**Lydia Davis’s Grammatical Examples[[1]](#endnote-1)**

Critics and admirers of the writer and translator Lydia Davis have always struggled to categorize her very short fiction. Her stories have been variously described as ‘miniatures, anecdotes, essays, jokes, parables, fables, texts, aphorisms or even apothegms, prayers or simply observations’ (Ricks qtd. in ‘The Man Booker’ 2013), ‘language games’ (Perloff 1989), or ‘philosophical investigations’ (Knight 2008). While her fiction could be nothing but minimal (her stories rarely exceed two or three pages and are often only a sentence long) their surprising, often cunning compactness seems to upend expectations of what a story is: a sentence fragment taken verbatim from John Ruskin’s *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, an exercise in re-reading and rewriting Beckett’s *Worstward Ho,* a ‘bad’ translation,a two-line dialogue between two women who like the word ‘extraordinary.’ The relatively little critical work on Davis has also struggled to position her firmly within wider literary contexts: minimalism, metafiction, LANGUAGE poetry. [[2]](#endnote-2) Indeed, her writing frequently verges into metafictional territory, most notably in early pieces such as ‘Story,’ ‘The Centre of the Story,’ and ‘The Letter,’ which begin as painful self-reflections on dysfunctional relationships only to become distracted in the act of their own telling and by the boundaries of their own forms. But Davis manages to evade minimalism and metafiction’s cycles of exhaustion and her fiction often appears larger than the space it takes up on the page.[[3]](#endnote-3) Mark McGurl gestures to this quality in her writing when he includes Davis in a group of ‘miniaturists,’ who are ‘small and self-contained but not linguistically parsimonious [...] maximalism in a minimalist package, or, in the Deleuzian idiom, as the becoming-maximal of Carverian minimalism’ (2009: 375-76).

These genre problems find form in one of Davis’s most pervasive and overlooked modes: the grammatical example. Take, for instance, ‘A Double Negative’ from Davis’s 2001 collection, *Samuel Johnson is Indignant*. The story reads in its entirety:

At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child. (Davis 2011: 373)

The story’s extreme brevity and its title’s apparent impersonality makes it seem, at first, to be a model of cold experimentalism, an Oulipian exercise in procedural constraint or a comic literalization of structuralist narratology, which emphasizes an analogy between grammatical and narrative syntax. As the language of the double negative unfolds, however, these constraints are revealed to be both formal and embodied, uncovering a nexus of social, psychological, and personal expectation that emerges out of the tension between the certainty (both moral and linguistic) of the prescriptive grammatical exemplar and the indeterminacy of the speaker’s expression. The story plays on our assumptions about grammar as a set of restrictive rules that govern the use of ‘correct’ language and which are largely encountered in institutional spaces like the classroom. While we might expect the story to enforce a view of grammar as socially normative, the very details of the example validate the ‘incorrect’ linguistic form it seeks to demonstrate. The ‘not’ that defines the double negative becomes the *only* way of articulating the speaker’s uncertainty in language, as her statement oscillates between defiant refusal and paralyzing indecision with each revision and reiteration. The story makes explicit the ways that doubt mediates the relationship between language and reality, but it also situates grammar as a possible means of working through this crisis, of recovering the social or the philosophical in the linguistic. By drawing us into the detail, the story addresses the opposing scales of grammar – on the one hand remedial, concrete, and mundane, and, on the other, philosophical, social, institutional, theoretical – as a crucial means of reconnecting word and world.

Davis’s sustained attention to grammar in stories like ‘A Double Negative,’ ‘Honoring the Subjunctive,’ or ‘Example of a Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room’ compress and transform larger social or aesthetic concerns into concrete and mundane problems of grammar. In these stories, her characters move between psychological depth and the flat, demonstrative identity of a subject in a grammar book; her language oscillating between the literary and linguistic curiosity.[[4]](#endnote-4) Her tendency to focus on the minute workings of language has led many – including Davis herself – to view her work as hermetic. In a 1997 interview with Francine Prose, Davis remarked:

I don’t have much trouble focusing on detail, word to word, sentence to sentence, but I have to make a major effort to step back from a piece of writing and summarize what its themes are. As a child I resisted knowing much about the outside world – politics, international situations . . . I hated history because the events could have come out too many different ways. Whereas I loved math because there was only one way a problem could come out.

This resistance to ‘stepping back’ has also led critics to question where exactly Davis fits in the schema of contemporary American literature. Larry McCaffrey states something like the consensus view when he claims that ‘Davis’s minimalist style was not developed as a reaction against the excesses of her postmodern contemporaries. Indeed, quite the contrary, both as a writer and a person Davis has evolved pretty much outside the context of contemporary American literary or cultural movements’ (1996: 61). Speaking to McCaffrey Davis insists that she actively avoided associating herself with any ‘group’ or ‘program’ and claims that, like the resistance to ‘the outside world’ in her writing, she ‘simply did not read her contemporaries,’ although she acknowledged that some aesthetic or thematic crossovers are unconscious and inescapable, ‘the product of the times’ (65).

Nevertheless, we might be forgiven for wanting to read Davis as a ‘product of the times,’ given her close but oblique relationship to the academic and literary institutions that shaped literary production at the end of the twentieth century. Davis finished her undergraduate degree at Barnard College in the wake of student revolts at Columbia University in 1968, at a moment when ‘awkward translations’ of key theoretical texts were beginning to be ‘passed from hand to hand in classes or at social gatherings’ (Cusset 2008: 60). By the 1980s and 1990s, when continental theory had become an institutional force in American universities, she was writing some of her best-known fiction, including her only novel *The End of the Story* (1997). In this off-kilter campus novel the majority of the action takes place at the margins of the institution, in corridors, walkways, and off-campus bars, resulting in a text that seems to simultaneously invite in and resist what McGurl has called the ‘systematic coupling’ (2009, 4) of the writer and the school. Unlike other writers of her generation, the influence of continental theory does not manifest in obvious ways in her fiction – a story entitled ‘Nietszche’ [*sic*] is about a spelling mistake. Instead, Davis’s engagement with theory comes largely through her translation practice. While living in Paris with fellow writer and then-partner Paul Auster, Davis’s first translations of Blanchot’s *L’Arrêt de mort* (*Death Sentence*) appeared in 1975, around the same time that Jacques Derrida was ‘introducing’ Blanchot to American academic circles, most notably in his contribution to *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979). In 1981 Davis published her translation of *The Gaze of Orpheus*,the first collection of Blanchot’s critical essays to appear in English (Evans, 2018: 25). Davis’s role in disseminating Blanchot in America, albeit as translator rather than ‘theorist,’ underscores her marginal relationship to what John Guillory calls ‘the canon of theory’ (1993: 176) in its radical and institutional forms in 1970s and 1980s.

Marjorie Perloff has described Davis as a ‘post-experimental’ writer, ‘for whom the first wave of postwar experimentalism…has been replaced by what looks at first like the return to a normative realism, to the recounting of ordinary incidents that stand synecdochically for the larger fabric of life’ (1989: 199). This return to realism would seem to align Davis with a set of ‘late postmodernists’ (Green 2005), or a slightly younger generation ‘post-postmodernists’ (Burn 2008), whose fiction is characterised by a tension between postmodern models of experimentalism and a desire to return to social realism and historical commitment.[[5]](#endnote-5) As Robert McLaughlin argues, post-postmodernism moves through postmodernism’s supposed ‘sever[ance] of the referential relationship between language and literature and the world’ (2004: 58). ‘Post-postmodernism,’ McLaughlin goes on to explain, ‘seeks not to reify the cynicism, the disconnect, the atomized privacy of our society nor to escape or mask it (as much art, serious and pop, does), but, by engaging the language-based nature of its operations, to make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us’ (62). Davis’s work seems to sit on the cusp (or the margin) of this transformation in contemporary fiction but her more recent work still does not fit neatly into the dominant trends that come ‘after’ postmodernism. Instead, her fiction seems to embody McLaughlin’s definition all too literally. As Perloff goes on to elaborate, her realism ‘has a parodic dimension’ that focuses ‘less on “character” or on moral and psychological value, than on language itself’ (1989: 199).

This essay proposes to read Davis’s fiction as ‘grammatical investigations’ that attempt to work against what Toril Moi has described as the ‘generalized doubt’ (2017: 82) that characterized the theoretical and aesthetic ‘skepticism’ of postmodernism. Davis’s commitment to this process situates her work within post-postmodern debates about doubt and belief, but crucially reframes these concerns about communication, both aesthetic and social, as problems of grammar. An integral but perhaps ambiguous concept, Wittgenstein understands grammar to be a ‘shared criteria’ for language use. As Rush Rhees interprets it ‘the rules of grammar are the rules of the lives in which there is language’ (qtd. in ibid 53). Grammatical investigation, then, is the means of doingphilosophy, of investigating use and leading language back from its metaphysical misunderstandings because, in the oft-cited phrase, ‘Philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*’ (§38) from the contexts in which it has meaning. This process, as Stanley Cavell interprets it, does not seek to bring forward ‘solutions to problems’ but acts as ‘treatments of them, like therapies’ (1982: 175). Grammar offers a means of gaining clarity on the relationship between language and the world and of working through forms of skepticism and misunderstanding. Davis’s investigations frequently take the form of grammar exercises, examples, or lessons that evoke associations with schoolroom pedagogy, foreign language learning, translation, or the rules of ‘usage’ that not only demonstrate a ‘devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the everyday, the low, the near’ (161). They also represent a desire to reconnect and communicate with the reader.

In what follows, I suggest that Davis’s engagement with grammar exposes her peculiar positioning both inside and outside the contemporary literary and academic sphere. Her grammatical approach resists poststructuralist interpretations of language that were beginning to take hold of the literary-academic sphere at the beginning of her career. Focusing on her use of pedagogical forms, I demonstrate that her commitment to small scale, grammar exercises also interrogate the self-reference of postmodern aesthetics and reformulates post-postmodernism’s emphasis on communication. These investigations frequently devolve into the comedic, particularly when they address the mundane and marginalized position that grammar holds in academic institutions and in our shared imagination. My essay closes by exploring the gendered labor involved in these kinds of grammatical investigation, labor that is often excluded from the institutional mainstream, but which is crucial in critiquing and remedying problems of linguistic skepticism and instrumental in finding a way back from the metaphysical to the everyday.

**Parts (Mis)Understood**

In their reading of Davis’s story ‘Break it Down’ (1986), Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman diagnose the protagonist’s unwieldy and futile attempts to impose a ‘theory of value’ on his disintegrating relationship as a symptom of ‘our affective encounter with “ontological disorganization” and the “unruliness of the world”’ (2014: 83). But as Edelman argues, the narrator’s urge to theorize succeeds only in producing an awareness of instability, an effect that he links in passing to Paul de Man’s ‘resistance to theory,’ which operates as ‘a defense against the breaking down it simultaneously desires’ (87, 98). Edelman’s reading of ‘Break it Down’ as de Manian ‘resistance’ is less a pronouncement of Davis’s story as poststructuralist, along any kind of ideological lines, than it is a claim about the institutional hold that American deconstruction had over the discipline since the early 1980s. But De Man’s ‘programmatic’ (Redfield, 2016, 4) statement that ‘the resistance to theory’ is ‘the resistance to the use of language about language’ (de Man, 1986: 12) is relevant to Davis’s work because, as John Guillory notes, it relies on the ‘expulsion of grammar’ (1993: 210) from the realm of theory and because it underpins the linguistic skepticism Davis’s work interrogates. In de Man’s view, literary reading involves the ‘unsettling’ foregrounding of rhetoric over grammar, disrupting their hierarchical relationship in the classical *trivium*.[[6]](#endnote-6) The displacement of grammar, the discipline that de Man claims is ‘the necessary pre-condition for scientific and humanistic knowledge’ (1986: 14), results in a perpetual tension between rhetoric and grammar that accounts for theory’s ability to dismantle dominant epistemological systems and to enact its own ‘undoing’ (17). While de Man sees this destabilisation as central to theory’s ability to disrupt dominant epistemologies and ‘unmask ideological aberration’ (11), the ultimate implication of this model is the instability of language as a mechanism for making any kind of stable statement about the world outside of language. To confront this indeterminacy, Jonathan Culler suggests, is to end up with a ‘more-than-grammatical problem’ (2007: 96).

‘Foucault and Pencil,’ from Davis’s 1997 collection *Almost No Memory*, reduces the theoretical problem of connecting text and world to one of grammatical reading.[[7]](#endnote-7) While her use of Foucault might suggest a conscious opposition between a more politically oriented theory and models of formalist deconstruction, this intellectual association quickly dissolves into a de Manian tension between grammar and rhetoric that is located in the act of literary (and theoretical) reading. In this instance, Davis’s intense inward focus manifests as a resistance to knowing, and more specifically as a resistance to knowing through theory. The story follows its protagonist’s failed attempts to read Foucault in French at snatched periods throughout the day, first in her therapist’s waiting room and then on the subway, while at the same time trying to work through an ‘argument’ that has occurred in her personal life. The prose is notational, removing pronouns and articles, and using conjunctions sparingly so that there is a blurring of boundaries between the content of Foucault’s text, the act of reading, and the interruptions of everyday life: ‘Sat down to read Foucault with pencil in hand. Knocked over glass of water onto waiting-room floor. Put down Foucault and pencil, mopped up water, refilled glass’ (Davis, 2011:151).

The story goes on to empty ‘theory’ of its intellectual content, comically foreclosing any communication of or engagement with the ideas in Foucault’s text, a sentiment which manifests in the narrator’s repeated refusal to read: ‘Sat in subway car, took out Foucault but did not read’; ‘stopped thinking and opened Foucault’ (151). At the root of this resistance is the narrator’s inability to make grammatical sense of Foucault’s French as she repeatedly displaces the act of reading onto a simultaneously rigorous and absentminded search for grammatical taxonomy: ‘Short sentences easier to understand than long ones. Certain long ones understandable part by part, but so long, forgot beginning before reaching end’ (151-52). Rather than making clear the meaning of the text, this process merely helps her gain a greater grammatical understanding of her lack of comprehension:

Understood more clearly at which points Foucault harder to understand and at which points easier: harder to understand when sentence was long and noun identifying subject of sentence was left back at beginning, replaced by male or female pronoun, when forgot what noun pronoun replaced had only pronoun for company traveling through sentence. Sometimes pronoun giving way in mid-sentence to new noun, new noun in turn replaced by new pronoun which then continued on to end of sentence. (152)

The linguistic reading of Foucault refuses any transcendence of grammar towards meaning as she struggles to find a pattern in Foucault’s unwieldy syntax. It also reformulates poststructuralist skepticism about meaning and reference as a problem of mundane linguistic misunderstanding, its intellectual weight eclipsed by the material conditions of the narrator, who labors to complete her translation amidst the distractions of her day-to-day life. This sentiment extends further to her comprehension of the text’s abstract concepts. She admits that it was ‘harder to understand when subject of sentence was noun like *thought, absence, law,* easier to understand when subject was noun like *beach, wave, sand, santorium* [sic]*, pension, door, hallway,* or, *civil servant*’ (152). The reader recoils from Foucault’s abstractions and finds refuge in a collection of mundane vocabulary that sparks yet more distraction and procrastination.

The recursive attempt to establish a grammatical ‘order of things’ in Foucault’s text is juxtaposed to the figural descriptions of the ‘conflict’ the narrator is experiencing in her personal life. As Jonathan Evans notes, ‘there is a metaphorical translation between Foucault’s book and the argument, where the difficulties of comprehension are carried over from one domain to another’ (2016: 139). Unlike Foucault’s text, whose grammatical opacity shuts out any intellectual associations, Davis’s ‘argument’ is conveyed figuratively as a ‘red flag’ (Davis 2011: 151) by the narrator’s therapist, and also as a ‘form of travel’ or ‘vehicle’ (152) propelling her forward not in the emotional course of the argument but by collapsing back into a grammatical movement ‘on to next sentence, next sentence on to next’ until ‘arguers are not where they had started’ (151). Later, the argument is compared to a ‘plant’, it ‘grew like hedge, surrounding arguers at first thinly, some light coming through, then more thickly, keeping light out, or darkening light. By argument’s end, arguers could not leave hedge, could not leave each other, and light was dim’ (152). Here, grammar and rhetoric are, again, in tension, not only in the metaphorical opposition between Foucault’s text and the narrator’s personal argument but in the story’s formal suppression of grammatical subjects and other parts of speech and the narrator (and therapist’s) use of figural language, neither of which provide any stable knowledge about the text nor the ‘argument.’

The tension between rhetoric and grammar is externalized in the separation between the act of reading Foucault and the narrator’s attempt to interpret the ‘argument’ in her personal life. The eponymous ‘pencil’ moves between both actions, placing them in physical and material proximity, but it also serves as a barrier to any crossover between ‘theory’ and the world outside the text. While the narrator is perpetually poised to write — either in her own notebook or to begin her annotations of Foucault’s text — her ‘pencil’ remains ‘idle in hand’ (152), illustrating a fundamental tension between ‘theory’ and the act of writing: ‘Took out notebook and pen to make note about passengers, made accidental mark with pencil in margin of Foucault, put down notebook, erased mark’ (152). In so doing, she refuses any resolution of the tension between these two modes of reading, which remain mutually obfuscating. While both grammar and rhetoric continue to participate in the destabilization of her cognition, grammar is not at any point subordinated to rhetoric. The diligent removal of the accidental pencil mark on Foucault’s text asserts stagnation over revelation and foregrounds the equivocation inherent in the opposition between rhetoric and grammar that underscores Davis’s resistance to theoretical — and de Manian — critique. Davis deflates, rather than resolves, this opposition, parodically relegating (and reformulating) both Foucault’s text and her personal reckoning to a problem of literary emphasis: ‘made note of what was now at least understood about lack of understanding reading Foucault, looked up at other passengers, thought again about argument, made note of same question about argument as before though with stress on a different word’ (153). This shift in emphasis suggests a desire for an alternative approach to language, one that breaks free of the circuitous logic of skeptical ‘self-resistance’ and which regrounds language in the quotidian, mundane, and imperfect.

***La Ferme et La Ville***

Davis’s opposition of the theoretical and the everyday in ‘Foucault and Pencil’ highlights the problem of meaning and reference as a central concern of her fiction, one which is worked through on the level of grammar. These questions also underpin her response to postmodernism, which can be seen most clearly in her aesthetic and philosophical differences from her close contemporary, Paul Auster, and his quintessentially postmodern *New York Trilogy* (1987). Davis and Auster met in the late 1960s while he was studying at Columbia and she at Barnard. The couple moved to Paris in 1971, where they lived in ‘romantic, self-imposed’ ‘hardship’ (Goodyear 2014), working as translators to pay the bills while co-running *Living Hand,* which published Davis’s first collection, *The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories*, in 1976. They were married in 1974 and divorced in 1978, not long after the birth of their son, Daniel. Auster’s first memoir, *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure* (1997), describes the ruthless discipline with which he and Davis approached their ‘work-for-hire’ translations, often dividing the source text in two, ‘literally tearing the book in half if [they] only had one copy,’ and each working rigorously towards a daily quota of words and pages (132). The image of Auster and Davis ripping a book in half offers a telling metaphor for the divergent aesthetics of these two authors and more crucially for the different ways in which questions about language and grammar enter their fiction.[[8]](#endnote-8) Examining Davis’s French Lesson I: *Le Meurtre*’ alongside Auster’s ‘City of Glass,’ I argue that Davis inverts the suspicions of the metaphysical postmodern detective story and transforms them into a Wittgensteinian investigation that seeks to recuperate meaning.

‘City of Glass’ offers a clear backdrop for reading Davis’s attitude to postmodernism’s theoretical influences. Since its publication in 1985, followed by the rest of the trilogy in 1987, the novel has been widely acknowledged as an exemplary postmodern ‘anti-detective story’, a genre which projects the detective as ‘the ultimate semiotician’ (Trotter 1991: 67)*.* The plot of ‘City of Glass’ is set in motion when Daniel Quinn, a failed poet who writes popular detective stories under the pseudonym William Wilson, receives a phone call requesting the services of a private eye named Paul Auster. Deciding to follow up the lead, Quinn impersonates Auster and is summoned to the home of Peter Stillman who, as a child, was locked for nine years in a dark room by his father, also called Peter Stillman, so that he would be isolated from the world and discover ‘God’s language’ (Auster 1990: 23).Stillman’s seclusion produces a disturbing and extremely isolated private language, not only devoid of any human context but, due to the dark room in which he was imprisoned, from any kind of external referent at all. Quinn is hired by Peter’s wife and former speech therapist, Virginia Stillman, who is concerned about the imminent release of Peter Stillman Sr. from prison and contracts Quinn to track him through the streets of New York. Quinn eventually discovers that Stillman’s erratic walking has been inscribing the words ‘THE TOWER OF BABEL’ onto the city itself. Having deciphered Stillman’s code and run out of pages in his notebook Quinn vanishes from the text, the mystery remaining unsolved.

These instantly recognizable postmodern tropes have led to a critical tendency to read the novel as a mere literalization of French theory. As Scott Dimovitz asserts,

the *Trilogy’s* constant meditation on heavy-hitter ontological and epistemological questions makes it read like a postmodern primer. Long sections of the elder Peter Stillman’s attempt to find a prelapsarian language by way of locking his infant son in a room do, in fact, read retrospectively like Derrida for Dummies. (2006: 615)

Alison Russell’s early appraisal of the novel best exemplified this poststructuralist reading, focusing on the anti-detective’s futile quest for a transcendental signified that manifests, also, in the author’s ‘logocentric quest for origin, a quest he himself continually deconstructs’ (1990: 80). The search for linguistic transparency is rendered monstrous by the deranged experiments of the older Peter Stillman who seeks to solve the postmodern crisis of representation by inventing new words: ‘a language that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world’ (Auster 1990: 92).

The novel’s pervasive refusal to name evokes the tension between the theoretical and the personal so prominent in Davis’s stories. Auster is widely known for his experimental autobiographical writing, which takes on a distinctly postmodern character in *The New York Trilogy* as Auster inscribes himself – and his authorship – into the fabric of the text. The metatextual confusion of Daniel Quinn, an author, with Paul Auster, a detective, seems, at first, to proclaim the ‘death of the author,’ with Quinn’s repeated insistence that ‘there is no Paul Auster here’ (Auster 1990,8). But the ‘real’ Auster makes an appearance halfway through the story and is revealed to be not a private detective but a writer, who answers the door to Quinn with ‘an uncapped fountain pen’ ‘fixed between his thumb and first two fingers, still poised in the writing position’ (111). Auster’s autobiographical presence is compounded by the additional appearance of Auster’s wife Siri (his second wife is the novelist Siri Hustvedt) and his son Daniel (121). Auster’s family life offers a direct contrast to Quinn, who, the reader learns, lost his wife and son in a mysterious and unexplained accident. The mirroring of Daniel Quinn and Daniel Auster plays into the novel’s wider preoccupation with patrilineal naming and lineage, which is most evident in the two Peter Stillmans, along with Quinn’s dead son, who was also called Peter. The duplication unsettles the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, as well as their textual identities. It also amplifies the presence of its male characters, foregrounding relationships between fathers and sons that is characteristic of Auster’s *oeuvre*.

The doubling of male protagonists results in the subsequent erasure of female characters and, most crucially, in the autobiographical erasure of Davis herself. In an interview with Larry McCaffrey and Sinda Gregory, Auster noted that he wrote ‘City of Glass’ to imagine ‘what would have happened to me if I hadn’t met my wife [Hustvedt] and what I came up with was Quinn’ (1993,33). But in writing his second marriage out of existence he more conspicuously erases his first. Quinn’s unnamed wife is diametrically opposed to the fictional Siri, ‘a tall, thin blonde, radiantly beautiful’ whose overabundant ‘energy and happiness’ makes ‘everything around her invisible’ (Auster 1990:121). The pattern of erasure is evident, also, in the figure of Virginia Stillman. Having set the mystery in motion, Virginia disappears from the text at just the moment that Quinn begins to decipher the mystery and as soon as he locates the ‘real’ Paul Auster. Virginia acts as the catalyst for the detective story but she also performs a crucial and largely underacknowledged role as linguistic mediator, a translator of the younger Peter Stillman’s peculiar private language and as his speech therapist, responsible for his assimilation into the social order after he is released from the ‘dark room.’ This detail is significant not only for the novel’s exploration of poststructuralist theories of language but also because Davis briefly studied to become a speech therapist before publishing her first collection of stories in 1976.

Auster’s metafictional erasure of Davis closely tracks the development of the novella’s attitude towards language in the unfolding of its mystery plot, whereby the search for transcendental meaning, for ‘a language that will at last say what we have to say,’ is rendered monstrous in the figure of the older Peter Stillman and ultimately self-destructive, in the case of Quinn. As the younger Peter Stillman’s speech therapist, Virginia role is reparative, offering a path back from linguistic emptiness (the ‘dark room’) towards social connection and communication. Her disappearance pushes Quinn further into his fruitless metaphysical quest for linguistic transparency in which the ‘corrupted,’ normative language that Virginia represents would be supplanted by an Adamic process of renaming. The story is fundamentally concerned with the connection between words and their referents but it is less interested in the linguistic systems, or grammars, that regulate how these words combine to make meaning, whether formally or socially. In other words, the eradication of Virginia Stillman also signals the expulsion of grammar from ‘City of Glass.’

Davis’s story ‘French Lesson I: *Le Meurtre*,’ published a year after ‘City as Glass’ in her collection *Break It Down* (1986) also treats philosophical issues of language and translation through the generic guise of the (anti)detective story. Davis’s approach to these common themes – or rather these narrative and formal ‘details’ – demonstrates not only her aesthetic divergence from Auster, but her refusal of the ontological and epistemological questions that his text poses. Refocusing on grammar, Davis’s narrator-cum-French teacher dismisses these kinds of ‘modern and contemporary ideas about language’ as ‘generally accepted’ (2011: 108), turning her attention, instead, to the investigation of how meaning is made.

Taking the form of a remedial language lesson, the generic playfulness of Davis’s story is embodied in its dual title whereby the story’s linguistic and pedagogical themes are held in tension with an elliptical mystery narrative.[[9]](#endnote-9) The lesson slowly introduces French vocabulary related to *la ferme* – as the narrator states, one must ‘always start learning your foreign language with the names of farm animals’ (103). In contrast to Peter Stillman’s ‘dark room,’ a site of failed instruction that eliminates the possibility for any kind of social consensus on language use, Davis’s narrator refuses to translate French words, instead allowing their meaning to be revealed through the context of her sentences:

Besides *la vache,* there are other *animaux* on *la ferme,* whose buildings are weather-beaten, pocked with rusty nails, and leaning at odd angles, but which has a new tractor. *Les chiens* cringe in the presence of their master, *le fermier,* and bark at *les chats* as *les chats* slink mewing to the back door, and *les poulets* cluck and scratch and are special pets of *le fermier’s* children until they are beheaded by *le fermier* and plucked by *la femme* of *le fermier* with her red-knuckled hands and then cooked and eaten by the entire *famille.* Until further notice do not pronounce the final consonants of any of the words in your new vocabulary unless they are followed by the letter *e,* and sometimes not even then. The rules and their numerous exceptions will be covered in later lessons. (104)

This introductory passage offers a proliferation of vocabulary that accelerates the reader’s language acquisition. An otherwise familiar cast of characters (*le fermier, la vache, les chiens, la famille*) are instilled with a violent power structure centering around the figure of *le fermier*, as the innocence of the grammatical example is subverted by an overabundance of macabre detail*.* These narrative digressions into the increasingly sinister world of *la ferme* continue throughout the story but, as in this passage, are always restrained by the formal reassertion of the grammar lesson. In this way, the *meurtre* is continuously deferred and subordinated to the recitation of grammatical rules and exceptions. The objective of ‘French Lesson’ is to lead readers towards understanding their ‘first complete sentence in French’ (109), slowly introducing nouns, articles, prepositions, and verbs, until each part of the sentence is in place. The narrative is dependent not on the resolution of the detective story but rather on the syntactical completion of the sentence. ‘French Lesson’ transmutes the traditional narrative suspense associated with detective fiction into a grammatical suspension reliant on the slow drip of parts of speech that control the comprehension of the narrative as a whole.

While Davis’s persistent reduction of the detective story to a grammatical and syntactic formula seems to conform to the tropes of the postmodern anti-detective story, her emphasis on comprehension, rendered through her pedagogical form, sets her apart from the metaphysical crises that other texts of this genre manifest. In ‘City of Glass’, Quinn’s climactic deciphering of Peter Stillman’s ‘THE TOWER OF BABEL’ gestures towards narrative development, but the textual legibility of Stillman’s motives leads only to the dissipation the mystery plot. Conversely, in ‘French Lesson’ the reader’s mastery of their first complete sentence in French, ‘*la femme est dans la cuisine*’ (109), results in a proliferation of alternative sentences and the expansion of narrative possibilities: ‘*La vache est dans la grange. La pomme de terre est dans la bassine. La bassine est dans* the sink’ (109). (The reader cannot help but think, here, of Wittgenstein’s cows and Saussure’s tree – *arbre* – which features elsewhere in the story.) The abrupt reversion to English puts a stop to this self-perpetuating structure, imposing a linguistic limit on the reader and regaining narrative control by reintroducing the problem of translation and linguistic competence. At the end of the story, Davis provides a list of vocabulary that helps the reader ascertain ‘the whereabouts of *le fermier*’ and ‘follow him into *la ville*’ (109). While the simple syntactic formula emphasizes the fixed position of nouns both within the structure of the sentence and in *la ferme,* the vocabulary associated with *la ville* introduces new forms of grammatical and narrative suspense:

*le sac:* bag

*la grive*: thrush

*l’alouette:* lark

*l’aile:* wing

*la plume:* feather

*la hachette:* hatchet

*le manche:* handle

*l’anxiété:* anxiety

*le meurtre:* murder (109)

The tension at the heart of the story, and its persistent deflation through grammatical means, is rooted in Davis’s exploration of French as a gendered language. It is also the point at which her resistance to ‘City of Glass’ and its quest for linguistic transcendence is most visible. Davis’s language lesson culminates in a grammatical example that also projects a familiar female stereotype: ‘*la femme est dans la cuisine*.’ The rigid construction of the French sentence, which puts each syntactical element in its correct order and place, and which fixes into place the narrative world of *la ferme,* also dictates the societal and spatial placement of *la femme* and her function in the story. Confined to the kitchen, *la femme* of *le fermier* is only able to look out of the window and partially perceive the sinister events unfolding:

A light is on in the barn, but outside it is dark and *la femme* of *le fermier* looks out a little anxiously across the barnyard from the window of her *cuisine*, where she is peeling vegetables. Now the hired man is silhouetted in the doorway of the barn. *La femme* wonders why he is standing still holding a short object in his right hand. The plural article *les*, spelled *l e s,* as in *les vaches,* is invariable… The singular *article* is either masculine, *le,* or feminine, *la,* depending on the noun it accompanies […] [T]here is very little else to go by, to tell what in the world of French nouns is masculine and what is feminine. […] One day, however, *la maison* will seem inevitably feminine to you, with its welcome open doors, its shady rooms, its warm kitchen. (106)

Here, Davis makes an explicit connection between the gendered role of ‘*la femme* of *le fermier*’and the grammar that constitutes and internalizes these gendered positions.

While ‘City of Glass’ destabilizes identities through patrilineal naming – both biographical and fictional – ‘French Lesson’ refocuses Auster’s abstract, metaphysical (and fundamentally poststructuralist) questions back onto the quotidian practicalities of grammar. Davis is prone to the same kind of autofictional impulses as Auster but instead of inscribing the author into the text, she excludes markers of identity entirely. Her stories frequently address themes of marital breakdown and its aftermath in abstract forms, as in ‘Problem’ which reduces complicated inter-familial bonds to a mathematical equation: ‘X is with Y, but living on money from Z. Y himself supports W, who lives with her child by V’ (124). Male-female relationships are schematized, and characters reduced to anonymous, gendered functions as in ‘Wife One in the Country’ where the narrator’s nominal identity, ‘Wife,’ is subverted in light of the presence of ‘Wife Two,’ sending her into a logical tailspin that threatens to deconstruct all her other relationships.

The characters in ‘French Lesson’ are identified by noun only (*la vache, le poulet, le fermier*) and ‘*la femme* of *le fermier*’ (the wife of the farmer)is defined entirely through her relation to the patriarchal noun, which also gives its name to the environment in which the story takes place. Notably, the narrator does not complete the French translation of this phrase, *la femme du fermier.* The English word ‘of’ acts as a linguistic barrier, a hinge that joins the two words while simultaneously enforcing separation. Leaving ‘of’ untranslated also preserves the gendered contrast between the articles *le* and *la*. ‘But where is *le fermier?*’ (107), the narrator asks. Where Auster sought to erase female presence in ‘City of Glass,’ Davis banishes the patriarchal figure and excludes ‘*la ville*.’ As *le fermier’s* absence becomes more and more conspicuous, *la femme* of *le fermier* comes to be referred to as simply *la femme* (woman) and becomes the primary agent through which the mystery unfolds. Her lines of perception continually lead to things amiss on *la ferme,* most crucially ‘the chopping block covered with *sang* that is still sticky’ (107) – and a homophonic pun on *sens* (meaning), the overall subject, after all, of the French lesson. The unwriting of the male agent transforms the grammatical function of *la femme*. Where Auster’s linguistic self-awareness dramatizes the impossibility of comprehension, ‘French Lesson’ facilitates and extends understanding through linguistic means. Language becomes the key to the mystery, which achieves resolution not in the recovery of the absent body of *le fermier* but in grammatical rediscovery of *la femme.*

**The Name of What She Was: Grammar, Gender, and Comedy**

If the action and philosophical message of ‘City of Glass’ originates in a moment of failed instruction (one with grave and perverse consequences), ‘French Lesson’ asserts its pedagogical form in order to stave off metaphysical uncertainty.[[10]](#endnote-10) But the farm setting of ‘French Lesson’ also makes visible a dynamics of female labor that characterizes Davis’s grammatical investigations, where domestic and reproductive labor (the milking cows) come to the fore and are disrupted in and by the absence of male workers. This is a common feature across Davis’s oeuvre – think of the translator of ‘Foucault and Pencil’ attempting to complete her work on the subway, or the narrator of ‘A Double Negative,’ who calculates, in grammatical terms, the pros and cons of motherhood. Contrasting ‘Example of a Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room’ (‘Your housekeeper *has been* Shelley’) (2011: 715) and ‘Can’t and Won’t,’ in which the narrator is denied a literary prize because she uses contractions in her writing only to turn this complaint into the title story of her most recent story collection, demonstrates Davis’s attentiveness to female labor at various ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. In each instance grammar and gender converge in a kind of comedy of error, one that transforms, often in the space of a one or two-line story, from hilarity to pathos. Much of this humor emerges from the placelessness of Davis’s narrators within the literary-academic spheres that is at odds with their earnest, sometimes futile commitment to their study of language (‘Ph.D.’ reads ‘All these years I thought I had a Ph.D./ But I do not have a Ph.D.’ (2015: 283)). These stories express doubt as to their own institutional and literary value, questioning whether these exercises in language and grammar are worthy of attention. Even as it turns on laughter, the stories leave the reader with the question: what’s so funny about women and grammar?

The answer might lie in Davis’s own ambiguous relationship to feminism and women’s writing. In her interview with McCaffrey she describes how, early in her career, she had ‘specifically *resisted* feminism’: ‘I suppose I have acted like a feminist in certain ways, and I have believed in most or all of the things that feminists believe in, so it wasn’t that I was opposed to their goals theoretically or emotionally. But I have never been an activist. … I still don’t label myself a feminist as such’ (1997: 76). It is clear that Davis’s resistance to feminism is less ideological than taxonomical. Nevertheless, her fiction is replete with explorations of female identities and uniquely female problems. These almost always manifest in parables of gender difference, tending to present male-female relationships in fabular, almost essentialist ways. Stories with titles like: ‘Mothers,’ ‘Meat, My Husband,’ ‘The Thirteenth Woman,’ ‘A Man in Our Town,’ ‘My Husband and I’ are comic explorations of male-female relationships reduced binary oppositions. They are parodies of pronominal misunderstanding which do not neatly align with any distinctive position, political or theoretical, on the subject of ‘woman.’ In ‘Suddenly Afraid,’ which reads, as a continuation of its title, ‘because she couldn’t write the name of what she was: a wa wam owm owamn womn’ (2011: 703), Davis leaves the word unexpressed, forcing the reader to supply the narrator’s identity by completing the anagram. The garbled ordering of the letters suggests a haphazard association with what it might mean to be a woman, expressing trepidation as to its political connotation. Wanting to be neither straightforwardly ‘woman’ or ‘man’ (the final combination ‘womn’ succeeds in dismembering the male suffix), her linguistic play continues in search of a more fitting label and questions the affiliation between linguistic meaning and social use.

When she writes more specifically about the position of women in literary or academic institutions, Davis’s critique is sharper, but it is also the point at which the possibilities of female solidarity within these contexts is most strained. In one scene in *The End of the Story,* for example, the narrator describes meeting other translators, most of whom are women. Davis’s subtle emphasis on the displacement of the underpaid female translator emerges as one among many contributing factors to the narrator’s ongoing writer’s block that makes up the novels plot. It also becomes a point of discomfort as the reader witnesses how the allegiances that might be formed between these undervalued artists and workers are undermined by the very conditions that should unite them:

At first I talk to the woman [translator] with enthusiasm, because there is so much I have wanted to say about translating to a person who understands it […] Then my enthusiasm slowly dies, because everything she says to me is a complaint, and I see that she has no joy in translating – no interest in her own work and no interest in me or my work either. (Davis 2015: 87)

Davis’s fiction repeatedly makes clear, to work with grammar in the institution is to be ignored and marginalized. Nevertheless, her wayward narrators persistently affirm that it is work worth doing. This work frequently emerges out of her use of pedagogical forms, which also highlights the gendered labor involved in these crucial acts of education. Grammar, therefore, becomes a means of articulating Davis’s own institutional marginalization, but it also offers a treatment or ‘therapy’ for these linguistic and social problems.

Tensions between motherhood and grammar, pedagogy and intellectual independence, financial obligation and aesthetic autonomy, survival and a life worth living are everywhere in Davis’s work. More often than not, her stark, almost absurdist humor forces her reader into moments of uncomfortable recognition. In ‘The Old Dictionary,’ the narrator wonders why she takes more care with a very old dictionary than she does with her son, who, in contrast to the dictionary’s linguistic stability, has needs that ‘can change right in the middle of a sentence’ (Davis 2011: 376). These frustrations can be sources of comedy in Davis’s work and the analytical, rigorous way in which her narrators treat their social environments and obligations contribute to the idiosyncratic quality of her fiction. But they also expose and seek to repair the relationship between language and the world. Davis’s grammatical examples do not represent an attempt to instruct in any prescriptive or normative sense but are instead records of her narrators’ attempts to find what Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life.’[[11]](#endnote-11)

Uncovering these forms of life is difficult and, as we have seen, is frequently plagued with doubt. Nowhere is this more apparent than in ‘Grammar Questions’ from Davis’s 2007 collection *Varieties of Disturbance* which struggles to reconcile the linguistic with the social and the ontological. The story focuses on the narrator’s attempts to come to (grammatical) terms with her father’s death, beginning with the seemingly simple question: ‘Now, during the time he is dying, can I say, “This is where he lives”?’ (527). Further possibilities follow: ‘“Well, right now he is not living, he is dying”’, or ‘“He lives in Vernon Hall”’ or ‘“He is dying in Vernon Hall”.’ Where elsewhere Davis’s precision is deployed in crafty exercises in intellectual subversion, here her analytical nature takes on a childlike sincerity. The syntax of this first line reveals a temporal awkwardness; the juxtaposition of ‘Now’ and ‘during’ betray conflicting senses of stasis and duration. The clumsy construction of ‘during the time he is dying’ reads somewhat like an approximate translation, as though Davis is attempting to convey a tense that does not quite exist in English. It seems cold to call it ‘the body’ but it also cannot be ‘his body’ because ‘he is no longer active or capable of owning anything’ (527). What occurs in ‘Grammar Questions’ is the fundamental failure of the language of grief, its peculiar discordance with its prescribed, authorized forms. Indeed, the philosophical problems that unfold from these grammatical investigations demarcate the inadequacy of language when addressing such ontological questions. Davis’s persistent questioning speaks to a kind of obsessive desire for correctness that is prevalent in so much of her fiction, not so much in the form of grammatical pedantry (although this does usually play a part) as of a search for an approximate honesty of representation.

The convergence of grammatical and personal loss in ‘Grammar Questions’ dramatizes a practical working through of the troubled relationship between ‘word’ and ‘world’. Davis’s stories always find their way back from their wider contexts to more personal and intimate subjects, a process that leads her away from abstract philosophies of language back to the everyday. While we might consider Davis’s grammatical examples as corrective, they are deployed not to enforce normative linguistic or social use but are work in the Cavellian sense of a continuous social molding. Her grammatical investigations do not seek to eradicate doubt but to work through it. As she writes in her essay ‘Form as a Response to Doubt,’ originally published in *(How)ever* magazine: ‘Doubt, uneasiness, dissatisfaction with writing or with existing forms may result in the formal integration of these doubts by the creation of new forms, forms that in one way or another exceed or surpass our expectations’ (2019: 224). In the very act of asking grammar questions, Davis brings forward deeper and more multifarious questions about the world around us, working with the idea that bigger things are made up of smaller units, ‘word to word, sentence to sentence.’

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1. I am grateful to Emilie Morin, Adam Kelly, Hannah Roche, and Patricia Malone, and my anonymous reader for their attentive readings of earlier drafts of this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kasia Boddy’s *The American Short Story Since 1950* (2010) gives a discussion of the play of genre in Davis’s work and how this has influenced her occasional categorization as literary minimalist and LANGUAGE poet. Maggie Doherty (2014) describes Davis’s early work as akin to ‘a specifically female take on minimalism,’ exemplified by Anne Beattie, Mary Gaitskill and Lorrie Moore, that combines elements 1980s minimalism, 1970s radical writing, and 1960s confessionalism. For a further discussion of these generic classifications see also, Karen Alexander, ‘Breaking it Down: Analysis in the Stories of Lydia Davis’ (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Julie Tanner (2021) has recently re-evaluated Davis’s use of metafiction in light of discussions about ‘self-reflexive’ writing. Davis’s writing is, for Tanner, an excellent example of the generative possibilities of reflexive writing when it is liberated from ‘the shadow of postmodern negativity.’ Tanner argues that Davis transforms metafiction’s self-reflexive doubt into something generative. While my argument also considers Davis’s aesthetic engagement with doubt, my focus is largely on Davis’s approach to linguistic skepticism rather than self-reflexivity. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In an interview with Lola Boorman (2018) Davis responded to the similarity between her grammar stories and the ‘anonymous examples you find in grammar books,’ stating ‘I hadn't thought of it that way because I really love the example sentences that are given in a grammar. I collect foreign grammars and I love just reading, you know, “Peter will be coming on the train today,” for example. They actually have content, but the content sort of floats there divorced from any story.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a fuller discussion of these debates see two special issues of *Twentieth-Century Literature* ‘After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction’ (2007) edited by Andrew Hoeberek and ‘Postmodernism, Then’ (2011) edited by Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden and *Postmodern/Postwar — And After: Rethinking American Literature* (2016) ed. Gladston, Worden and Hoberek. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. De Man’s discussion of rhetoric of grammar is grounded in their relationship in the medieval *trivium.* Comprising grammar, logic, and rhetoric, each discipline is fundamental to the construction of the subsequent ‘higher order’ concept. Grammar forms the foundation of the trivium, and its mastery is necessary for the deployment of logic, while both logic and grammar are essential to the construction of rhetoric. The disruption of this stable process of knowledge formation, of which grammar is the starting point, is at the heart of de Man’s model of ‘the theoretical project of rhetorical analysis,’ which is synonymous with the act of literary reading. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Davis translated an interview with Foucault by Paul Rabinow, entitled ‘Polemics, Politics and Problematizations,’ in 1997. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Auster’s description mirrors his subsequent intertextual relationship with his second wife Siri Hustvedt, who also has a tendency to place fictional versions of herself in her work. The protagonist of *The Blindfold* (1992) is named Iris, Siri spelled backwards. A version of Hustvedt’s Iris subsequently appeared in Auster’s novel, *Leviathan,* published the same year as *The Blindfold.* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. It is possible that Davis drew inspiration form Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Le rendez-vous* (1981), a grammar textbook designed for university students made up of a detective novel by Robbe-Grillet and a series of grammar exercises devised by the textbook writer, Yvonne Lenard. Each chapter of the detective novel would introduce students to a more advanced linguistic concept, building their competence as they went. It would also, at the novel’s close, act as a primer the *Nouveau Roman*. That same year, Robbe-Grillet published the detective story as a stand-alone text in French, entitled *Djinn,* which became his most popular and highest selling work.Sara Kippur (2020) demonstrates that the venture was a canny move on Robbe-Grillet’s part to break into the American market by composing a work that would be designed for university syllabi. As Kippur notes, this was a period of great popularity for French studies and a moment when teachers and academics were being greatly influenced by experimental theories and literature from Europe. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Moi (2017, 51) proposes a connection between Wittgenstein’s ‘longing for a clear view and his passion for detective novels.’ As mentioned earlier in my essay this ‘clear view’ (*übersichtliche Darstellung*), which is also translated as the ‘surveyable representation,’ provided by grammar can only be achieved through grammatical investigation. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The term ‘forms of life’ (*Lebensform*) is a contested one among students of Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, ‘forms of life’ are related to the idea of social ‘agreement’ such that language becomes, as Daniele Moyal-Sharrock (2015) notes, ‘a shared way of acting’. As Wittgenstein says ‘to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life’ (§19) In his interpretation Cavell (1999, 177-78) describes the process of ‘learning a language’ as not merely ‘learn[ing] the pronunciation of sounds and their grammatical orders, but the “forms of life” which make those sounds the words they are.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-11)