have used parentheses in this paragraph, we could conclude that the information therein is just as vital as the other information for a minimal understanding of the text.
- 33 Repetition in a literary text is a stylistic feature, but in a short story where, compared to the novel, every sentence counts in the construction of meaning, we must account for this repetition, to which the narrator further draws our attention by placing *She is like me. She likes the things I like* in parentheses.

- 34 Although « like » is a preposition, Quirk *et al.* point out that in *She is like me*, *like* is adjective-like, because it can be modified by an adverb²⁸, *i.e. She is rather like me*. Thanks to this repetition, we are called to notice that if a logical deduction about how the narrator knows what she likes is to be drawn by comparison, the premise through which this is to be drawn should be *I like what she likes. I am like her*. If a logical conclusion about the narrator is to be put to demonstration, the experiencer should be *I* and the stimulus *she*. The fact that *therefore* followed by a comma is abandoned for *so* without comma, emerges as narrative coherence that reinforces the discovery that the narrator is dealing with faulty logic and thus equally distorted feeling. From a 12-word argument in version 1 we arrive at a 35-word frenzy that is a sample of quintessential Lydia Davis. The reader thus discovers that this is a complex story on mimetic desire told through the reflections of what could be the narrative voice of an immature teenager.
- 35 This discovery in turn sends us back to investigate more fully the change from *therefore*, to *so*. If both *so* and *therefore* can be used to conclude an argument, the fact that *so* is for informal use and *therefore* more formal, the reasons for this are partly encoded in their morphology.
- 36 If both *so* and *therefore* can be said to refer back to what has already been stated, Quirk remarks: « As with many other connective adjuncts, there is a slight anaphoric compound in the meaning *for this reason, as a result of*²⁹ ». *Therefore*, on the other hand, is a compound adverb, which Lapaire and Rotgé remind us is made up of THERE + Preposition FORE, the etymology of which is *that which precedes in space and time*. It is thus, more strongly anaphoric than *so*. They continue: « We are thus in presence of an operator fundamentally turned towards what precedes it, and which causality — which transplants itself easily onto the before/after dichotomy to become source/consequence — had no trouble recuperating³⁰ ».
- 37 The mental work going on is again, according to Lapaire and Rotgé « organized and dynamic³¹ ».
- 38 The comma is not compulsory after *therefore* and it could be added after *so*. One of the purposes of a comma is to set off an intonation group, which means that if the sentence is to be read aloud, it would receive a word accent. The comma marks a pause and this is important in what Hirotsami, Frazier, and Rayner term « sentence wrap-up ». In a study of eye movement, they tested the actual split second pause during silent reading by measuring the eye movement of the readers in the experiment:
- They found in one experiment that the presence of a comma did incite the reader to pause and to — as they termed it — 'wrap up'. They also tested the understanding of sequences and found that though the presence of the comma does cause a temporary slowdown, the punctuation helps rather than hinders the reader. They pose two hypotheses: dwelling at the ends of clauses is specific to reading — an adaptation to the peculiar demands of processing language in the visual modality. Alternatively, it is possible that the processing of punctuation in reading is on par with the processing of intonation boundaries in speech³².
- 39 The comma gives a drum-roll announcement effect enabling the reader to more fully realize an important conclusion. In this story, since the conclusion steadily loses its force, *therefore* will be abandoned and replaced by *so* and the *end-wrap* comma will also be abandoned. Because, of course, there is no end-wrap here. The story does end but with an unfinished impression stemming from the fact that this faulty argument could

go on and on. This feeling of irresolution is cohesively built into the narrative by the general vagueness of the text and repetition of the modal auxiliary, *might*.

Vagueness and Irresolution

- 40 The general impression of vagueness in the text is created by the use of pronouns *she*, *it*, *this*, and *one* with no overt referents as well as the use of the noun phrase « the things » which have not been identified. The *I* refers to the homodiegetic narrator, who might be compared to the mouth in Beckett's play *Not I* where the only character on the blackened stage is a disembodied mouth that talks at breakneck speed rendering the monologue only comprehensible by fragment.
- 41 Vagueness is a characteristic of some predicates, such as the following:
 Katy is old.
 This paper is red.
 Burt is bald.
- 42 OLD, BALD, and RED appear straightforward, but upon closer examination, these adjectives, remain elusive when it comes to determining the truth value of the propositions. Even if we determine Katy's exact age, it is still difficult to tell whether that counts as old without knowing the context. And when the context changes, so does the truth value of the proposition.
- 43 For *Burt is bald* the truth condition is subjected to what is known as Sorites susceptibility. The Sorites paradox comes from the Greek word *soros* meaning *pile*. The original version of the Sorites paradox is a challenge to determine at which point a set of individual grains of rice becomes a pile. If it can clearly be deduced that a single grain does not make a pile, nor does a second grain, at some point a pile is formed after sufficiently many grains are added. How can we know the definition of the word *pile* when we can't tell the moment one is created? Likewise, with *Burt is bald*, how many strands of hair is Burt allowed to have to be considered bald, so that *Burt is bald* is true³³?
- 44 *She likes the things I like* also is subject to Sorites susceptibility. Do the things she likes include everything — Brussels sprouts? blood sausage? the color purple? playing bridge? What, for example do the degree adverbs *just* and *plain* add to the absolute adjective *awful*, or the adverb *really* add to the verb *like*? Of course, they increase the degree of awfulness, and that of liking, but *awful* and *like* are self-explanatory. What the degree elements add to the text here is basically to inform the reader more about the utterers. In their propensity to add degree to basically empty propositions, they render them even emptier.
- 45 The topic of vagueness is relevant to the linguist in Davis who invites us to ponder what implication the existence of vagueness has on our knowledge of lexical items — but it is also relevant to the philosopher in Davis who has to deal with predicates that lead to paradox— how propositions are true and false at the same time.
- 46 The use of the verb *think* in *I think I like it* in versions 4 and 5 and *might* in *I might like it* and *I might really like it* reinforce the non-event dimension of this story³⁴. They simultaneously highlight the obsessive tentativeness, and hesitation of this narrator in what seems to be a Sisyphean attempt to know herself. Again, using as our barometer

the concept of linguistic events, the obvious conclusion to this story is that knowing what he/she really likes is another non-event.

- 47 The story can also be read as a comment on the Lacanian maxim that, man's desire is the desire of the Other. Firstly, that desire is essentially a desire for recognition from this 'Other'; secondly that desire is for the thing that we suppose the Other desires, which is to say, the thing that the Other lacks.

The necessary and sufficient reason for the repetitive insistence of these desires in the transference and their permanent remembrance in a signifier that repression has appropriated – that is, in which the repressed returns – is found if one accepts the idea that in these determinations the desire for recognition dominates the desire that is to be recognised, preserving it as such until it is recognised³⁵.

- 48 As Owen Hewiston explains:

In other words, desire pushes for recognition. It is less a question of what we desire as much as it is that we be recognised. Moreover, Lacan believes that this dependence on the other for recognition is responsible for structuring not only our desires, but even our drives³⁶.

- 49 As the signifier is only rendered through the pronouns *it*, *this*, *the other one* and the broadly generic, *the same things*, the narrator's relentless drive to find out what she likes and her dependence on the Other to discover what this might be, is rendered vague. The signifier that repression has appropriated remains unspecified. However, in a Lacanian interpretation of the story, the use of *really* to modify *like* would confirm the idea of an eager striving for recognition³⁷.

- 50 The story also concords with what the philosopher René Girard had to say about mimetic desire. According to Girard, once our fundamental necessities are acquired, we look around us to what other people are doing, and wanting, and we copy them. For Girard, imitation is at the root of all behavior and in this age of social media, where the verb *like* has taken on a new significance and in so doing has also lost a great deal, Girard's belief that we do not know what we desire and have to turn to others to make up our minds also takes on renewed importance³⁸.

- 51 To conclude, Davis' narrator has taken the self as tragi-comic hero and her story reminds us that the difficulty we may have with language comes from the fact that language has a life of its own.

- 52 The seeming inconclusiveness of this story turns out to be the plot itself as well as Davis' acknowledgment of Aristotle's belief that exactness in capturing reality will inevitably evade us:

It is the mark of an instructed mind to rest satisfied with the degree of precision which the nature of the subject admits and not to seek exactness when only an approximation of the truth is possible³⁹.

- 53 It is in understanding this that she has managed to write stories that provoke the reader in a way that more conventional stories cannot. More precisely, it is in her creative recognition of an inherent irresoluteness in language; in her attentive preoccupation with the complexity of grammatical details down to the very last comma, parenthesis, or italic, that « How I know What I Like » represents so finely the feeling of plenitude readers discover in her stories.

- 54 In Beckett's play, *Act Without Words*⁴⁰, the most prominent element of the scenario consists of a nameless character being intermittently poked into action by a long goad that stretches across the stage. « How I Know What I Like », as in so many of Lydia

Davis' short short-stories, functions a little the same way as this goad. Its extreme brevity and tightly knit narrative work like an electro shock to the weary existential postmodern readers reminding us that we are alive.

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NOTES

1. P. De Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 91.
2. M. Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, (translated by Anne Smock) Lincoln, Nebraska University Press, [1955] 1982, p. 52.
3. L. Davis, *Can't and Won't*, St. Ives, Penguin Random House, 2014, p. 274-275.
4. Davis explains her surprise and admiration in *Malone Dies*, where the plot development centres around the dropping of a pencil and how she had never imagined anything like that before.
5. C. Ricks, « Introduction », L. Davis, *The collected stories of Lydia Davis*, London, Penguin Books, 2009, p.xx.
6. E. Wachtel, *Writers and Company*, « Interview with Lydia Davis », www.cbc.ca/player/play/2387047128 .
7. D. Goodyear, « Long Story Short: Lydia Davis's Radical Fiction », *New Yorker*, March 17, 2014, p. 21.
8. Davis has also translated Michel Leiris, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Proust's *Swann's Way*. In 2015, she was elevated to the ranks of Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government.
9. De Mann, *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 84.
10. *Ibid.*
11. L. Davis, op. cit., p. 219.
12. P. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*, London, Penguin, 1995, pp. 6-7.
13. dictionary.cambridge.org, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/>
14. S. Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable: A Trilogy*, London, Everyman's Library, 1997.
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17. SIL Glossary of Linguistic Terms, <https://glossary.sil.org/term/event>
18. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
19. J.W. Pennebaker, *The Secret Life of Pronouns*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2011, p. 12.

20. *Ibid.*, p.23.
21. R. Huddleston and R. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 1154.
22. M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hassan, *Coherence in English*, London, Longman, 1976.
23. J.R. Lapaire and W. Rotgé, *La grammaire linguistique de l'anglais*, *op. cit.*, p. 288-290.
24. *Ibid.* p. 777-778.
25. R. Huddleston and G. Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English language*, *op. cit.*, p. 1748.
26. C. Bigot, « Alice Munro, le grain de la voix », *Confluences Conference : Sounds Foreign*, Université Paris Ouest, 9 January, 2015.
27. L. Blin, « Sweet Dissonance in Alice Munro's 'The Progress of Love', 'Friend of My Youth' and 'Free Radicals' », *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*. Vol.37, No. 2, Spring 2015, pp 45-55.
28. Quirk *et al.*, *op. cit.* p. 553. As one peer reviewer pointed out, this analysis of Quirk *et al.* is not entirely convincing, as adverbs are very often used to modify prepositions: *i.e.* « I am really against it. », « I'm totally for it ». Since adverbs cannot modify prepositions, it is more prudent to say that in these cases the prepositions function like adjectives.
29. *Ibid.* p.16015.
30. J.R. Lapaire and W. Rotgé, *op. cit.* p. 289.
31. *Ibid.*
32. M. Hirotami, L. Frazier, K. Rayner, « Punctuation and Intonation Effects on Clause and Sentence Wrap-up: Evidence from Eye Movements, » in *Journal of Memory and Language*, 54, 2006, p.431.
33. N. Klinedinst and P. Egge, *Vagueness and Language Use*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp 1-5.
34. Linguists agree on the non-factual, non-actual, non-occurring characteristic modals introduce in a sentence. Swann: « We do not normally use modal verbs to say the situations definitely exist or that particular events have definitely happened. We use them for things we expect, which are or are not possible, which we want to happen, which we are not sure about, which tend to happen. » M. Swann, *Practical English Usage* Oxford, Oxford University Press, p.356. Huddleston and Pullum: « I still commit myself to the factuality of written /said it – my commitment is qualified in the sense that the truth of the proposition is not present as something that is already known but as something that is inferred. » R. Huddleston and G. Pullum *op. cit.* p.173.
35. J. Lacan, translated by B. Fink, « The mirror stage as formative of the I function » in *Écrits; the first complete edition in English*, London, W.W. Norton, [1949] 2002, p.431.
36. O. Hewitson, « What does Lacan say about Desire? », <http://www.lacanonline.com/index/2010/05/what-does-lacan-say-about-desire/>
37. I would like to thank Emanuel Vernadakis for his suggestion of the Lacanian link to this story. All possible errors of interpretation are my own.
38. R. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997.
39. Aristotle, <https://www.quotes.net/quote/40981>
40. S. Beckett, « Act Without Words » in *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*, London, Faber & Faber, 1984.

ABSTRACTS

If the urge to write comes from the realization that, according to Maurice Blanchot, nothing can be done with words, reading Lydia Davis' short stories demonstrates Blanchot's further claim that reading is situated beyond and before comprehension. Davis, who translated Blanchot (as well as Leiris, Flaubert and Proust), is mostly known for her short, short stories, sometimes known as flash fiction or micro fiction. Though her work is not confined to short, short pieces, in each collection, they make up roughly 50-75% of the stories. Though her stories are short on character, scanty of plot, and vague or silent in regards to place, they are replete with meaning. In order to grasp the meaning, the reader must delve into the workings of English grammar, a domain that Davis, as a translator has probed with minute consideration. Paul De Man wrote that meaning is always displaced with regards to the meaning it initially intended¹. This displacement is of course, the source of misunderstanding and eventual conflict. Davis works with this idea of displaced meaning in her stories, and her attention to language invites the reader to examine her stories down to the very morpheme, and in some cases down to the punctuation mark. The analysis of « How I Know What I Like » from Davis' 2015 collection *Can't and Won't* will demonstrate through her use of function words, modality and punctuation how the very fleetingness of this short, short-story leaves an indelible impression on the reader.

Si, selon Maurice Blanchot, l'envie d'écrire vient du constat qu'on ne peut rien faire avec les mots, la lecture des nouvelles de Lydia Davis démontre bien une autre affirmation de Blanchot : que la lecture se situe au-delà et est antérieure à la compréhension. Davis, qui a traduit Blanchot (ainsi que Leiris, Flaubert et Proust), est surtout connue pour ses nouvelles très courtes, parfois appelées flash-fiction ou micro-fiction. Bien que son travail ne se limite pas à de courtes pièces, dans chaque recueil, elles représentent environ 50 à 75% de ses nouvelles. Bien que ses récits puissent paraître pauvres sur le plan des personnages, peu intenses sur le plan de l'intrigue et vagues ou silencieux sur le plan des lieux, ils ne sont pas pour autant moins riches en signification. Pour en saisir le sens, le lecteur doit se plonger dans les rouages de la grammaire anglaise, un domaine que Lydia Davis, en tant que traductrice, a exploré avec beaucoup d'attention. Paul De Man a écrit que le sens est toujours déplacé par rapport à celui qui était initialement prévu. Ce déplacement est bien sûr la source de malentendus et d'éventuels conflits. C'est à cette notion de sens déplacé, ainsi qu'à la complexité du langage, que Davis porte son attention, invitant le lecteur à une exploration jusque dans les moindres morphèmes, et dans certains cas, jusqu'au signe de ponctuation. L'analyse de « How I Know What I Like » du recueil *Can't and Won't* (2015) démontrera, malgré la fugacité même de cette courte histoire, comment son emploi de mots de fonction, de modalité, et de ponctuation œuvrent ensemble afin de laisser au lecteur une impression indélébile.

INDEX

Mots-clés: imprécision, mots de fonction, modalité, ponctuation, irrésolution

Keywords: vagueness, function words, modality, punctuation, irresolution

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