

**“I Try to Figure it Out”; “Maybe the
Answer is What Will Occur to Me Later,
When I Look Back”:
Reconciliation and Ceremonial Closure in
the Fiction of Lydia Davis**

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I dwell in possibility,

—Emily Dickinson

“Story,” by Lydia Davis, first appeared in the small collection *Story and Other Stories* (1983), then in *Break it Down* (1986) and then in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009). In addition, it was expanded and transformed into the short novel *The End of the Story* (1995). As Christopher J. Knight argues, “‘Story’ is *The End of the Story* in a nutshell” (“Lydia Davis’ Own Philosophical Investigation” 203). Knight compares this novel to “a detective story in reverse,” because, whereas a detective story ends by solving a mystery, this novel “moves in the direction of greater and greater uncertainty” (216). Similarly, Marjorie Perloff, in a discussion of “Story,” suggests that “The ‘story’ can never approach closure; just the same, it is only human to ‘try to figure it out’” (208). Furthermore, Perloff argues that “ultimately, the ‘events’ that have generated the hermeneutic puzzle all but fade into the background, for it is the puzzle itself that has become the narrator’s obsession” (208). Indeed, reconciliation of the puzzle (rather than the relationship) is key, not only in “Story” and *The End of the Story*, but in much of the fiction of Lydia Davis. However, the puzzle tends to be unsolvable; the narrators of Davis’s fiction tend to end up with more questions than answers, even though many of her stories follow the problem solution form, and so the ending of the story is merely ceremonial, rather than conclusive.

“Story”

Davis clearly states the problem in the opening of “Story”: “I get home from work and there is a message from him: that he is not coming, that he is busy. He will call again” (3). The first half of this story consists of the narrator’s collection of evidence. He does not call again, so the narrator drives to his apartment. He is not home, so she

leaves a note. The narrator returns home, and, eventually phones again. He is now home. He reports that “he has been to the movies with his old girlfriend, and she’s still there. He says he’ll call back” (3). In the meantime, the narrator stewes about his not coming by writing in her notebook. She distances herself from the situation, by writing in the third person: “clearly she always needed to have a love even if it was a complicated love” (3). He calls back and they argue, because “everything he says is a contradiction” (3). The narrator hangs up, because “there is no way [she] can get him to reconcile any of his contradictions” (4). The situation is further complicated by similar past situations with the narrator’s husband. She returns to her notebook. Feeling better, she calls him back to apologize, but he does not answer, so she drives again to his apartment. He comes out to meet her and explains that “the only reason [the old girlfriend] is there is that something is troubling her and he is the only one she can talk to about it” (5). This first section ends when he says, “You don’t understand, do you?” (5).

The following sentence begins part two (which is separated from part one by white space), and announces the beginning of the solution to the problem: “I try to figure it out” (5). Then the narrator summarizes the events of part one:

So they went to the movies and then came back to his place and then I called and then she left and he called back and we argued and then I called back twice but he had gone out to get a beer (he says) and then I drove over and in the meantime he had returned from buying beer and she had also come back and she was in his room so we talked by the garage doors. (5-6)

However, she immediately begins to question: “But what is the truth?” (6). She attempts to use logic and comes up with more questions:

Could he and she both really have come back in that short interval between my last phone call and my arrival at his place? Or is the truth really that during his call to me she waited outside or in his garage or in her car and that he then brought her in again, and that when the phone rang with my second and third calls he let it ring without answering, because he was fed up with me and with arguing? (6)

All the preceding facts come into question. A new problem has arisen:

The fact that he does not tell me the truth all the time makes me not sure of his truth at certain times, and then I work to figure out for myself if what he is telling me is the truth or not, and sometimes I can figure out that it’s not the truth and sometimes I don’t know and never know, and sometimes just because he says it to me over and over again I am convinced it is the truth because I don’t believe he would repeat a lie so often. (6)

Davis states, in an interview with Christopher J. Knight:

Sometimes, as in the story called “Story,” the only sort of truth that can be discovered is the facts of a situation. She wants to know what the facts are. Is he lying or not? Did he actually go out and buy beer and come back again? Either he did or he didn’t. It is not open to interpretation, but is something that he can hide from her. (“An Interview” 539)

Ironically the most conclusive statement the narrator makes about the problem is this: “I don’t believe anyway that there was any trip out for beer” (6), which is an interpretation about the facts, not a fact itself, and is based on simple opinion rather than analysis. Readers can accept this interpretation because of the use of the parenthetical

“he says” in connection to the buying of beer in the earlier summary of events. By the end of “Story,” the narrator has decided that the original problem, that he is not coming, does not matter. She is more interested in the multiplicity of new questions generated by that initial problem:

Maybe the truth does not matter, but I want to know it if only so that I can come to some conclusions about such questions as: whether he is angry at me or not; if he is, then how angry; whether he still loves her or not; if he does, then how much; whether he loves me or not; how much. (6)

Furthermore, it is not just the facts that are in question, but the telling of the facts, the telling of the story: “how capable he is of deceiving me in the act and after the act in the telling” (6). This story ends with an emphasis on the telling of the story rather than the story itself. If we cannot trust the teller, we cannot trust the story, for the teller of the story may indeed lie to us.

The End of the Story

Lydia Davis’ novel, *The End of the Story* is very similar to “Story.” However, this novel is more self-conscious about the telling of the story. The novel is as much about the writing of the novel as it is about the story the novel is about. As Davis states in an interview with Christopher J. Knight,

I was working on that straight chronological account and meanwhile began writing what I called Novel II, which was a novel about a person trying to write a novel, and things in her life surrounding that. And that interested me far more than Novel I. That was really alive and exciting. In the end I just combined them to make this one. I expanded and rearranged the chronological story and also put in what the novelist was doing as she worked. (“An Interview” 540)

The narrator of both the novel and the story use the same strategies for making sense of things. One strategy involves writing about the situation. Third person is used in order to achieve distance and objectivity:

Certain things I wrote down in the first person, and others, the most painful things, I think, or the most embarrassing, I wrote down in the third person. Then a day came when I had used *she* for I so long that even the third person was too close to me and I needed another person, even farther away than the third person. But there was no other person. (*The End of the Story* 197)

Both the novel and the story concern an unsatisfactory relationship. In “Story,” the relationship has not yet ended; whereas in *The End of the Story* the relationship is over and the narrator is actually in a relationship with another man and writing about former events. However, the narrator of the novel had begun writing about the relationship before it had ended, similar to the writing of the narrator of “Story” in notebooks: “First there was anger, then greater and greater distress, and then I would see how a part of it could be written down. And if I wrote it down very precisely, the thought or the memory, then I would often have a feeling of peace” (196). The narrator has, apparently, been writing about this relationship for quite some time:

I don't know why I didn't stop writing about him after a while. I suppose I had written so much by then, and the idea of writing about him had been with me so long, and the frustration had continued so long, that I didn't want to stop before I had finished something. (*The End of the Story* 197)

The male figure in both works does not always tell the truth. The narrator of the novel reports: "He told me he had just finished writing a novel, but later this turned out not to be true" (19). However, the truth of the matter becomes complicated as the narrator further explains: "What he had just finished was not a novel but a story twenty pages long that he then cut down to six pages" (19). Finally, the narrator complicates the matter further by bringing in her own involvement with the situation: "Either I had not heard him right or he was so nervous that he said the word 'novel' by mistake and did not hear it" (19).

Because of the complexities of communication, the narrator of this novel, like the narrator of the story offers more questions than answers:

I did not have good answers for my questions. I could always find a few answers for each question, but I wasn't satisfied with them: though they seemed to answer the question, the question did not go away. Why had he claimed on the telephone, when I called him long distance, that we were still together and there was nothing to worry about? Was he ever truly tempted to come back to me after I returned? (*The End of the Story* 198)

The narrator compares the novel to a puzzle:

... this novel is like a puzzle with a difficult solution. If I were clever and patient enough, I could find it. When I do a difficult crossword I never quite finish it, but I usually don't remember to look at the solution when it appears. I have been working on this puzzle so long by now that I catch myself thinking it is time to look at the solution, as though I will only have to dig through a pile of papers to find it. I have the same sort of frustration, at times, with a problem in a translation. I ask, Now, what is the answer—as though it existed somewhere. Maybe the answer is what will occur to me later, when I look back. (87)

Perhaps, because the novel is being formally drafted after the end of the relationship, the narrator's puzzlement is reduced to reconciling the intellectual puzzle rather than reconciling the relationship. In contrast, the narrator of the story is still involved in the relationship, so reconciliation of that relationship is still theoretically possible. However, the reader of these works, who has never been involved in these relationships, finds the task of reconciling the puzzle most engaging.

"Maybe the Answer Is What Will Occur to Me Later, When I Look Back"

Neither narrator of "Story" or *The End of the Story* solves the puzzle before the conclusion of the work; however, both texts do, in fact, end. The conclusions to these two works can be better understood in reference to the work of Susan Lohafer. Lohafer, in *Coming to Terms with the Short Story*, outlines three kinds of closure: 1) "physical closure," in which one merely reads to the end 2) "cognitive closure," in which one understands what one has just read, and 3) "deferred," which is "achieved when we arrive at an understanding of the full significance . . . it can never really be reached, especially in a story that provokes serious thought. Nevertheless, it can be used, in argument, to point to stages in the appreciation of residual meaning" (43). Both works, clearly, arrive at a physical closure. Both works, (perhaps less clearly)

arrive at a cognitive closure—most readers would understand the sentences just read. However, the full significance of both works is deferred; for, if the narrator cannot understand the significance of the events, how can the reader?

Davis alludes that the act of a ceremony can conclude a story, though the story itself has no closure; it has no end, because it is far too complex; we can never know the truth of all the facts, and many of the facts we do know often contradict, but a ceremonial act serves as a metaphorical conclusion:

I think one reason the cup of tea in the bookstore seems like the end of the story even though the story went on afterward is that I did stop searching for him at that point Another reason, maybe even more important, is that this cup of tea . . . was not only a kindness . . . but also a ceremonial act . . . And since all along there had been too many ends to the story, and since they did not end anything, but only continued something, something not formed into any story, I needed an act of ceremony to end the story. (*The End of the Story* 230-231)

Although the narrator, of both “Story” and *The End of the Story*, cannot reconcile the relationship, cannot reconcile the puzzle, an act of ceremony can serve as a sense of closure; and, perhaps, the full significance of the story will be revealed at a later time (however unlikely). This deference of meaning, for the narrator, and for the reader, is the element that makes the work of Lydia Davis so intriguing. Readers, like the narrators of these works, feel compelled to solve the puzzle, despite the fact that the puzzle is unsolvable, so the work lingers in the imagination, like a ghost, haunting us, like most good fiction.

“What Was Interesting,” “Center of the Story,” and “New Year’s Resolution”

“What Was Interesting,” first published in *Almost No Memory* (1997) and then in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009) is, again, about a woman writing a story, though, in this instance, the woman writing the story is not the narrator. The narrator summarizes the main action as thus: “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” (204). Much like the situation in “Story,” which is complicated by the narrator’s former relationship to her husband, this situation of being put into the cab is complicated: “He had put her into a cab with two men who were not pleased to be riding with her, as she was not pleased to be riding with them, because of some complicated events that had occurred years before” (204). Again, the complication of the relationship is noted as more compelling because of its complication: “a difficult love affair should be more interesting than an easy one” (206). Again, this man works in the mode of contradiction: “he always did something she had not known he was going to do and it was often in contradiction to a plan they had made” (206). Again, there is anger: “It is not entirely clear, in the story, why being put in a cab by this man should cause so much anger in her . . . She was so angry she would have been happy to take her fists to him, but he was not there” (204-205). Again, the story is concluded by a sense of ceremony:

She was sick that day from all she had drunk. It would be more interesting to be well after drinking so much than to be sick, but she preferred being sick to being well that day, as though it were a celebration of the change that had happened. (209)

Following this celebration, the relationship ends: “After this, she would have almost nothing more to do with him. She would not answer his letters, and would barely speak to him if she chanced to meet him” (209). However, full closure of the relationship, and the story is deferred: “but this anger of hers, lasting so long, was certainly more interesting to her, because in the end she found it harder to explain than the fact that she had loved him so long” (209).

In “The Center of the Story,” first published in *Almost No Memory* (197) and then in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009), the narrator tells the story about a woman who has written a story: “A woman has written a story that has a hurricane in it, and a hurricane usually promises to be interesting. But in this story the hurricane threatens the city without actually striking it” (173). Although this story (and the story being written in it) is not about a relationship with a man, it shares the theme of absence. In “Story,” *The End of the Story*, and “What Was Interesting,” the man’s absence from the relationship, both physical and emotional, sparks the initial problem. In “The Center of the Story,” the problem is the absence of a center: “unlike a hurricane, this story has no center” (173). Like *The End of the Story*, “The Center of the Story” begins at the end, after the story has been written, and it is a puzzle to the woman who wrote it: “Now that it is finished, it puzzles her” (173). We then hear about this woman’s process of writing the story and her preparation: her reading the Bible, her note taking, her visits to churches and synagogues. We also hear about a character, an ill man. As we hear about these things, the narrator suggests possible, but unsatisfactory centers for the story. In the last paragraph, the narrator brings in a new problem, that of ending the story: “This comes close to the end of the story as it is now, but she can’t really end with the devil and a train ride. So the end is a problem, too, though less of a problem than the center” (176). Finally, the narrator arrives at two solutions to the problem of the lack of a center: “There may be no center” (176); or, “there is a center but the center is empty . . . in the same way that the man was sick but not dying, the hurricane approached but did not strike, and she had a religious calm but no faith” (177).

“New Year’s Resolution,” first published in *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* (2001) and then in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009), concerns a problem sparked by a conversation: “I ask my friend Bob what his New Year’s resolutions are and he says, with a shrug (indicating that this is obvious or not surprising): to drink less, to lose weight . . . He asks me the same, but I am not ready to answer him yet” (354). The rest of this one paragraph story attempts to answer this question, though the answer is deferred for several days: “After a few days of consideration, I think the most truthful answer to my friend Bob would be: My New Year’s resolution is to learn to see myself as nothing” (354). The problem is this: “Is this competitive? He wants to lose some weight, I want to see myself as nothing. Of course, to be competitive is not in keeping with any Buddhist philosophy” (354). The narrator quickly arrives at an additional problem:

But there is another problem, which I have been wanting to describe to Bob for a few weeks now: at last, halfway through your life, you are smart enough to see that it all amounts to nothing, even success amounts to nothing. But how does a person learn to see herself as nothing when she has already had so much trouble learning to see herself as something in the first place? (354-455)

The complication posed by this additional problem proves puzzling: “It’s so confusing. You spend the first half of your life learning that you are something after all,

now you have to spend the second half learning to see yourself as nothing. You have been a negative nothing now you want to be a positive nothing” (355). The narrator’s resolution proves difficult: “I have begun trying, in these first days of the new year, but so far it’s pretty difficult. I’m pretty close to nothing all morning, but by late afternoon what is in me that is something starts throwing its weight around” (355). The narrator suggests, at the conclusion of the story, that perhaps she should lower her expectations: “So what I think at this point is that I’m aiming too high, that maybe nothing is too much, to begin with. Maybe for now I should just try, each day, to be a little less than I usually am” (355). The narrator has arrived at a possible solution to the problem, but putting this solution into action may take some, perhaps a very long time. Likely, the narrator will not achieve this goal in her lifetime.

Ceremonial Closure

Resolution. Reconciliation. *The End of the Story*. Not possible. As concluded by Josh Cohen, “Davis’ fiction repeatedly carries us across an elaborate often labyrinthine logical and emotional pathway only to leave both narrator and reader in ignorance” (“Reflexive Incomprehension” 507). Perhaps the form of these narratives would be more appropriately described as problem/complication rather than problem/solution, for the problem merely becomes more complex through its analysis rather than solved. The initial problem multiplies. And, without resolution of the problem, the story, truly can never end. As Josh Cohen argues in reference to *The End of the Story*: “the narrator turns to the ceremony in the absence of an image or revelation to resolve the story” (514). So we are left to drink our tea, even though it is “cheap and bitter, with a paper tab hanging over the side of the mug” (Davis, *The End of the Story* 231). However, the question remains: why do we so love a mystery; why are we so obsessed to solve it? And why does it linger with us when we do not?

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