

**IDEAS OF ORDER**

*Story and Other Stories*, by Lydia Davis (Great Barrington, Mass.: The Figures, 1983)

My doctor saw me and looked past me. He heard my words and at the same time he heard other words. He took me apart and put me together in another pattern. ("Therapy")

We have all these favorite shows coming on every evening. They say it will be exciting and it always is.

They give us hints of what is to come and then it comes and it is exciting.

If dead people walked outside our windows we would be no more excited. ("Television")

The psychoanalyst and the reader of an ironic text have in common that they hear/see one linguistic structure and simultaneously create another. In both instances, that is, the routine operations of a listener/reader on a text become more than usually accessible to the consciousness, more deliberately explored. Such passages in *Story and Other Stories* as those quoted above direct Lydia Davis's readers toward these two active roles, providing us with more opportunities than usual for literary co-creation. Her humorous and impeccably crafted prose brings us to construct truths about her characters—and immediately call them into doubt. We are left, finally, as her characters are, with a conundrum, or at the most with some idea of what meaning is *not*: static, prepackaged, easily reduced or contained.

We know, for example, and are amused by our superior knowledge, that the title character of "Mr. Burdoff's Visit to Germany" is deluded. Rational and order-loving, he is "accustomed . . . to the clarity of the 18th century" and "schooled in the strict progressions of *Scarlatti*." When he makes a brief foray into an unfamiliar realm of experience, he is extremely pleased with himself: "He thinks of the night—important to the progress of their relationship—that he and Helen made love during her menstruation." He is self-satisfied, however, about an adventure he never really had: by placing the act of uninhibited lovemaking into the familiar and comforting container of "progress," he has instantly tamed it.

But Mr. Burdoff's longing for order, reason, and progress is only an exaggerated version of desires harbored by most of the stories' narrators or characters—and, by inference, by their creator. The relation of

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