

# Exhausted Replenishment: Experimental Fiction and the Decomposition of Literature

Ivan Callus

University of Malta  
Email: ivan.callus@um.edu.mt

## Abstract

This paper provides a series of reflections on experimental fiction and the decomposition of literature through selective close reference to work by the American writer Lydia Davis. Incidental reference is also made to digital culture, as well as to the work of Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges, John Williams and Jim Crace, these last two being particularly crucial in cueing the essay's conclusion on the congruence between the act of experiment and acts of literature. The essay first considers the plausibility of the kind of critical narrative that recounts literature's supposed precariousness within contemporary culture, moving on to consider the difficulties posed by routines of postmodernist commentary that are themselves, arguably, a little sclerotic. The suggestion, then, is that the "literature of replenishment" may itself be spent in its attempts to revive the "literature of exhaustion", and that this enervation affects literary criticism too. The paper then focuses on four short stories by Lydia Davis, chosen because their experiments with brevity and grammar prompt findings that seem to give the lie to the idea that literature's resources for self-renewal are exhausted. The Conclusion reflects on perceptions of terminality in literature and literary criticism and considers their tenability in the present.

**Keywords:** *experimental fiction, decomposition, exhaustion, replenishment, Lydia Davis, Jorge Luis Borges, Jim Crace, Stoner*

Spinoza believed that all things wish to go on being what they are – stone wishes eternally to be stone, and tiger, to be tiger.<sup>1</sup>

(Jorge Luis Borges)

## Introduction: The Problem of Post-Experimental Literature

An essay about experimental fiction cannot itself be square. But how to take literary criticism beyond the angles whose rightness it presumes? To all intents and purposes, and apart from the ebbing fortunes of certain schools of commentary and the rise of other approaches to reading, literary criticism does not come across as a discourse whose protocols have undergone fundamental change. True: it has readjusted and readapted itself to the various digital cultures of our time, but these have not quite worked upon the practice of the discipline to the extent with which, say, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges and I," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 324.

computational affordances of corpus linguistics have transformed the ambits they have penetrated. This confirms that novelty in affordances is not, by itself, sufficient to usher in the new. Discourses are not above remaining sclerotic in an age of new medialities, as was anticipated fifteen years ago by the editors of a collection exploring new directions in criticism.<sup>2</sup>

The suggestion within literary criticism today is not of buoyancy. There is an extraordinary amount of chatter about the post-theoretical moment and the decline of the humanities more broadly, within which the literary and its study can only falter. Projections concerning the future of literary criticism in the twenty-first century,<sup>3</sup> which veer from the flustered to the bullish, are symptomatic of an uncertainty that dispels any tremendous confidence in the discourse to which this essay is affiliated. Nor is it a consolation to say that it was ever thus, or that even in the heyday of theory the “bread of apocalypse” was already making criticism mealy-mouthed about larger futures, let alone literature’s and literary criticism’s.<sup>4</sup> To discover decades-old reflections on “imperfect critics” does little to suppress the view that criticism “in the present time”, which has a “function” that is as urgent as ever, if not more so, is more precariously positioned than it has ever been.<sup>5</sup>

Some of this vulnerability occurs because the literary now inhabits cultural spaces that appear increasingly post-literary. “Language isn’t what it used to be”, writes N. Katherine Hayles in an article that looks at the “traumas of code” that programme all our lives – including reading – differently.<sup>6</sup> And fiction – within which reading, ahead of any thought of literature or criticism, has priority investments – is now switched to channels that do not so much remediate as newly mediate.<sup>7</sup> As will be acknowledged further below, this means that experimental fiction is most straightforwardly locatable in those mediations where the newness of the channels suffices to make experimentation happen as a matter of course. After all, what can one do within a new environment but experiment? Yet, in the midst of all this, literary criticism does not mediate itself very differently or very newly. Digital platforms, open access, electronic publishing and other such channels notwithstanding, the language, forms, assumptions, styles and reaches of literary criticism do not appear significantly differentiated from what they were when the possibility of, say, a “Derridabase” was speculatively mooted by Geoffrey Benington: “The guiding idea of the exposition comes from computers: G.B. would have liked to systematize J.D.’s thought to the point of turning it into an

---

<sup>2</sup> See Martin McQuillan, Graeme Macdonald, Robin Purves and Stephen Thomson, “The Joy of Theory,” in *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), ix-xx. For reflections on the difference between the novel and the new, see my “‘This’?: Posthumanism and the Graveyard Scene in *Hamlet*”, in *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 213-37.

<sup>3</sup> On this theme, see Cathy Caruth and Jonathan Culler, “Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century,” *PMLA* 125.4, special issue (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, intr. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Imperfect Critics,” in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Methuen, 1950) and Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” in *Selected Prose*, ed. P. J. Keating (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 130-57.

<sup>6</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, “Traumas of Code,” *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (2006): 136.

<sup>7</sup> On remediation, see J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

interactive program which, in spite of its difficulty, would in principle be accessible to any user.”<sup>8</sup> Embedded as familiarly in the procedures and rituals surrounding the scholarly monograph and the journal article as it ever was, literary criticism maintains a magnificent confidence in its spaces and repertoires. It can appear, in fact, that literary criticism is intent on intactness.

This is odd, for experimentation – at least in terms of other forms it could think about, if not of its own forms – is something that literary criticism used to be big on. There was a time not so long ago when all the talk was of metafiction, surfiction, combinatorics, wor(l)d games, hermetic fictions, and much of the differently same and samely different besides.<sup>9</sup> That was the time when “theorizing the avant-garde” was mainstream.<sup>10</sup> Even then, however, when it was devoting itself to the innovative in literature, literary criticism never really experimented much with its own forms and channels. There are some signs of that changing: one remembers Jerome McGann’s work ten years ago on radiant textuality, for instance, and the recent determination of other scholars to reflect on “comparative textual media”.<sup>11</sup> It is not altogether certain, however, that this is sufficiently pervasive to compel the “new republic of letters” in the digital age that McGann has recently written on.<sup>12</sup>

But let us work with the supposition – prevalent in a lot of contemporary rhetoric around contemporary media – that novel channels are open for literature, if not for criticism. “Make it new”: Pound’s famous statement, which gives this issue of *Word and Text* its title, can seem to find itself taken up most relevantly in the twenty-first century in spaces for fiction staked out by ‘texts’ (to use this last word in its most print-detached sense) occupying the interfaces between digital games, electronic literature and digital art.<sup>13</sup> These phrases have been placed within scare quotes because what they designate is not yet sufficiently evolved, defined or – at least to certain readers – compelling to bear comparison with the Modernism that Pound’s invocation helped to usher in. And yet this asymmetry is not, in itself and for the purposes of this essay or this issue of *Word and Text*, important.

It is not important for three reasons. Firstly, the opinion that there are unequal entities to compare would not, in any case, be shared by the partisans of these new channels, who have long been disposed to discern the sublime there.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, even if

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, “Derridabase,” in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>9</sup> See, among other relevant works of criticism on this, *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981); Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984); Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide* (Harlow: Longman, 1987); David Meakin, *Hermetic Fictions: Alchemy and Irony in the Novel* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> See Jerome McGann, *A New Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> See, among other relevant works, N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Bloomington: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), and *Literary Art in Digital Performance: Case Studies in New Media Art and Criticism*, ed. Francisco J. Ricardo (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> See, among other studies, Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

the asymmetry were to be acknowledged, it is surely only a matter of time before equilibration occurs and a canon of this particular form of the 'new' is consensually recognized by sufficiently diffused "interpretative communities".<sup>15</sup> Whereupon the third factor sets in. There is little point to replaying any more those sophisticated postmodernist routines that suspect the very notion of the 'new'. Literary criticism might itself move towards the experimental if it suspends those routines. In other words, this essay will proceed on the assumption that it is opportune to approach the idea of experimental fiction in the expectation, even the anticipation, of that for which no prior conceptual, aesthetic or formal reference exists. The new, then, is newly possible. The really new might be upon us, round the corner, about to happen, fresh and bright for the encounter, coming smartly and soon to a 'page' near you. For literary criticism it may actually be experimental to contemplate that eventuality, so routine has its suspicion of the new become.

Ahead of that coming of the new (to be uncynical), something else would need to be acknowledged. Like 'text', 'page' these days is no longer a print-bound space. Things are now "postprint", so let us add the following, for good measure: the new might be coming to a screen or device near you. Let us believe in that possibility, unprompted though it may be by the critical reflexes of the past few years. At least for the purposes of this exercise, it is an important move. No more of those practised gambits where the talk is of "ironic revisitation" or of "a procedure in "ana-"". <sup>16</sup> No more of exhaustion, or even of replenishment.<sup>17</sup> Even the latter is not interesting when the *new* is coming, or when the new may already be upon you.

There is plenty to show that the temper of the channels in which this form of the new might take flight is open to the new and its possibility and is excited by it. There are various attitudes in evidence where the stance is fetchingly wide-eyed about the prospects, in a way that literature and literary criticism may not have been for a long time now. To the practised critical mind, the enthusiasm can seem callow. But innocence and naïveté are good sometimes. They might even be more true to the moment.

Consequently, literary criticism may need to entertain the idea that the experimental and the new are really possible again, whereupon some thought of working some degree of change upon itself might not be out of place. Ironically, unless it experiments with the reflexes that lead it to distrust the possibility of the new in literature, and experiments thoroughly enough to shut them down for the duration, it cannot truly articulate much that is to the purpose about the experimental. But to do so, it must conduct itself differently. It must look at different texts, read differently, write and frame itself differently. Undoubtedly, this can seem a bit rich: this very essay starts off by saying that an essay about experimental fiction cannot itself be square, but it then remains conventional enough in the form of its presentation, if not necessarily in its dispositions. For the fact is that this essay remains caught up in the discourse of literary criticism, which is not very presently or powerfully situated in those channels from

---

<sup>15</sup> See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> See Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt, 1984) and Jean-François Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of "Post-"," in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, ed. and trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), 93.

<sup>17</sup> See the influential essays by John Barth that also shape the title of this paper: "The Literature of Exhaustion," *Atlantic Monthly* 220 (August 1967): 29-34, and "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* 245 (January 1997): 65-71.

which the new might, just about, come. Thee online journal *electronic book review* is perhaps one exception that proves the rule. The links provided at the site of the Electronic Literature Collection – [collection.eliterature.org](http://collection.eliterature.org) – are perhaps another, their implications being significant for both literature and literary criticism, independently of what one makes, individually, of what is archived there. If there are other convention-busting fora it is not enough, at least not just yet, to impart a sense that literary criticism is singularly proactive in moving to other forms and spaces and channels as it considers (or does not) the new to which it attends (or fails to).

Hence, this is where we are with these thoughts, in a space like this one: proof, if any were needed, that even when writing about the new, literary criticism flies to familiar settings and styles.

There is another factor worth considering. This very issue of *Word and Text* reinscribes a practised discourse even while otherwise commendably bringing the question of experimentation and the new back on literary criticism's agenda. In parenthesis: it was high time this questioning occurred and that somebody did that, and of course, there are other interesting stirrings in that direction, as exemplified by *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, reviewed in this issue by Mario Aquilina, or *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Posthumanism*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini and due for publication in 2015. These give the lie to the suggestion in the first paragraph above to the effect that literary criticism seeks to maintain accustomed integrities. Or they seem to, for in fact the move to embrace the experimental remains as conventionally framed as this essay itself is. Touch Stone Press's acclaimed *The Waste Land* app, where Pound's notes on T.S. Eliot's poem are among the many features interconnected in ways that are not easily configured together in a print environment, offers some cues to how literary criticism might mediate itself differently. For though it cannot be said that the offerings on this app help to engender a new form of being for literary criticism, they do allow a glimpse of what could be done. Until that is more comprehensively and pervasively attempted, however, the critical unconscious remains fundamentally unchanged. For, to close this parenthesis, even the Call for Papers for this issue – or indeed this very essay, whose injunction to itself to resist that unconscious is not easily accepted or accommodated – reclaims and relaunches the terms in which the experimental has been typically constructed and critiqued. There are, for instance, familiar authorities invoked: Barth, Federman, McHale, Pound himself. The list of authors presented as experimental in the present perpetuates a familiar notion of what experimentation involves within literary and critical universes: Chuck Palahniuk, Lawrence Norfolk, Christian Bök, Mark Z. Danielewski, etc. The list of perspectives offered for analysis is not too discomposing either, not when literary criticism has learnt to co-opt Surrealism and the Oulipo, or other categories that feature there, like "neo avant-gardism", "transgressive fiction" and "new dystopias/utopias". Certainly, the reference to "multimodal literature, digital technologies, electronic "code poetry", collaborative e-fiction" ably recognises forms of literary experimentation that are, very specifically, 21<sup>st</sup>-century developments on which the sense of the new sits very discernibly. And it would not do to think that the reading public (to reuse Q. D. Leavis's old phrase) is going to be blasé about this to the proportionate extent that it may be blasé about the serially new in digital technology, where (r)evolutionary design is inexorably regular. We may know that we may be blasé, but if we are primed to be, then experimentation has no chance. For where (r)evolution is regular, experimentation becomes a routine.

The impasses that arise there are captured in the tensions between two statements quoted in the Call for Papers. Ruth Felski is cited to the effect that critics “who proclaim the subversive power of formal experimentation, fail to consider that the breaking of conventions itself becomes conventional”. Eva Figes is quoted as follows: “What matters is that the writer should shock into awareness, startle, engage the attention: above all that he should not engage in the trade of reassurance.” How, then, is one to maintain shocked, startled, engaged attention in the age of *post-experimental* fiction? When convention-breaking has become conventional, to the extent that it can come across as *tired* rather than tiresome, what does literature do next if it wishes to experiment? How is literary criticism to handle all this? Literary criticism seems itself deeply engaged in “the trade of reassurance”, as it seeks to keep its idioms, forms and institutional dimensions intact. It even does so, as this essay and this issue shows, in discussing experimental fiction. There are routines even when discussing the experimental, and they are not easily interrupted or stayed. The problem of post-experimental fiction, which is flagged up in the subtitle to this Introduction, is therefore precisely this one: the sense that experimentation within literary fiction may have grown jaded, exhausted, and that it trades in the reassuring routine of the performance of renewal while remaining, to echo the epigraph to this paper, rather too much itself.

‘Routine’: this is a discomposing term in this context. There is no need to go through another convention here: that of bringing to the fore the various etymologies of this word and its various uses across different contexts. The move is easily enough rehearsed to presume that the connotations and ambiguities in question are alive and present as a more urgent question is asked. Rather, let the question be asked again: how is the sense of the new and the vibrancy of experiment to be pursued, encountered, managed in fiction, in a twenty-first century incredulous about metanarratives involving experimentation?

In other words (this is not fanciful and it is determined not to be cynical): how to displace jadedness, and bring in joy? Is this possible in post-experimental fiction?

### **Experiment I, involving a *very short* short story by Lydia Davis**

It would be facile to speak about (post-)experimental literature without testing out its effects on readers. What, otherwise, would be the point? Unless readers exhibit some level of intellectual curiosity and delight – or at least benign puzzlement – before the experimental, rather than a ‘been-there-read-loads-of-that-sort-of-thing’ kind of shoulder-shrugging jadedness, the loops of routine will be felt to deaden any quickening of joy. It stands to be admitted that this joy of discovery in literature’s “othermindedness” is not easily found post-Joyce, and that is true independently of whether we are speaking of James Joyce or Michael Joyce.<sup>18</sup> After Joyce, and indeed after Mallarmé, Woolf, Borges, Calvino, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Queneau, Perec, Mathews, or Brooke-Rose, the experimentation that reshapes literary form – as distinct from the quieter experimentation that can be encountered, say, in Proust or James, Bellow or Coetzee, Morrison or McEwan – can appear exhausted.

Such a feeling of exhaustion can make the perception of being post-experimental, alluded to above, overpowering. It can seem like the strategies of the literature of

---

<sup>18</sup> See Michael Joyce, *Othermindedness: The Emergence of Network Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

replenishment, alluded to in this issue's Call for Papers, are now themselves 'used up' (this last deserves to be as well known a phrase as those articulating Barth's more famous distinction). 'Exhausted replenishment': the productive paradoxes of this phrase therefore potentially describe the state of experimental fiction now. Strategies of replenishment, strategies of experimentation, even, are attempted, dabbled with, announced. Some are even hyped. Being excitable on what might just about seem new is always an option one has, after all. But in the meantime, within a different critical gaze, the potentialities of literature that had once motivated the Oulipo's *ouvroirs* appear spent, enervated. Experimental fiction, it seems, may itself be used up.

So where *is* the joy to come from? An account of four experiments with joy in different possibilities for the form of the short story follows. To repeat the rationale: unless one experiments with literature that is currently itself experimental and that has some designs on the new, unless one tries out its effects both on oneself and other readers, any further critical statement becomes, at best, impressionistic, even if it is steeped in the traditions of the experimental. And at worst, it can be doctrinaire about the experimental, which would be a travesty.

Consequently, all the examples that feature in the rest of this paper arise from the experience of a year spent in seminars discussing forms of experimental fiction (and literary theory) with a group of committed postgraduates endowed with a keen and uncynical appreciation of the literary. The students also had some awareness and openness regarding Mallarmé, both the Joyces, Borges, Beckett and other workers in "literature's laboratories" (Stanford's Literature Lab and what it envisions, at [litlab.stanford.edu](http://litlab.stanford.edu), is worth looking up). I am indebted to their comments and insights.

One disclaimer: I – or my reading – was also, inevitably, a subject and object of the experiment. Keeping things scientific and controlled was never the point. If it is not intuitively clear why it wasn't so, then this essay might as well abort itself here.

One clarification: the seminars in question were not set up to be experiments feeding into this paper. They happened, and then this paper did. With hindsight, however, it is possible to see that the seminars were, in parts, an exercise in comparing the resonances of different forms of experimental fiction with a group of informed but not over-practised readers.

One confession: I was tempted to write out each of these four sections on Lydia Davis as a variation on the genre of the write-up of an experiment in a Chemistry class. The temptation was to try to allay the charge of squareness, referred to in this essay's opening sentence. Wisely, I didn't, tutored by the lessons of experiments in literature and others in literary criticism that might come across as clever, but merely so.

So: Lydia Davis was chosen because there is a distinct sense of freshness imparted by her writing. The credentials are strong, of course. That is to be expected of someone who last year won the Man Booker International Prize and who has translated, among others, Flaubert, Proust, Leiris or Blanchot (this last being a particularly strong presence in her work).<sup>19</sup> The credentials are stronger still because Davis has renewed the genre of the short story, working with extreme brevity and/or the subtlest implication (some stray stories, where anger surfaces, are perhaps not so subtle, but that is by the bye). Some sense of the way in which her stories challenge reassurance can be had by the fact that the text of the first story to feature here, "Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room", is shorter than the title. The story reads, "Your

---

<sup>19</sup> On this presence, see Jonathan Evans, *Transcultural* 4.1 (2011): 49-61. Available online; accessed May 30, 2014, <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/TC>.

housekeeper *has been* Shelly.”<sup>20</sup> The unsettled questions that follow are easily summoned. How can this be a short story? Is this the literary equivalent of the *objet trouvé*: the reframing, by a writer of repute, of a mundane hotel notice that thereby becomes literary? A variation on the generic joke featuring quotations from hotel notices to which English remains foreign, the text of the story foregrounds quite how powerful and loaded, whether unwittingly or otherwise, such mundane communication can be. In this case the example is presumably a hotel-room *billet*, doubtless presented on official stationery in its original context, which formalizes even as it personalizes a polite but still unmistakable request for a tip and which, in the process of reframing, has its subtle importunateness subtly revealed. The story – to call it that – has two characters: Shelly (who is apparently not above dropping her vowels) and the unspecified “you” who is the changing hotel guest, thereby instituting a game with modes of address that even if it not as prolongedly inventive as, say, Bill Broady’s *Swimmer*, a novel written in the second-person singular, remains effective. The title’s specification of the past continuous tense, then, introduces a surprising poignancy. The housekeeping is thereby portrayed as repeated and repetitive, further bringing out the *billet*’s attempt to counteract the anonymity of the cleaning staff. But the effect is subtler still, for the “continuous[ness]” suggests an interminability that is contradicted by the pragmatic knowledge that in its setting the *billet* can be removed. Shelly can be redeployed, and all names on other such cards, as well as the other staff they designate, are interchangeable.

The conclusion on Experiment I is not difficult to arrive at: that is a lot of story in five words. It puts Twitterature<sup>21</sup> in perspective, as the seminar group was quick to point out. It also trumps a lot of flash fiction, though not perhaps Ernest Hemingway’s famous yet apocryphal classic “For sale: baby shoes, never worn”. Yet Davis’s story does seem to be a new departure, for brevity’s and literature’s ways with the potentialities for (re)framing the object are thrust to the fore in her text. The inevitable questions arise. Is this *literature*? How is this a short story? Can one write a short story simply by reframing, under a pointed title, any stray notice? Is literature writeable if one, as an author, has an eye for, and acts upon the prompts of, such notices, or their analogues? One is reminded of an Oulipian fantasy (inevitably, human finitude and literature’s infinitude being what they are, this could only be a *thought-experiment*): the project to render literary every genre in the world, even the most mundane. But one is also reminded of a remark by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*. Itself, in a different way, a very wise short text, *Aspects of the Novel* makes the following distinction between two possible texts to which the status of storydom and storyworld might or might not be accorded: ““The king died and then the queen died,” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief,” is a plot.”<sup>22</sup> The thing is, all manner of plots are being worked upon the literary in the stories of writers like Lydia Davis.

Consequently, titles, as the story in this experiment demonstrates, have a literature-conferring potential. In terms of literature’s institutional dimensions, it must

---

<sup>20</sup> Lydia Davis, “Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room,” in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), 715.

<sup>21</sup> See Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin, *Twitterature: The World’s Greatest Books in Twenty Tweets or Less* (London: Penguin, 2009), which takes further the principle used by E. O. Parrott in *How to Become Ridiculously Well-read in One Evening: A Collection of Literary Encapsulations* (London: Viking, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974).

also be said that the procedures of publishing that place a text like this within a cover bearing the larger title, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, further sanctions the ascription. There is experimentation with that legitimation as well. The laws of literature, and what they legitimate, allow for that. Hence literature is as well defined by this punning formula as by any other definition: literature consists of studied texts.

The conclusion concerning Experiment I may therefore run as follows. In bringing all the above to the fore, Experiment I is successful. Something new about literature – both about its forms and what is allowable therein – emerges in Davis’s *very short* short story. Whether the emergence is seismic to any degree is another matter. I rather suspect not. But literature is not about the magnitude of seismic shifts only, not even when literature seeks the experimental with studied deliberation. This short story does startle, to quote the criteria of Figs. It does not trade in reassurance. There will be more about this issue in the Conclusion to this essay.

## **Experiment II, involving a slightly longer short story by Lydia Davis**

In “Borges and I”, the text from which the epigraph to this essay is taken, Jorge Luis Borges provided literature with its tersest and most complete reflection on the indistinctness between author, persona, implied author, narrator and implied narrator. His text – whether it is a fiction, a short story, or a gesture toward any other genre yet to be named is a question prompted by its experimentation – turns on the final line: “I am not sure which of us it is that’s writing this page.”<sup>23</sup> The (in)ability to (dis)identify with self and other in this case of [mis]identity involving authorship, and its projections to the selfsame and to alterity, narrativizes an anomie which even Blanchot’s essay “The Essential Solitude”, on the authorial self’s voiding and (self-)avoidances before the Work, does not quite capture. The text, as anybody who has read it is bound to recall, is dependent also on mechanisms of pronominal ambiguity and on a duality that is all too geometrically immediate rather than spectral. “Borges and I” is no longer than 350 words, but it sets up a perfect structure for the exploration of ‘I/me’ oppositions in literature.

Lydia Davis’s “A Position at the University”, which at just over 200 words is longer than “Example of the Continuous Past Tense in a Hotel Room” but shorter than “Borges and I”, comes across as a variation on the experiment. This is perfectly fine within the context of literature’s experiments in making things new. After all, is it not a law of science that the results of a test, or experiment, must be replicable to good effect for the experiment’s success to appear securable? Davis (or her narrator / persona / implied author / implied narrator) starts in the tradition established by “Borges and I”: “I think I know what sort of person I am.”<sup>24</sup> But there in instability in the thought: “[T]he fact that I have a position at the university will appear to mean that I must be the sort of person who has a position at the university.” By the end of the text, we are in a place similar to that staked out by Borges’s *ficción*:

<sup>23</sup> Borges, “Borges and I,” 324.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, Lydia, “A Position at the University,” in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 299. No further page references to this story will be provided within parentheses in the main text: it is, after all, a single-page text, and literary criticism would need to be *very* square to serially footnote that.

But, on the other hand, I know I am not the sort of person I imagine when I hear that a person has a position at the university. Then I see what the problem is: when others describe me this way, they appear to describe me completely, whereas in fact they do not describe me completely, and a complete description of me would include truths that seem quite incompatible with the fact that I have a position at the university.

The Borgesian play on I/me is replicated here. The structure works, and the experiment is possibly more successful still because it is briefer than Borges's. But literature's experiments do not work like those of science. If the point is to have made 'it' new, then Borges's experiment with this particular approach to the innovative exerts a primacy in which the value of originality overrides the value of replicability. If, like Kellogg's Cornflakes, Borges's story is "the original and best" example of this form that it institutes, its imitability imposes nothing like the incontrovertibility that the replicability of science's tests and experiments seek to establish. Rather, it works through the operations of that paradoxical dynamic: the breakthrough, or literary innovation, that takes on classicity. In comparison, and for all its further compressions of brevity, Davis's text appears in that regard to be secondary (it has value of another kind, of course). There is much that could be said concerning all this about the nature of literary genius, or about the equally paradoxical notion of the genealogies of the original. But in the space available, let us move to the intermediate conclusion suggested by this experiment.

Experiment II is incompletely successful. "A Position at the University" does prove that the breakthrough experiment of "Borges and I" is imitable, so that the latter text has its priority canonized further by the former, which pointedly or not so pointedly (this remains a matter for speculation) follows in its wake. Davis's story is successful too in being more concise than Borges's, while reserving all the pertinence of questions on whether reflections like those in these two texts qualify as stories, *ficciones*, literature. But it does not strike the reader, quite, as *new*. To put it more dismally than the story's merits warrant: it is rather that a clever protocol of what might be termed the alterliterary, established previously, has been cleverly replayed.<sup>25</sup>

But in the process, this second experiment that is reviewed here successfully brings to the fore something that will already have been sensed in Experiment I. Literary criticism finds itself disarmed – in terms of its effectiveness, if not of its sentiments – by experiments like this, which explore literature's most concise reaches. It would after all be gross and dross to discourse at length about such brief and yet so inexhaustible texts. Not to mention that stories like these compel literary criticism to embark, unavoidably, on dangerous experiments with the length to which quotation can legitimately – legally – go.

Again, and to recall the criteria of Figs, there is not much trade in reassurance being peddled there. Experimentation seems alive and well. More to the point, another intuition is confirmed. Literary experimentation, even in the present, need not be overdetermined by postprint mediality. There is life in the printbound yet.

---

<sup>25</sup> For a different envisaging of the use of the term 'alterliterary', but one which was anticipating radical experimentation with fiction some time ago already, see Richard Ziegfeld, "Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre?," *New Literary History* 202 (1989): 341-72.

### Experiment III, involving grammar and language usage in a short story by Lydia Davis

There is no literary experimentation without new ways with grammar. This truism on “grammars of creation” finds itself interestingly explored in another short story by Lydia Davis which, although it is of rather more normal length, has another longish title: “We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth Graders”.<sup>26</sup> The title resembles that of an academic article, and in fact the story provides a parodic pastiche of textual analysis in certain approaches to linguistics and stylistics.

The story purports to be “a study of twenty-seven get-well letters written by a class of fourth-graders to their classmate Stephen, when he was in the hospital recovering from a serious case of osteomyelitis.” (534) It is further reported that “the children’s teacher, Miss F., assigned them to write Stephen a get-well letter. She then corrected the letters sparingly but precisely and sent them in a packet to Stephen. This was a school letter clearly intended, if we may judge from the number of consistent features, to teach certain letter-writing skills.” (535) There is wicked comedy in that phrase, “sparingly but precisely”, and in the fictional study’s lack of awareness, throughout, of the incongruity across this otherwise square representation of epistolary empathy, pedagogic pragmatism and the protocols of linguistic analysis. What is debunked across the story, thereby, is the imperviousness of certain methodologies to language’s opacities and to their resistance to being corralled within classificatory protocols. And of such protocols there are plenty in Davis’s story, which in separate sections and with correctly assiduous methodology – one is reminded of Paul de Man’s caustic comments in “The Resistance to Theory” on grammar, correctness and “the resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language”<sup>27</sup> – draws in the following: “The School”, “General Appearance and Form of the Letters” (subdivided into “Length”, “Overall Coherence”, “Sentence Structures” – itself further subdivided into “Compound Sentences”, “Complex Sentences”, “Compound-Complex Sentences”, “Verbs”, “Imperatives”, “Style”, “Content”, “Formulaic Expressions of Sympathy”, a subcategory then itself divided into subordinate subcategories), and “Conclusion: The Daily Lives of the Children, Their Awareness of Space and Time, and Their Characters and States of Mind”. One gets the picture. The story has in its sights the humourlessness of the modes of reading that it satirizes, as well as the underlying lack of a hermeneutics of doubt and the tendency towards grandiose extrapolation: “We may confidently form some idea of the children’s daily lives, characters, and moods from these letters, as well as their perceptions of space and time, even though the letters may to some extent misrepresent the truth because of the circumstances under which they were written [...]” (555). Here, however, is the Addendum with which the story ends:

#### *Addendum*

Of interest, for comparison, may be a letter in Stephen’s own handwriting, on an unlined page, written after he returned home, in which he thanks a former teacher for a

<sup>26</sup> See George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) and Lydia Davis, “We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth Graders,” in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), 534-60. Further page references to the latter text are given within parentheses in the main text.

<sup>27</sup> Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” in *The Resistance to Theory*, Foreword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 17.

gift evidently received during his convalescence. His letter is a rough draft, including one misspelling and one usage error, and lacking certain punctuation marks, and may closely resemble the rough drafts of his classmates' letters, if such existed. It is dated "Feb 20 1951" and reads: "Dear Miss R., Thank you for the book. I am out of the hospital and I dont have to wear krutchs anymore Love Stephen." (560)

This is winsome: not only for those errors with which the story ends – some language errors can be charming, as well as forgivable – but also because of the suggestion that Stephen has learnt nothing from his teacher's markings of his classmates' errors. It is tempting to speculate that the teacher in the story who sent the letters, Miss F, would have sent the letter back, corrected. Once a teacher, always a teacher. But Miss R., a former teacher, is probably less demanding: Stephen is either incorrigible or feels she would not begrudge him an error in a thank-you letter. Moreover, Stephen wrote his own thank-you letter with just the same indulgence in the formulaic as he would have witnessed in the get-well letters he received. The reader would hope that the child-to-child communications were less perfunctory than his child-to-adult communication was, even though this cannot be certain, since they were part of an exercise in that very chilling genre: the get-well letter as classwork. And in this Addendum, the implications of that phrase, "if such existed", are too delicious for words, as is the fact that Stephen waited to get home to write his thank-you letter. It might also be mentioned that if we ourselves, as readers, decide to be pedantic, we would find that the analysis in the story (which, incidentally, is not as neat or consistent in its classificatory protocols as it purports to be), after the inability to repress itself, actually miscounts the usage errors.

The story as a whole, therefore, is a parable on (a) the irrepressibility and pompousness of pedagogical instincts where poor usage is concerned; (b) the ways in which niceties over grammatical correctness open themselves to ridicule when they overlook context; and (c) the squareness of the discourse and the protocols of certain approaches to textual analysis. It also leads to the reflection that where no errors in language are found, analysis would find itself constrained to correct, or work, on the next and deeper thing instead. And that can be discomfiting, for analysis would probably prefer not have to look into what might be found there. Poor grammar and poor usage keep analysis busy and safe.

The conclusion to Experiment III might therefore be the following. The story is, in many ways, delightfully successful. It debunks – gently rather than destructively – the "will to correct[ness]" that any teacher or academic will tend towards, doing so in the form of a pastiche study within pedagogical stylistics that nevertheless remains, recognizably, a short story. What is made new here – or at least extended – is literature's subsuming to itself of a genre that is distinctly counter-literary in its intent, form, idiom and assumptions. For if poor usage can be made to service the literary, what this experiment will have shown is that literature can be renewed by the absorption of what is hardly language, let alone *literary* language. Experiment I had shown that already and Experiment III reinforces the realization. And while it is true that *Finnegans Wake* had discovered that some time ago, it is also true that the demonstration takes on further strength when it comes from the mouths (or pens) of (fictional) babes.

## Experiment IV, involving, again, grammar and language usage in a story by Lydia Davis

There are a remarkable number of stories by Lydia Davis that turn on points of grammar, niceties of language usage, and language learning. “Honoring the Subjunctive”, “*French Lesson I: Le Meurtre*” and “A Double Negative” are good examples, but most potent and poignant of all is “Grammar Questions”. It is commented on here in the last experiment reported on in this paper. This fourth experiment completes the square of the four texts that provide the examples in this essay, which in another sense is so intent on what is square and what is not, and allows Davis’s fictional experiments with grammar’s outer/outré reaches and linguistic pedantry to cue the overarching conclusion that the essay moves toward.

“Grammar Questions” is another *short* short story: at two and a half pages not extremely so, but still short. Again, narrativity is not prominent, bringing to the fore once more the question of what it is that confers storydom, for the text is rather a series of reflections on the kind of language to use to refer to a dying father. Here is how it starts:

Now, during the time that he is dying, can I say, “This is where he lives”?  
If someone asks me, “Where does he live?” should I answer, “Well, right now he is not living, he is dying”?<sup>28</sup>

The story considers other oddities in the way language positions death as its referent: “When he is dead, everything to do with him will be in the past tense. Or rather, the sentence “He is dead” will be in the present tense [...]” (527). The pronominal ambiguities referred to in Experiment II take on a darker turn here: “Is he, once he is dead, still “he,” and if so, for how long is he still “he”?” There is, furthermore, a canniness in the implicit admission that precision over language is neither consoling nor, in a situation like the one described, ever apt:

He will be put in a box, not a coffin. Then, when he is in that box, will I say, “That is my father in that box,” or “That was my father in that box,” or will I say, “That, in the box, was my father”? (528)

There are other reflections of this kind in the text. They all probe language’s imprecisions in representations of dying and death but also its quiet, delicate, instinctive euphemism, which Davis relentlessly probes in the story’s square-on rather than square look at idiomaticities on death. Hence: “In the phrase “he is dying,” the words *he is* with the present participle suggest that he is actively doing something. But he is not actively dying. The only thing he is still actively doing is breathing.” (528) Or – intention and the aptness of predicate being very much at issue – the following: ““He is not eating” sounds active, too. But it is not his choice. He is not conscious that he is not eating.” (529)

The conclusion concerning this experiment is therefore irresistible. This is fiction that explores agency, personhood and subjectivity with poignancy and sensitivity – yet with clinical terseness. In seeking to grasp that which it cannot, language is tested for its

<sup>28</sup> Lydia Davis, “Grammar Questions,” in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 527. Further page references to this story are given within parentheses in the main text.

effectiveness in the representation of death and dying, and found to be quite as indefinite as what it seeks to designate. Davis thereby makes tense *tense*. Correspondingly, the metalinguistic exercise and experimentation is precise in its revelation of language's necessary, perhaps kindly, imprecision, ambiguity, ambivalence. And clinicalism, it is known, is good where experimentation is concerned. A clinical study, within fiction, of language's not quite clinical ways with dying and death is what "Grammar Questions" provides. Grammar's ways with the representation of humanity's undoing are thereby undone. The experiment works.

Again, to quote Figs, readers will have been startled and engaged. One recognizes reassurance: experimentation, in literature, is not spent. Whereupon a different question might be asked: did we *really* think it might be?

## **Conclusion: (Post-)Experimentation and the Decomposition of Literature**

Lydia Davis, it will be acknowledged on the basis of the above, has made it new. That is not in question. Rather, the tensor question is, rather, the following. Is 'it', thereby, new *enough*?

That is probably a better question to ask than the temptingly easy and glib statements that could otherwise be framed, in the shape of "formulaic expressions" (to quote the story that provides Experiment III) on the nature of the (trans)avant-garde, the (post)modern, the (post)contemporary. Such expressions could take, for instance, forms like the following, to which Jean-François Lyotard, Bruno Latour and Jacques Derrida have inured us: Will these stories have set the rules for what will have been made? Have they never been experimental? Were they always already experimental?

But that is too practised. It is simpler and more effective to ask if we find joy in Lydia Davis's ways with the new. I said in the Introduction that the experiment would be pointless unless it were referred back to the reactions of its audience, its readers. Judging from the responses of the savvy readers brought to an encounter with these texts – the students whose attention was drawn to Lydia Davis – this form of literary experimentation elicits impressions of ingenuity (certainly); freshness and provocativeness (equally certainly, the sense of this being piqued also by the inevitable questions on what it is that should be reserved as literary); greatness (not certain, the student perspective on this tending to be nicely fastidious in regard to the relative strength of competing claims on this category, a fastidiousness which never quite recedes even in the aftermath of the Canon Wars); sublimity (but only partially, since there appears to be a fine discrimination concerning experimentation that is transiently rather than enduringly or even timelessly sublime, examples of both having been picked out across Davis's work). On that basis, then, and through Davis, contemporary fiction can be shown to still have purchase on the experimental and the new.

Nevertheless, some impression of the post-experimental lingers. This may occur for one very strong reason. The idea of exhausted replenishment that gives this essay its title is hard to allay. The legacies of modernist, high modernist and postmodernist experimentation, with their different and extensive repertoires in the replenishing of that which had seemed exhausted, have set and settled in the minds of informed readers. Even work like Davis's, with its variegations of ingenuity, freshness, provocation, greatness and sublimity, does not substantially transform the shape, space, extent of that

particular set of experimental fiction of which it is a member. Quite simply, it is recognizable for what it is, if one has experience re-cognizing both what it breaks ranks with and what it is affiliated to. There are forms of othermindedness to which we can remain too inured, even after we have encountered a truly novel, or new, variation on it. Of course, this does not diminish Davis's work, or its other dimensions, in any way. It simply suggests that experimentation's replenishments might, in the age of the multimodal, look quite as much for multiple coding of the new as postmodernism was accustomed to uncovering double coding.

But what would that mean? If the age of post-experimental literature is also the age of the post-literary, in the straightforward sense of the conventions of literature and literary studies being encroached upon, say, by electronic literature (again, one could refer to the Electronic Literature Collection to follow that up), then we are moving to brave new worlds for which, indeed, there is no prior conceptual, aesthetic or formal conception, as the Introduction to this essay speculated. This is a vast and tempting topic, but it is the focus for a different study that I am pursuing elsewhere. Here let me rather mention, at the end, that it would be careless to overlook the decisive, uncompromising and deeply transformative experimentation that proceeds in those forms of literature that look anything but experimental. Lydia Davis has already demonstrated the importance of that. Two examples will bear it out further, and provide a sound concluding dynamic. Neither of them is likely to be mentioned in any cataloguing of the experimental, as it might be surveyed in a volume like *The Routledge Companion to Electronic Literature*, say. And yet, in both of these texts, experimentation is hardly tokenistic.

The first is John Williams's *Stoner*. This will seem surprising. Although in the recent hype around this recently rediscovered novel (it was first published nearly fifty years ago), much was made of the fact that it may be "the best book you have never read" – thereby positing an optimality whose originality remains suggestive of the prospective and unprospected, even after it is (re)discovered – *Stoner* remains, in essence, a narrative where it is easy for the mercurial and the unprecedented to remain unsuspected. What was it, therefore, that famously excited a novelist like Ian McEwan, who praised it on the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4? Julian Barnes, another novelist, provides a resounding answer:

[It is a true "reader's novel", in the sense that its narrative reinforces the very value of reading and study. Many will be reminded of their own lectoral epiphanies, of those moments when the magic of literature first made some kind of distant sense, first suggested that this might be the best way of understanding life. And readers are also aware that this sacred inner space, in which reading and ruminating and being oneself happen, is increasingly threatened by what *Stoner* refers to as "the world" – which is nowadays full of hectic interference with, and constant surveillance of, the individual.<sup>29</sup>

Here, and to keep things close to the experiential and the experienced, the interesting thing was that I was teaching *Stoner* around the same period of seminars on Davis and on electronic literature. The coinciding was not incongruous. Presumably it is telling that the seminar group found *Stoner* a distinctly complete work of art, amenable to "lectorale epiphanies". Surrounding it was much talk, to quote Jorge Semprun, of "literature or life", as well as of tone, style, profundity, sublimity: the very kind of

<sup>29</sup> The *Today* programme in question was broadcast on July 5, 2013. Barnes's review appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper on December 13, 2013.

discourse that permeated the appreciative responses of McEwan or Julian Barnes. Nevertheless, what I find telling for this context in this novel by Williams, which is so apparently squarely set in the conventions of omniscient narration and of quasi-retro classic realism, is its thematic awareness of the experimental in literature. The awareness is not of a blink-and-you'll-miss-it nature, but neither is it dramatized very conspicuously. For one of the central episodes in the novel develops around the contrasting fortunes of two different protégés of two feuding academics. The episode involves dissertation projects on the ebb and flow of convention and experiment in literature: a salient detail of the narrative that remains largely overlooked and uncommented. William Stoner himself, the protagonist and a beleaguered academic, changes deeply in the novel, though he remains eccentrically emblematic of staid and stolid continuity. He is an experiment, then, in consistency within the discontinuous, such that some of his most frequent assertions posit an indifferent equanimity that is genuine rather than contrived: "It doesn't matter", or, "It really isn't important." They counterpoint the novel's ambivalence on change and experiment in life, love, work – and literature.

The other example comes from Jim Crace's novel *Being Dead*. In formal terms, the novel looks conventional. The theme and the language keep convention at bay, however, for this is a strangely lyrical representation of the process of bodily decomposition. The protagonists in the novel – Joseph and Celice, an elderly couple – are dead. They have been murdered, and the corpses lie on a beach, open to decomposition's depredations. The action alternates between an evocation of their remembered lives and a forensic description of the decay but also the teeming nonhuman life surrounding decomposition. This is not an easy theme for literature, or indeed for any discourse. But the language remains accessible and perspicuous: a reminder that these qualities are not inimical to the experimental. Equally, the experimental can be achieved without overdramatic effect, as Crace's novel demonstrates. Strikingly, literature, with its proneness to its own transformation, can be very purposively composed when the subject is metamorphosis and decomposition. The quietly toned and subdued poetry of the gaze on a theme and on a prospect that had not really been given such extended treatment before is enough to secure experimentation. For there certainly is experiment in that too, in final lines like these:

And still, today and every day, the dunes are lifted, stacked and undermined. Their crests migrate and reassemble with the wind. They do their best to raise their backs against the weather and the sea and block the wind-borne sorrows of the world. All along the shores of Baritone Bay and all the coast beyond, tide after tide, time after time, the corpses and the broken, thinned remains of fish and birds, of barnacles and rats, of molluscs, mammals, mussels, crabs are lifted, washed and sorted by the waves. And Joseph and Celice enjoy a loving and unconscious end, beyond experience.  
These are the everending days of being dead.

This is not simply a revisitation of the themes of Philip Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb". There "the endless altered people came" to the cathedral, where "[t]he earl and countess lie in stone". There, "Above their scrap of history / Only an attitude remains: / Time has transfigured them into / Untruth."<sup>30</sup> The different scales of magnitude and the

---

<sup>30</sup> Philip Larkin, "An Arundel Tomb," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 110-11.

microscopic that figure decomposition are represented with very fine resolution in Crace's prose, which is, rather, a reflection on how everything that longs to persist in its being (to reframe the epigraph, from both Spinoza and Borges) is open to the everending: to the not-itself that brings decomposition even to the literary, discomposing it with the experimentation that would differentiate literature from itself even as literature perdures in the recomposed assurance in its being, to which it has immemorially tended. Perhaps there is a lesson here, in both *Stoner* and *Being Dead*, on change and decline, change and renewal. The post-experimental, which suggests the decay or at least the decline of the tradition of renewing the tradition, of renewing what had once been itself renewing, is not necessarily about "everending" dimensions in literature, or only obliquely so. Literature is not dying, even as it supposedly decomposes, discomposed by the onslaughts of experiments with it that usher in the impression of the post-literary. For surely there is something to be taken from the fact that it is strangely alive, strangely itself, vitally experimental and experimentally vital, in narratives about decomposition itself, as in "Grammar Questions" or *Being Dead*. Unlike the corpse of M. Valdemar in Edgar Allan Poe's story, it does not decompose before witnesses' eyes when it articulates impending, inhabited inexistence: "*I say to you that I am dead!*" (emphasis in the original)<sup>31</sup> The decomposition of literature, therefore, is in a necessary relation with the everending, everbeginning processes of (post-)experimentation with decline and rupture, decline and renewal. Always, it must drive to ends and terminalities, to happen upon experimenting, unchanging being.

And literary criticism? Let it be square, for literature and its institutions can take that. Perhaps they even call for it to be so. When it isn't – as in Derrida's "Envois" or *Glas* – it arguably turns itself into literature anyway, in what can seem like a strange congruence between the act of experiment and acts of literature.<sup>32</sup> But when it is, let it not thereby be too tempted to put too much in boxes, for it might otherwise think, to quote Davis's story in Experiment IV, that it might yet say, one day, "That, in the box, was literature."

## References

1. Aciman, Alexander, and Emmett Rensin. *Twitterature: The World's Greatest Books in Twenty Tweets or Less*. London: Penguin, 2009).
2. Arnold, Matthew. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." In *Selected Prose*. Edited by P. J. Keating, 130-57. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
3. Barnes, Julian. "Stoner: the must-read novel of 2013." *The Guardian*. December 13, 2013.
4. Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." *Atlantic Monthly* 220. August 1967. 29-34
5. Barth, John. "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction." *Atlantic Monthly* 245, January 1997. 65-71.

<sup>31</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin, 1982), 103.

<sup>32</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Envois," in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), and *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992).

6. Bennington, Geoffrey. "Derridabase." In Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
7. Blanchot, Maurice. "The Essential Solitude." In *The Space of Literature*. Translated by Ann Smock, 19-34. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
8. Bolter, J. David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.
9. Borges, Jorge Luis. "Borges and I." In *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley, 324. New York: Penguin, 1998.
10. Bray, Joe, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
11. Broady, Bill. *Swimmer*. London: Flamingo, 2000.
12. Callus, Ivan. "'This'?: Posthumanism and the Graveyard Scene in *Hamlet*". In *Posthumanist Shakespeares*. Edited by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, 213-37. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
13. Caruth, Cathy, and Jonathan Culler, eds. "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century." *PMLA* 125.4 (2010).
14. Clarke, Bruce, and Manuela Rossini, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Posthumanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: forthcoming.
15. Crace, Jim. *Being Dead*. London: Penguin, 2000.
16. Davis, Lydia. "A Double Negative." In *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*. 373. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.
17. Davis, Lydia. "Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room." In *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 715. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.
18. Davis, Lydia. "*French Lesson I: Le Meurtre*." In *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 103. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.
19. Davis, Lydia. "Grammar Questions." In *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 527-29. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.
20. Davis, Lydia. "Honoring the Subjunctive." In *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 377. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.
21. Davis, Lydia. "A Position at the University." In *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 299. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.
22. Davis, Lydia. "We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth Graders." In *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, 534-60. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010.
23. de Man, Paul. "The Resistance to Theory." In *The Resistance to Theory*. Foreword by Wlad Godzich, 3-20. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
24. Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge. London: Routledge, 1992.
25. Derrida, Jacques. "Envois." In *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Translated by Alan Bass, 1-256. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
26. Derrida, Jacques. *Glas*. Translated by John P. Leavey, Jr, and Richard Rand. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

27. Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Introduction by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg. New York: Routledge, 1994.
28. Eco, Umberto. *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*. New York: Harcourt, 1984.
29. Eliot, T. S. "Imperfect Critics." In *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 7<sup>th</sup> edn, 17-46. London: Methuen, 1950.
30. Evans, Jonathan. "Translation and Response between Maurice Blanchot and Lydia Davis." *Transcultural* 4.1 (2011): 49-61. Available online. Accessed May 30, 2014. <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/TC>.
31. Federman, Raymond, ed. *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981.
32. Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in this Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.
33. Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings*. London: Edward Arnold, 1974.
34. Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Bloomington: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.
35. Hayles, N. Katherine. "Traumas of Code." *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (2006): 136-57.
36. Hayles, N. Katherine, and Jessica Pressman. *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
37. Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. Edited by Robbert-Jan Henkes, Erik Brindervoet, Finn Fordham. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
38. Larkin, Philip. "An Arundel Tomb." *Collected Poems*. Edited by Anthony Thwaite, 110-11. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
39. Leavis, Q. D. *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1932.
40. Lyotard, Jean-François. "Note on the Meaning of "Post-". In *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*. Translations edited by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, 87-93. London: Turnaround, 1992.
41. McEwan, Ian. Interview on the Today programme. BBC Radio 4, 5 July 2013.
42. McGann, Jerome. *Radiant Textuality*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
43. McGann, Jerome. *A New Republic of Letters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.
44. McQuillan, Martin, Graeme Macdonald, Robin Purves and Stephen Thomson. "The Joy of Theory." In *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*. Edited by Martin McQuillan Graeme Macdonald, Robin Purves and Stephen Thomson, ix-xx. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
45. Meakin, David. *Hermetic Fictions: Alchemy and Irony in the Novel*. Keele: Keele University Press, 1995.
46. Mosco, Vincent. *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
47. Murphy, Richard. *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
48. Nash, Christopher. *World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide*. Harlow: Longman, 1987.

49. Parrott, E. O. *How to Become Ridiculously Well-read in One Evening: A Collection of Literary Encapsulations*. London: Viking, 1985.
50. Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." In *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 96-103. London: Penguin, 1982.
51. Ricardo, Francisco J., ed. *Literary Art in Digital Performance: Case Studies in New Media Art and Criticism* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009.
52. Semprun, Jorge. *Literature or Life*. Translated by Linda Coverdale. London: Penguin, 1998.
53. Steiner, George. *Grammars of Creation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
54. Touch Stone Press. *The Waste Land for iPad*. London: Faber Digital, 2011. [Electronic: App].
55. Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984.
56. Williams, John. *Stoner*. New York: Vintage, 2010.
57. Ziegfeld, Richard. "Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre?" *New Literary History* 202 (1989): 341-72.

## **Reînnoire epuizată: Proza experimentală și descompunerea literaturii**

Acest articol propune o serie de reflecții asupra literaturii experimentale și a descompunerii literaturii prin referințe apropiate, însă selective la opera scriitoarei americane Lydia Davis. Apar de asemenea referințe accidentale la cultura digitală și la opera lui Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges, John Williams și Jim Crace, dintre care ultimii doi sunt în mod crucial exploatați pentru concluzia eseului care se referă la congruența dintre actul experimental și literaritate. Înainte de toate, eseul ia în considerație plauzabilitatea tipului de critică narativă care relatează presupusa poziție precară a literaturii în cultura contemporană, apoi enumeră dificultățile puse de rutina comentariului postmodern care este ea însăși oarecum lipsită de putere de adaptabilitate. În partea a doua a eseului sugestia este că „literatura de reînnoire” poate fi ea însăși epuizată în încercarea ei de a aduce la viață „literatura epuizată”, iar această nervozitate afectează și critica literară. Sunt analizate patru povestiri ale Lydiei Davis, alese pentru că reprezintă experimente asupra conciziei și gramaticii. Concluziile par a contrazice ideea că resursele literaturii de reînnoire prin ea însăși sunt epuizate. Articolul reflectează asupra percepției terminalității literaturii și criticii literare și ia în calcul capacitatea acestora de se susține.