

Davis's Poetic Dialogue with Leiris's Autobiography

Jonathan Evans  
*University of Hull*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Evans, Jonathan. "Davis's Poetic Dialogue with Leiris's Autobiography." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1755>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1755)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 14 Issue 1 (March 2012) Article 8**  
**Jonathan Evans,**  
**"Davis's Poetic Dialogue with Leiris's Autobiography"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/8>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Davis's Poetic Dialogue with Leiris's Autobiography" Jonathan Evans analyzes Lydia Davis's translation of the first two parts of Michel Leiris's autobiography, which shows an encounter between two writers. Davis has also written stories which reference Leiris and thus position him as a precursor. Evans proposes that Leiris is not only a source of influence for Davis, but that their texts can be read as a dialogue. Using a methodology that draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Evans shows how Leiris focuses on sound and graphological patterns in order to understand his own conscious and unconscious relationship with words. Davis, in her stories, forces the reader to question their own relationship to language and the symbolic order. Thus, Davis's translation of Leiris's autobiography becomes a graft on her work as it offers her a chance to explore writing in a way which would be uncharacteristic in her own work.

## Jonathan EVANS

### Davis's Poetic Dialogue with Leiris's Autobiography

Lydia Davis has written that, in terms of style, Michel Leiris is perhaps the "real pinnacle" of a translator's career ("Remembering" 87). Davis translated and published three books from Leiris's oeuvre: *Brisées: Broken Branches*, a collection of occasional essays, and two parts of his four part autobiography *La Règle du jeu* as *Scratches* and *Scraps*. In this study I explore how Davis's translations of Leiris represent a dialogue between the two authors, picking up resonances of his work in hers. I suggest that the translations produce a graft onto Davis's own work. Two texts by Davis support a reading of Leiris as a precursor as they have an intertextual link to Leiris, "Swimming in Egypt: Dreams While Awake and Asleep" (*Proust* 35-44) and "To Reiterate" (*Almost* 83). I begin my analysis with these two texts before moving on to looking at how Leiris in *La Règle du jeu* stages the questioning of language. I then analyse Davis's stories in relation to Leiris's writing, before concluding with a discussion of the difference in their projects. I focus throughout on Davis's relationship with *La Règle du jeu* owing to its importance, indeed centrality, in Leiris's oeuvre. Leiris wrote in many genres, from surrealist poetry to ethnography, but for many critics (e.g., Hand; Leigh; Lejeune; Sauret) his most important works are in the field of autobiography. Indeed, Seán Hand regards all that Leiris wrote as connected to autobiography, "seizing the rule of its own singular game" (4), so even the essays in *Brisées* could be viewed as part of the same project.

Davis and Leiris share an affinity in their privileging of what Roman Jakobson calls the "poetic function" (356-58) above narrative development in their texts. The poetic function is where language brings attention to itself, "focus on the message [the verbal text] for its own sake" (Jakobson 356). This is not only relevant to poetry, but to any verbal text that is self-reflexive, folding the reader's attention back onto the text and the formal construction of that text. The importance of language is a regular trope in writing on Leiris (see Thomas), but I argue here that Leiris's focus on poetic function is an attempt to recover unconscious structures as part of his autobiographical project: he focuses on what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic elements of the text, or the "géo-texte" (83) and the sounds and rhythms of the text in an attempt to understand his process of subject formation. Davis, on the other hand, privileges the poetic function of language in order to question what Jacques Lacan calls the "ordre symbolique" (*Ecrits* 66), the interpersonal system of language and its exclusion of real referents. The two writers therefore proceed by similar means towards different goals: Davis's texts function as a response to and a rewriting of Leiris's, going beyond them into different terrains.

The two texts by Davis are based on intertextual reference to Leiris and suggest that Leiris has influenced Davis's writing in ways which go beyond simple ideas of stylistic influence. "Swimming in Egypt: Dreams while Awake and Asleep" (*Proust* 35-44) narrates a sequence of dreams and dreamlike moments that appears to be almost a rewriting of Leiris's *Nuit sans Nuit et Quelques Jours sans Jour* (1961). In this work Leiris records, in chronological order, a sequence of dreams and waking moments which appeared like dreams. In her text, on the other hand, Davis decided to recount dreams and dreamlike moments, but not identify "which were which and sequence them according to a logic that was not necessarily chronological," as well as "shaping the dreams as [she] liked" (*Proust* 38). The relationship between Davis's text and Leiris's here seems at first glance to be one of direct influence. Indeed, Davis notes that the text "illustrates the way in which a work of literature (in this case, Leiris's *Nuits sans Nuit et Quelques Jours sans Jour*) can exert an influence that produces a concrete result on years later" (*Proust* 7). Davis's project is directly inspired by Leiris's book, which she records having "acquired ... many years ago, soon after it was published in Richard Sieburth's translation" (37). The genesis of "Swimming in Egypt" was not, however, immediately related to her reading of *Nights as Days, Days as Nights* (as Sieburth titled his 1987 translation), but to an experience that appeared extremely dreamlike to Davis, of driving up what should have been a road, according to her map, but which turned out to become a forest path. This experience made her "contemplate Leiris's book with fresh interest and devise a project of [her] own" (37), which became the text "Swimming in Egypt."

The explanation of the writing of "Swimming in Egypt" is included in the text itself, which was published in a short volume on translation, and it seems that Davis needed a text that could represent

her Leiris translations. The other two texts in the volume, which deal with Davis's relationship to her translations of Maurice Blanchot and Marcel Proust are based on previously published material, although two sections of "Swimming in Egypt" were published as a broadside by Kore Press of Tucson in 2007, according to the copyright notice for *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*. Davis notes that the experience took place "recently" (38) and the piece could have been written for the pamphlet. While the other two texts in the pamphlet deal directly with works Davis has translated, this one refers to a text translated by someone else (and read in translation by Davis), complicating any supposedly simple relationship between translation and influence.

The second text is more tentative in its connection to Leiris and does not refer to Leiris himself, but to Michel Butor. "To Reiterate" was first published in the magazine *Pequod* in 1986, before Davis published her translation of *Brisées*. It begins: "Michel Butor says that to travel is to write, because to travel is to read" (*Almost* 83). This appears to refer to a footnote in Leiris's essay on Butor's *La Modification*, reproduced in *Brisées*, which quotes Butor as saying "words on a page are only markers on a road the reader himself is traveling" (Leiris, *Brisées* 212). If this is the quote Davis is referring to, then she has reversed his metaphor from reading is a form of travelling to travelling is a form of reading. The second text is more tentative in its connection to Leiris and does not refer to Leiris himself, but to Michel Butor. "To Reiterate" was first published in the magazine *Pequod* in 1986, before Davis published her translation of *Brisées*. It begins: "Michel Butor says that to travel is to write, because to travel is to read" (*Almost* 83). This appears to refer to a footnote in Leiris's essay on Butor's *La Modification*, reproduced in *Brisées*, which quotes Butor as saying "words on a page are only markers on a road the reader himself is traveling" (Leiris, *Brisées* 212). If this is the quote Davis is referring to, then she has reversed his metaphor from reading is a form of travelling to travelling is a form of reading. "To Reiterate" develops this analogy further, linking translating to writing, reading, and travelling, until "to read is also to read, and even more, because when you read you read, but also travel, because traveling read, therefore read and read" (*Almost* 83). The text folds in on itself, doubling meanings and questioning a received understanding of the relationship between writing, translating, reading and travelling. Its connection to Leiris is slim, but at the same time shows an interest in the way language can bring attention to itself which, in turn, suggests an affinity between the two writers, even before Davis started translating *Brisées* or *La Règle du jeu*.

Davis's texts have an intertextual connection to Leiris, albeit a submerged one in the case of "To Reiterate," in order to avoid direct interaction with Leiris's texts: she does not quote or otherwise integrate Leiris's writing into her own. She places Leiris's writing in a position of inspiration, as something to emulate, although with variation, in "Swimming in Egypt," and as the (probable) source of a quote that provided the stimulus for "To Reiterate." The point of contact between the two writers is not only apparent in these texts, but also in the affinity they have for writing in a way that privileges the poetic function of language. Throughout *La Règle du jeu* Leiris interrogates the role of words in his life, and nowhere more so than in the first volume, *Scratches*. The first section, "Reusement!" in *La Règle du jeu* (3-6) describes the entry of the young Leiris into the world of words. While what Leiris describes in this section is already a speaking subject, capable of forming sentences and talking, he begins to be able to contemplate words in relation to each other, and to some extent as objects in themselves rather than just carriers of meaning, suggesting Leiris's later poetic vocation. The process could be read as an entry into Lacan's symbolic order, which represents the social aspect of language. As Lacan notes, it is through language that the idea of the incest taboo can come into existence, as it is due to linguistic concepts of family relations (i.e., who is mother, sister, aunt, cousin) that one can recognize which people are taboo (*Écrits* 156-57). Slavoj Žižek likens the symbolic order to the rules of a game of chess (8). The symbolic order represents the rules of the "game" of social interaction, and Leiris's understanding of this "game" grows in "Reusement!"

The young Leiris shouts out "reusement" only to be corrected, told that he should say "heureusement" (*La Règle* 5). The effect is one of revelation: "Suddenly to perceive in its entirety a word that I had always mangled before felt like a discovery, as though a veil had suddenly been torn away or some truth exploded. This vague utterance — which until now had been private and in some sense closed — had suddenly and fortuitously been promoted to the role of a link in a whole semantic cycle" (*Scratches* 5) ("Appréhender d'un coup dans sons intégrité ce mot qu'auparavant j'avais toujours ecorché prend une allure de découverte, comme la déchirement brusque d'une voile ou

l'éclatement de quelque vérité. Voici ce vague vocable — qui jusqu'à présent m'avait été tout à fait personnel et restait comme fermé — est, par un hasard, promu au rôle de chaînon de tout un cycle sémantique" [*La Règle* 6]). Leiris's awareness of the word as a word increases and at the same time through the knowledge of the word "heureusement" he can connect it to the word "heureux," a connection that allows Leiris to go on to note the change from a personal expression (reusement) to a more socialized and shared expression (heureusement) which is understandable by other people and at the same time connected to a series of other words. Yet, "heureusement" is not the only word around which this section revolves. The object that causes the child's exclamation is a toy soldier. The word "soldier" is repeated in each of the first six paragraphs, although Leiris notes how little import the fact that it was a soldier had on him, being more interested in the fact that one of his toys had fallen and could have broken (*Scratches* 4; *La Règle* 4). As he notes, "I had no definite response to the word 'soldier'" ("soldat, cela n'éveillait aucun résonance défini en moi" [*Scratches* 4; *La Règle* 4]). Yet this word, "soldat" dominates the first half of the section. It is the only thing in the first few paragraphs which is sure: all other descriptions are questioned or multiplied — "A new soldier or an old one ... Probably a French soldier" ("Un soldat neuf ou ancien ... Un soldat vraisemblablement français" [*Scratches* 4; *La Règle* 4]). The theme of soldiers and the image of manliness they represent becomes more important later in the latter two sections of which describe Leiris himself as a soldier: the word "soldier" is by no means arbitrary.

The whole "Reusement!" section forms an introduction to *La Règle du jeu*. The opening provided by the word "heureusement" into a more social view of language is mirrored by the movement in the first two volumes away from the personal to a more social vision; from Leiris the child to Leiris the adult, engaged in a war. Hand sees *La Règle* as "playful variations on the theme of producing self-representation" (86), although he goes further and bases his analysis of the whole work on his reading of "Reusement!" stating that "we find that *Biffures*'s opening 'Reusement!' scene encapsulates the general drama of the whole autobiography" (172). Not only is the question of the social introduced here, but also, less obviously, the figure of the soldier, and, more obviously, a question of language. It is Leiris's fascination as a child with the way the word "heureusement" connects to the word "heureux" that allows him to picture a social world, "to sense obscurely ... how articulated language ... went beyond me, thrusting mysterious antennae in all directions" (*Scratches* 6) ("d'obscurément sentir ... en quoi le langage articulé ... me dépasse, poussant de tous côtes ses antennes mystérieuse" [*La Règle* 6]).

All the sections of *Scratches* apart from "Sunday" (154-215) ("Dimanche" [*La Règle* 169-237]) are constructed around readings or misreadings of words, most clearly shown in the confusion between "I drink pale red wine" ["Je bois du vin clair"] and "I drink wine, Clairet" [Je bois du vin, Clairet] (*Scratches* 8; *La Règle* 8) in the section "Songs" (7-17) ("Chansons" [*La Règle* 7-18]). This form of misreading (or mishearing) and the subsequent confusion that ensues appears often throughout the text and Leiris explains his intention to use the word "bifurs," meaning bifurcations or railway junctions and sounding almost the same as "biffures" [crossings out] to describe the material he was using (*Scratches* 238; *La Règle* 262). His attention is focused on what he calls "trippings or slippings of thought occurring as a result of fracture, a dazzling flash ... or some singularity or other ... manifesting itself in speech" (*Scratches* 238) ("trébuchements ou glissements de pensée se produisant à l'occasion d'une fêlure, d'une miroitement ... ou d'une quelque singularité ... se manifestant dans le discours" [*La Règle* 262-63]). Hand describes this as "the *astonishment* of the subject-in-language" (89; emphasis in the original), which he sees as grounding *biffures* in a "graphological" scheme: it follows Leiris's development in language rather than his biological development. Philippe Lejeune agrees when he notes that Leiris's work considers "his story as that of a *being of language*" ("son histoire come celle d'un être de langage" [7]; emphasis in the original; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). The development in language does not exclude his social development — rather it situates Leiris's autobiography on the level of the symbolic, despite its continual returning to what Kristeva calls the pre-Oedipal semiotic elements of language (19).

Sections like "Alphabet" (*Scratches* 31-63; *La Règle* 33-68) and "Once Upon A Time" (*Scratches* 117-53) ("Il était une fois" [*La Règle* 128-68]) use the sound of the word as a starting point for further reflection. In "Once Upon A Time" this reflection is mainly at the beginning, with isolated moments later on, but in "Alphabet" it seems to continue throughout the text, with various words and

sounds providing the impetus. Thus Leiris manages to associate the word "alphabet" with horses, expressions like "coup de foudre" ("love at first sight"), dice, letters, and sensual impressions. He goes on to include Biblical names, which often cause him to pause because of the diaereses in the French versions of the names Caïn and Moïses (*Scratches* 47-48; *La Règle* 50-52). Finally, he moves on to French history (*Scratches* 58; *La Règle* 62). The shifting pattern of association is the formative principle of the text, rather than narrative or argument. This development by association is what Hand refers to as the "musical form" (86) of *La Règle*. The text appears to be constructed more like a symphony, with recurrent themes that intimate and reference each other, rather than a narrative text. This is strange in the autobiographical genre, which Bran Nicol describes as a "rather conservative form of prose writing" (105). However, as Blanchot notes in relation to another text of Leiris's, autobiography is always in a state of flux: it has no constant subject but one that is in a state of becoming (239). Leiris's writing mirrors this constant movement, and the recourse to the semiotic and phonological elements of language overshadows a more strictly logical and rhetorical development. Lejeune sees the autobiography as being written like a poem (160), and notes how Leiris will search for the centre of a series of associations, while also allowing himself to develop secondary chains of association (164). This can be seen in the ranging from the alphabet and letters to the diaereses in Biblical names (in French), which then lead on to French history in the section "Alphabet": it is possible at the same time to read a chronological movement hidden behind the chain of associations, as one learns the alphabet first and then other things.

The form of sections in *Scratches / La Règle de jeu*, then, tends towards a description of the effect of language on the young Leiris, and allows the movement of each section to develop around a chain of associations. In the second volume, *Scraps*, the focus on language is reduced, although not absent. Indeed, while words continue to play an important role in "Mors" (*Scraps* 1-71; *La Règle* 289-356), they lead here into a discussion of death, a subject which Leiris explores in this section, ranging from thoughts of his own mortality (*Scraps* 18; *La Règle* 305) to the death of others such as Max Jacob (*Scraps* 35; *La Règle* 322), to the theatricality of death (*Scraps* 40-41; *La Règle* 327) and even zombies (*Scraps* 51; *La Règle* 336), which represent a suspension of death. Yet the central theme of the section, death, is not mentioned for 16 pages (*Scraps* 17; *La Règle* 304). Before then there are reflections on the theatre, a trip to the Antilles, the theme of waking, his family, self-reflexive passages about writing, and even corrections to *Scratches*. These latter take the form of actual corrections, where Leiris had misquoted songs (*Scraps* 11; *La Règle* 299), and reflections on the sound of words (*Scraps* 10-11; *La Règle* 297-99). All these subjects lay the groundwork for themes that will reappear throughout "Mors." While "Mors" seems more focused than the earlier sections, it still proceeds by association, sometimes leaving the reader wondering how Leiris has moved from one theme to another. He tries to explain the process in the text: "I am performing a series of shifts: from darkness to sleep, from suburb to desert, from oblivion to the Zuider Zee, from insect to sleepwalker, from solitude to death" (*Scraps* 23) ("J'opère une série de glissements, d'obscurité à sommeil, de banlieue à désert, d'oubli à Zuyderzée, d'insecte à somnambule, de solitude à mort" [*La Règle* 310]). Yet he never really explains the process of association; he only asserts that that is what he is doing. The effect, again, is that the text reads more like a prose poem than a narrative.

"Mors," like much of *Biffures*, tends towards a privileging of what Kristeva (83) calls the "géo-texte," that is, the part of the text which is filled with the pre-Oedipal drives of the semiotic (19), manifested as phonological and graphological patterns. In the early parts of Leiris's *La Règle du jeu*, the "pheno-texte" (Kristeva 84), or the communicative aspect of the text, tends to be submerged under the "géo-texte," although both are present, and both are, as Kristeva (84) makes clear, essential to the meaning of the text. The writing, therefore, operates like a controlled version of free association: it aims to recover Leiris's unconscious through the return to the semiotic. J.B. Pontalis also notes the free association in the text, but argues that it "rules out choice and system" (134), thus making it limited. Indeed, this ruling out of conscious choice is the significant element of free association. However, Leiris does make choices over what the beginnings of his chains of association, and follows through these chains in order to discover the unconscious significance that exists simultaneously with the conscious meaning for him of those words or phrases.

The privileging of the semiotic over the symbolic in Leiris's autobiography represents the return to childhood implicit in the first part of *Biffures*, but in the later parts and "Mors" in *Fourbis*, the theme is



no longer of childhood. Here the semiotic aspects of the text seem more like an attempt to reunite individual (child) and social (adult) selves. However, the final two sections of *Scratches* involve less word-play, and "Sports notebook" (*Scraps* 73-180) ("Les Tablettes Sportives" [*La Règle* 357-461]) and "'Look! Already the Angel'" (*Scraps* 181-241) ("Vois! Déjà l'ange" [*La Règle* 462-520]) in *Fourbis* even follow generally linear narratives. The first describes Leiris's interest in sports as a child and leading up to his time in the army, at the beginning of the World War II, while "Look! Already the Angel" describes an affair he had with a prostitute called Khadidja when he was a soldier. These last two sections can be seen as a development of the tendency in the first two volumes of *La Règle du jeu* to move toward social interaction and the symbolic order (already hinted at in "Reusement!"), away from a child's unconnected world of individual language. *La Règle*, then, begins by exploring the child's relation to language, which is also a relation to the social world. This social world gains in importance as the work progresses.

Davis also explores language use and the social, questioning the established order by demonstrating how language is used to build this order. In what follows I analyse how Davis undoes the knots of language, echoing Leiris's play with language. However, where Leiris uses language as a means of self-exploration, Davis's texts invite the reader to question their own assumptions about the symbolic order of language. For example, in the story "They Take Turns Using A Word They Like" the difference stresses of words are emphasized: "'It's *extraordinary*,' says one woman. 'It *is* extraordinary,' says the other" (*Samuel Johnson* 98; emphasis in the original). Davis's story seems like a caption for a non-existent *New Yorker* style cartoon: a caption that is tinged with a surprisingly metaphysical question, with the focus on being in the second woman's utterance. The almost repetition is discomfiting: from the title the reader would expect something different, for example, different words that they might like. The repetition of the words arrives as a shock; the change in emphasis is the difference between them but it is left to the reader to interpret what that difference may mean. The story provides the impetus for thought. The difference between the two utterances causes the reader to imagine what the two women might look like, how they would sound, why one would like the word "is," etc. Davis stages Jakobson's poetic function, making the reader of the text focus on the words themselves. The reader is confronted with the words as words, facing a revelatory moment in a similar way to the young Leiris in "Reusement!" (*Scratches* 3-7; *La Règle* 3-6), but Davis differs from Leiris in that she does not give an interpretation and leaves it up to the readers to question their own expectations and understanding.

Other of Davis's stories are also structured around what seem to be minor grammatical features, such as "Examples of *Remember*" (*Samuel Johnson* 28), "Honoring the Subjunctive" (*Samuel Johnson* 71), and "Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room" (*Varieties* 201). These stories, each of which is no more than two lines long, focus the reader again on the structures of language involved, but not explicitly interpreting them. In "A Double Negative," the grammatical construction demonstrates the character's ambivalence towards having children: "she does not want to not have had a child" (*Samuel Johnson* 66). In the story "Grammar Questions" (*Varieties* 27-29), a grammatical structure is similarly used as cover for an emotional development. The question of how to refer to a dying or dead person in the present or past tense allows the narrator to explore, albeit obliquely, how she will react to her father's imminent death. Through the questions it unfolds that the father is in hospital, cannot eat and is not conscious. Here it is not so much grammar itself that worries the narrator, but rather what it is used to refer to a person she has emotional connection to. Language may exist as a symbolic system, but "Grammar Questions" reminds the reader that it is referential: the way one uses language is important because it refers to people.

"Letter to a Funeral Parlor" (*Varieties* 74-75) similarly takes the language used to refer to the dead as its starting point, specifically a complaint over the word "cremains." The narrator/letter writer notices several instances in which the language of professional undertaking is distanced from the experience of the bereaved: "your representative used the words loved one to refer to him. That was comfortable for us, even if the ways in which we loved him were complicated" (74). The word "cremains," though, is uncomfortable for the family and the narrator explains why, referring to its status as a portmanteau word and how it makes them think of "some kind of chipped beef dish" (75). Here, again, sensitivity to language is used to explore the relationship between the narrator and their dead father. There is still an element of humour in both these stories, but rather than being solely

humorous they develop a narrative of mourning around the (mis)use of language. In "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" Davis reminds the reader that words do not just refer to other words, but rather to people and things outside of language: referents. Marjorie Perloff has noted this tendency in Davis's fiction, which she says "renew[s], however elliptically, the contact words make with their referents" (212), although she does not highlight the interpersonal nature of this renewal. The referent in "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" is the narrator's father, who is now dead. While there is language to refer to the father, he also exceeds language: he is more than how he can be described. As people (and things) exceed language, they are not wholly assimilable to the symbolic order. Lacan calls "réel" that which lies outside of the agreed illusion of the symbolic order (*Séminaire* 53-54). This real he says appears with the force of a "rencontre" (54); an encounter that is always traumatic. The narrator of Davis's story turns away from the symbolic order, which reduces their father to "cremains," preferring the trauma of their encounter with their father, in all its difficulties.

Where "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" refuses the play of language and so the symbolic order, "A Mown Lawn" (*Samuel Johnson* 2) combines playfully a privileging of the poetic function — which echoes Leiris's writing — and explicit criticism of the symbolic order. The text was published in *The Best American Poetry 2001*, edited by Robert Hass and David Lehman, as a poem (67), although Davis prefers the designation story, which she says she finds "more elastic" (page). The text begins "She hated a *mown lawn*" (*Samuel Johnson* 2; original emphasis in all quotes from this story); the italics distance the words from their communicative function. The reader is therefore unsure whether it refers to an actual area of grass that has been cut, or the words "mown lawn." The second sentence places words as combinations of symbols (letters) and phonemes, but also reverts to semantic meaning at the end: "Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was — a *woman*." The words "mow" and "wom" are anagrams of each other, foregrounding their material nature and suggesting the sort of play that is possible in language. The return of semantic meaning, "woman," at the end of the sentence brings back a connection between phonemes/graphemes and a signified. The signified in this case is part of the symbolic order: by describing "woman" as "the name of what she was," Davis separates the word from the entity (or possibly state) of woman. This questioning of the word "woman" is also present in another of Davis's stories, "Suddenly Afraid": "because she couldn't write the name of what she was: a wa wam owm owamm womn" (*Varieties* 189). "Suddenly Afraid" echoes the phrasing in "A Mown Lawn," separating the name "woman" from the condition of being a woman, but also foregrounds an anagrammatic play in the way the words after the colon approach asymptotically the word "woman" — the reader can infer this word from the failed attempts at writing it. In both texts, then, the word seems to exist in itself, separate from what a woman is.

The two texts highlight how the symbolic order, where words are accepted as having a meaning, is separate from a real existence. Lacan notes that the real is "that which always lies behind the automaton" ("cela qui gît toujours derrière l'automaton" [*Séminaire* 54]), the automaton here being the acceptance of standard meanings for English words, and especially the word "woman": Davis shows how the word itself need not mean anything, and a woman is always distinct from the word "woman." This could be related to an experience of translation, where there is constant confrontation with different words that apparently refer to the same object, state or condition, thus highlighting the arbitrary connection between signifier and signified. Davis's foregrounding of "woman" is also similar to the way that Leiris interrogates his reactions to words throughout *La Règle*, although here, as in the earlier example, Davis does not fully develop the exploration of the word's meaning, but lets readers question their own understanding.

"A Mown Lawn" resembles Leiris's autobiography in the way that it develops through a series of associations, as do the sections of *Biffures*. From "lawn" it goes to "man" to "*Nam*, a bad war. A raw war," then back to "lawn," which the narrator notes "was a contraction of *law man*." The question of law then holds for several sentences before meeting resistance from the narrator, who appears not to like the conformity involved in mowing a lawn: "A *lawn* not *mown* grows *long* she said: better a *long lawn*." The obvious alliteration and assonance here, as well as a staccato rhythm of single stressed syllables, make the text sound like a tongue twister, but again it does not quite let go of semantic meaning — as the best tongue twisters do not, either. The text has moved from considerations of sound to feelings of claustrophobia caused by suburban conformity in America and intimations of the



connection of suburbia to neo-colonial wars, with the two references to (Viet) Nam. Here there is a connection between the mown lawn of the title, the conformity it represents, and imperialism. "A Mown Lawn" advocates for a resistance to conformity, a refusal to play by the rules of the game, not only in its semantic content, but also in its form: the anagrammatic play foregrounds the arbitrary connections between word and meaning, signifier and signified. As the Lacanian symbolic order is intimately connected to language (*Ecrits* 155-57), this undoing of language questions the symbolic order. It does not return to a real referent, as "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" does, but it opens a space, like Davis's other stories, for the questioning of received ideas. Davis's undoing of the fabric of language in some of her stories reflects Leiris's method of analysing words in *Scratches*. They both use an investigation into language to structure their texts. In the case of the shorter stories, though, Davis does not perform the analysis herself, but rather creates a space of confusion that requires the reader to analyse the text. Leiris, on the other hand, seems to be interested in analysing for his sake: the reader is left outside of the process, following along but not required to analyse words for themselves. Where Leiris excludes the reader from the text, Davis's stories include him/her.

The difference can be explained by the difference in the projects of the two writers: Leiris is writing autobiography, and wants to develop an understanding of events and words in relations to his own life. Patrick Sauret describes the construction of *La Règle* as a "series of reading exercises as well as a description of the way of reading that is used" ("série d'exercices de lecture ainsi qu'une description du mode de lecture employé" [46]). He calls what Leiris is reading "autograms ... the verbal translation of a fragment of existence" ("autogramme[s] ... la traduction verbale d'un fragment d'existence" [46]). The material in *La Règle* is therefore intimately linked to Leiris's actual existence. The text cannot really exist without reference to the life of Michel Leiris, even if it only refers to certain aspects of that existence. Leiris's foregrounding of the poetic function, then, focuses his analysis on the words in his life, and so he needs to analyse those words himself, in order to come closer to an understanding of his relationship to them. Leiris is expressly trying to learn about himself, writing that *La Règle du jeu* "was originally intended to be a means of enlightening me for a more coherent conduct of my way of living" (*Scraps* 9) ("visait, originellement, à être moyen de m'éclairer pour une conduite plus cohérente de ma façon de vivre" [*La Règle* 296]). The text is, in Blanchot's words, "un acte réel" (238): it is not only supposed to be literary, but also an intervention in Leiris's life. Leiris therefore fills in interpretations and explains how certain words are meaningful to him, as he is searching for a meaning that belongs to him.

Davis, on the other hand, is writing fiction. Her stories need not be referred to her own life, although several can be, such as "Letter to a Funeral Parlor" (*Samuel Johnson* 74-75), which refers to a father who was an English professor, as was Davis's (Knight 525). Yet here Davis distances the story from her own life by casting it in the form of a letter of complaint, and not including details or names. When questioned about the autobiographical nature of her fiction by Christopher J. Knight, she commented that some of work has a basis in her life "but there are always fictional elements" (547). The example of "Swimming in Egypt" (*Proust* 35-44), which emulates a text by Leiris, demonstrates how Davis distances herself from the text: Davis copies Leiris's basic process, recording dreams and dreamlike moments, but changes them so they have a fictional form, rather than one which is autobiographical. Even the narrator of Davis's novel *The End of the Story*, published in 1995, writes in a way that divorces what she writes from herself, and she notes: "I began to wonder how the things I was writing could be formed into a story, and I began to look for a beginning and an end" (198). The narrator is thus transforming the writing from autobiographical to fictional, by making the material follow the dictates of narrative form. There is, therefore, a refusal of the autobiographical in favor of fictionalisation. The text is never confessional, but takes elements from the life of its writer. Davis says that this is what she also does: "I still define myself as a fictional writer for lack of another term, but I'm not really inventing. I'm taking what I see, the material I'm given, and arranging it, and really doing very little invention" (Stewart Atwell and Espach <<http://fictionwritersreview.com/interviews/little-plots-of-real-life-a-conversation-with-lydia-davis-interview>>). Davis suggests that she is not inventing but using found elements in her writing. Davis's stories, through their focus on formal elements, are pushed towards the status of literary texts. She leaves the reader to find their own interpretations for the various strange instances of word use and grammar because the work is not about Davis, but about those strange instances. If Davis interpreted

them for the reader, then the work would be more about her. By leaving readers to fend for themselves, the texts allow the reader to question meaning and the symbolic order that shapes meaning. Yet at the same time she returns to a sense that meaning is not just linguistic or symbolic: there are people and things that language refers to. To reduce them to linguistic devices is to ignore their reality. Hence the horror at the word "cremains" — it reduces the remains of the body of a loved person to a neologistic trade term.

The texts that are mostly based around language are mainly from *Samuel Johnson is Indignant* (2001) and *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007), both of which date (mainly) from after Davis's translation of Leiris. It would be hasty to ascribe the way she questions words and language to her experience translating Leiris, however. Davis has her own project in questioning language that differs from Leiris's exploration of the self: Davis's questioning focuses on the social, interpersonal aspects of language use. Leiris can be read as a precursor, as he uses a similar technique, but Davis develops and refines this technique in her own way. Davis's own textual production, in the form of "Swimming in Egypt" and "To Reiterate" reinforce the reading of Leiris as a precursor for Davis's work. In both these texts, as in the stories discussed in the latter half of this article, Davis's application of Leiris's techniques is always veiled: either by fictionalisation or other forms of displacement. Davis can be said to take formal elements from Leiris, but not content. It is, however, equally possible to read their relationship as a form of extension of Davis's writing. By approaching the autobiographical in Leiris's work, she can write in a way that is outside of her own, usual style. She said in an interview with Larry McCaffery that she liked translation because translating allowed her that ability to write like someone else (75). Translating Leiris would allow her to explore his lyrical autobiographical mode without writing something that is openly autobiographical. Her translation therefore offers the chance to write as if writing autobiography, but as the autobiography belongs to someone else, it becomes fictional. It cannot have the same intended purpose for Davis as it does for Leiris: it will not act as intervention in her life. What it does become is an exercise in writing, a literary game. It is like a found text that has been reworked by Davis. As a text by Davis, it loses the seriousness and purposefulness that Leiris accorded it and it becomes similar to Davis's other works in its literariness. It acts like a graft as it becomes part of Davis's work, but the possibility of reading it within the context of Leiris's work never vanishes. Both readings are possible at the same time: the tension is not and cannot be resolved.

## Works Cited

- Blanchot, Maurice. "Regards d'outre-tombe." *La Part du feu*. By Maurice Blanchot. Paris: Gallimard, 1949. 238-48.
- Davis, Lydia. *Almost No Memory*. New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1997.
- Davis, Lydia. *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*. Lewes: Sylph, 2007.
- Davis, Lydia. "'Remembering the Van Wagenens.'" *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting*. Ed. Charles Baxter. Saint Paul: Graywolf P, 1999. 87-105.
- Davis, Lydia. *Samuel Johnson is Indignant*. New York: McSweeney's, 2001.
- Davis, Lydia. *The End of the Story*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1995.
- Davis, Lydia. *Varieties of Disturbance*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007.
- Hand, Séan. *Michel Leiris: Writing the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Hass, Robert, and David Lehman, eds. *The Best American Poetry 2001*. New York: Scribner Poetry, 2001.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas B. Sebeok. Cambridge: MIT P, 1960. 350-77.
- Knight, Christopher J. "An Interview with Lydia Davis." *Contemporary Literature* 40.4 (1999): 525-51.
- Kristeva, Julia. *La Révolution du langage poétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1974.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits I*. Paris: Seuil, 1970.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Le Séminaire livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris: Seuil, 1973.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Lire Leiris. Autobiographie et langage*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1975.
- Leigh, James. "The Figure of Autobiography." *Modern Language Notes* 93.4 (1978): 733-49.
- Leiris, Michel. *Brisées: Broken Branches*. Trans. Lydia Davis. San Francisco: North Point P, 1989.
- Leiris, Michel. *L'Age d'homme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1939.
- Leiris, Michel. *La Règle du jeu*. Paris: Gallimard, 2003.
- Leiris, Michel. *Nights as Days, Days as Nights*. Trans. Richard Seiburth. Hygiene: Eridanos P, 1987.
- Leiris, Michel. *Nuits sans Nuit et Quelques Jours sans Jour*. Paris: Gallimard, 1961.
- Leiris, Michel. *Scraps*. Trans. Lydia Davis. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Leiris, Michel. *Scratches*. Trans. Lydia Davis. 1991. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1997.
- McCaffery, Larry. "Deliberately, Terribly Neutral: An Interview with Lydia Davis." *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996. 59-79.

- Nicol, Bran. "'The Memoir as Self-destruction': A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius." *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Jo Gill. London: Routledge, 2006. 100-14.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Fiction as Language Game: The Hermeneutic Parables of Lydia Davis and Maxine Chernoff." *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*. Ed. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989. 199-214.
- Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand. "Michel Leiris, or Psychoanalysis without End." Trans. David Macey. *Yale French Studies* 81 (1992): 128-44.
- Sauret, Philippe. *Inventions de Lecture chez Michel Leiris*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995.
- Stewart Atwell, Mary, and Alison Espach. "Little Plots of Real Life: A Conversation with Lydia Davis." *Fiction Writer's Review* (2009): <<http://fictionwritersreview.com/interviews/little-plots-of-real-life-a-conversation-with-lydia-davis-interview>>.
- Thomas, Jean-Jacques. "A One-Dimensional Poetics: Michel Leiris." *SubStance* 4.11-12 (1975): 3-43.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *How to Read Lacan*. London: Granta, 2006.

Author's profile: Jonathan Evans teaches translation studies at the University of Hull. His interests in research include translation and retranslation, the analysis of author-translation in the Francophone tradition, and translation between film and media. His recent publications include "The Repetition of Haruhi Suzumiya," *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* (2012) and "Cover Songs: Metaphor or Object of Study?," *The Changing Face of Translation* (Ed. I. Kemble, 2009). E-mail: <[jonathan.evans@hull.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.evans@hull.ac.uk)>