

the narrative impulse to various characters' attempts to control their realities is most strongly suggested in "Story." The careful, dislocated questions the narrator poses about her lover at the end of the piece ("whether he is angry or not; if he is then how angry; whether he still loves her or not; if he does then how much") clearly serve the same distancing and controlling functions for her as the act of writing, described earlier on ("And then I go on to write, in the third person and the past tense, that clearly she always needed to know love, even if it was a complicated love").

Certainly Davis's style works to assure us that reality is orderly and reasonable. The syntax presents no disturbing dislocations, the vocabulary no difficulties. The diction tends, in fact, to be conservative in formality: with the exception of the first story, "Break It Down," there are very few contractions to be found in the collection.

Lexical and syntactical repetition tell us, by their example of congruence, that all is harmonious. And the ratiocinative urges of the narrators of such pieces as "Story" and "Break It Down" are evidence of prose that sets out all the road signs of logic: phrases like "for example," "how it works," "on the one hand, on the other hand" abound, and we even find occasional subtitles that summarize the material to follow. Definitions of character types in "Strangers" and "The Tastes" imply that people are quantifiable, categorizable. Indeed many of the pieces take an essay-like form, opening with a clearly stated topic sentence followed by illustrative evidence.

The alternative texts we construct from the same linguistic material tell rather less comforting stories. The notes of the reader-as-analyst might include some of the following observations. Repetition is a manifestation of obsessive/compulsive behavior, an activity outside of the characters'/narrators' control. Causality breaks down at the level of the individual sentences, which tend to be coordinate rather than subordinate—utterances of characters unwilling or unable to impose meaning on the data they observe. (As the narrator of "Therapy," describing herself in a state of disturbance, puts it, "I had a pair of eyes buried under understanding.") And the formal diction may be read as a sign of alienation of speakers who are not only out of sync with the contemporary world, but also estranged from their own language. Davis's characters sound at times like intelligent foreigners who have learned to speak correctly but have not entirely mastered colloquialism. The narrator of "Television," with the tautological propriety of a non-native speaker, refers to "dead people" outside the window and describes the

family sitting down to watch "a story of detective investigation" on TV.\*

The ironic reader, looking for narrative unreliability rather than psychological instability, gets active encouragement from some of Davis's narrators. In "Mildred and the Oboe," a vivid and convincing account of a neighbor's overheard act of masturbation is followed by the retraction, "Of course there may have been another explanation for what I heard." More often the evidence of narrative mendacity is more subtly encoded in the text—say, by a slight grammatical shift. In "Our Therapy," the qualifying "may" in the second clause of the sentence, "She nearly cries at this too but she may be in a public place surrounded by strangers," undermines the indicative authority of the opening clause.

At times a character's self-assessment is at odds with the larger rhetorical picture of her personality. For example, the narrator's lively explanations for the sounds issuing from the downstairs apartment in "Mildred and the Oboe" belie her assertion that she is "a sober person, a mother"; the banal apposition of sobriety and motherhood is particularly suspect in this inventive and sophisticated narrator. The frequent disjunctions between matter-of-fact statement and fantastic ("The Tasters") or startlingly graphic ("Visit to Her Husband") subject, between flat, non-lyrical prose and asserted emotion (see the excerpt from "Television," above), rend the orderly linguistic edifices of Davis's stories.

We are never left complacent with our superior co-authorial knowledge, however. A good deal of our enjoyment of these stories derives from the recognition they afford us of the fantasies of order we bring to them. The effect of "City Employment" is only partly contingent on the absurdity of such ideas as workers being hired by the city to "call up people at seven in the morning and ask in a muffled voice to speak to Lisa." Beyond the humor implicit in the concept that such conventionally non-productive activities might be financially remunerative is that in the idea that they are ordered, not random—and, further, that they are arranged for *our* sakes: "People of all ages are hired by the city to act as lunatics so that the rest of us will feel sane." Davis's stories continually probe the impulses that give rise to such notions as that they were written for our benefit (afford us recognition, don't abandon us to complacency) and that they yield up their beneficial truths when subjected to orderly scrutiny and analysis.

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\* In Davis's earlier collection, *The Thirteenth Woman* (Living Hand, 1976), characters often have foreign names (Altester, Mrs. In, Magin) and/or live in territory vaguely provincial, pre-revolutionary East European (Frydlant in Bohemia, Silit in Trsk). In *Story*, with the exception of the name of the title character in "Sketches for a Life of Wassily"—written earlier than the other stories in the collection—and an occasional reference to a character's residence in a "village," foreignness and nonmodernity are evoked more subtly by a hypercorrectness of the narrators'/characters' speech.