

In the Eye of the Storm: The Motif of Silence in A. L. Kennedy's Early Short Stories: *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains*

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Abstract

*The traditional dismissive view of female identity characteristic of the strongly masculinised Scottish culture used to trap potential women artists into passivity. Alison Louise (A. L.) Kennedy seems to be suspended between extremes in responding either by silence or maddening eloquence. Kennedy's short stories are multi-faceted, unpredictable organisms which relentlessly experiment with various means of expression and continually challenge the reader's expectations. I have chosen only one of the facets, Kennedy's use of silence in places that seem to call for explanation, silence as a bridge that may paradoxically lead to revealing a significant meaning in the form of epiphany. I have opted for her very first collection of short stories, *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990), to demonstrate that this unique narrative device is present and functional even in her early fiction.*

Keywords: Narration, short story, A. L. Kennedy, Scottish identity, Caledonian antiszygy, identity self-fashioning, narrative strategies, defamiliarisation, contemporary British women writers

1. Quest for Identity

Since her literary debut, a collection of short stories entitled *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990), A. L. Kennedy has become a most distinctive, quizzical, perplexing, beloved, and influential presence among the *literati* of Scotland and Britain as a whole. Kennedy has been a steady recipient of literary prizes since the publication of *Night*

Geometry and the Garscadden Trains, and having received her fair share of them, she has also found herself in the position of bestowing awards while still in her prime as a woman and a writer. Without any doubt, A. L. Kennedy ranks among those personalities who have widened contemporary Scottish cultural and literary horizons.

But contemporary Scottish literature owes its remarkable variety to a relatively recent development. Not long ago, Scotland tended to be less than self-confident regarding its cultural heritage, particularly bemoaning the lack of art concerned with the everyday realities of ordinary people. Even such a significant novel as *Alasdair Gray's Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, published as late as 1981, is deeply troubled by the Scottish malaise:

Think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used imaginatively by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. . . . Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves. (243)

While Gray is writing specifically about Glasgow, his complaint could easily be extended to Scotland in general, because at that time Scotland's literary reputation still rested chiefly on the ballads of Robert Burns, the romantic historicism of Walter Scott and, in the twentieth century, the nationalist synthetic Scots poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid and the somewhat solitary figure of Muriel Spark. Of course, Scottish literature continued to be written, but there were few authors active between, say, the 1930s and 1970s who dealt with contemporary topics and exercised a significant influence on the following generations. Scottish writing was waiting to be revived and energised, and this is a change that occurred in the 1980s with a host of newly emerging writers – starting with the highly influential Alasdair Gray – who explored new directions in Scottish literature with a striking originality.

Kennedy, indisputably one of the writers of the so-called Second Literary Renaissance of the 1980s, seemed very slow about correcting Alasdair Gray by re-imagining Scotland in more positive and up-to-date terms; on the contrary, she follows his example, giving the idea of Scottishness an even more caustic spin in her own fiction, non-fiction, articles and even stand-up comedy. Here is a telling example from her first novel, *Looking for the Possible Dance* (1993), where Kennedy satirises Scotland's romanticisation of national history, withdrawal into an idealised past and avoidance of present-day challenges:

The purposes of the ceilidh, a uniquely unsullied flowering of Scottish culture, are many. Among these are the taking of spirituous liquors, the singing of songs, the playing of music, dancing, joking, wynching, fighting, greeting, eating stovies and looking at the moon while contemplating the certainty of death. . . . As the Israelites had their psalms, so we have the ceilidh. As the Africans transported to Haiti kept their voodoo, so we have the ceilidh. As every languageless, stateless, selfless nation has one last, twisted image of its worst and best, we have the ceilidh. Here we pretend we are Highland, pretend we have mysteries in our work, pretend we have work. We forget our record of atrocities wherever we have been made masters and become

comfortable servants again. Our present and our past creep in to change each other and we feel angry and sad and Scottish. Perhaps we feel free. (145–46)

Paradoxically, Scottish literature has grown in proportion and in quality since the publication of *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*. More than three decades later, readers as well as literary critics observe that Scottish literature enjoys good health (better than ever) and prides itself on a new generation of writers who are blazing trails in new areas. Lately, a number of Scottish writers have tackled previously neglected topics, including contemporary urban life, which, with the exception of the 1930s social realist novels of dubious artistic merit, was a virtually unexplored area until the gritty works of James Kelman, Irvine Welsh and others. A particularly dark strain of Scottish crime fiction, tartan noir, as represented by Ian Rankin, Denise Mina and Stuart MacBride, has meanwhile become Scotland's staple literary export product.

I am convinced that much of the contemporary success of Scottish culture in general, and literature in particular, is based on the phenomenon of “Caledonian antisyzygy.” This term was popularised¹ by Hugh MacDiarmid, who defined it as the conjunction of opposites, a reflection of contrasts that may be applied to Scottish life and culture in general, because only Scots have such a large capacity for containing in themselves and their art elements that contradict each other. Although the concept of Caledonian antisyzygy is not a novel invention and is based on a degree of speculation rather than a scientific fact, it has been central to Scottish imagination, starting with R. L. Stevenson's seminal novella *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), which continues to be rewritten, reimagined and referenced in Scottish writing even today. Kennedy's explanation of the “gravest” importance of an indescribably flimsy, marginal “ceilidh” points towards a sign of the cultural weakness of the Scots in a milieu that operates within the context of the centre-versus-margin dichotomy. As a result, the Scottish polyphonic² literary tradition was perceived in terms of sets of binary oppositions, where Scottish became the repressed “other” of what English was not: dark as opposed to enlightened, backward as opposed to advanced, parochial and primitive versus sophisticated.³

2. A Helpful Yoke

For a long time, women writers were excluded from the Scottish literary canon, let alone the British one, partly because of their Scottishness and partly because of their gender, since writing, especially in Scotland, was presented as a predominantly male activity. Janice Galloway, Kennedy's contemporary, demonstrates this when she describes her feelings of guilt for “not backing up our menfolk and their ‘real’ concerns. Female concerns, like meat on mother's plate, are extras after the men and weans have been served” (5–6). Against all the odds, there has been a striking expansion of Scottish women's writing in recent years, some of them willingly accepting their lot – the conjunction of opposites, ambivalence, paradox – and others challenging literary, social and gender stereotypes.⁴ A. L. Kennedy seems both to despair of the ambivalence of her legacy and yet still embrace it in a cheerful, even wanton manner. Women writers such as Kennedy may perceive themselves as a marginalised minority within an already marginalised literary tradition; on the other hand, they thrive on the very existence of restrictions and walls to break down. The

protean, ever-changing quality of Scottishness enables a writer never to define their identity irreversibly. The ambivalence of being balanced between Scottish and British cultures, writing from the margins while working within a broader British and European context, is rich in possibilities. It should not come as a surprise that Kennedy has a reputation for being ambivalent about her job, in love with words and polyphonic voices, always playing hide-and-seek with those who venture too close.

A. L. Kennedy ranks among the volatile writers who actively refuse to be associated with any limiting labels, such as “Scottish writer,” “woman writer” or even “feminist writer.” Despite her rejection of ideological concepts and critical categories, the very fact that Kennedy happens to be Scottish and female and as often as not opts for Scottish settings and female protagonists makes her work ultimately relevant in the discourse concerning Scottish identity and the position of women. In her volume *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* and elsewhere, the author prefers bleak urban settings, usually not explicitly named but at the same time readily recognisable from various interspersed details as Scotland, or, more specifically, Glasgow. Kennedy is preoccupied with depicting the seemingly inconsequential struggles of unexceptional characters: mostly working-class, often but not always female, and typically people who are exploited, abused and oppressed. Some of the stories in *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* veer towards magical realism, notably “Translations” and “Cap O’Rushes,” which will be discussed in more detail later. Regarding Kennedy’s utilisation of magical realism, gothicism and fantasy, Kaye Mitchell observes: “Experiments in form and style, including the use of fantasy, have frequently been viewed as offering women writers the opportunity to posit alternative realities, to critique the ‘naturalness’ of the (patriarchal) reality which they are compelled to inhabit and to express the fragmentary or alienated nature of female experience” (23). Even though Kennedy can hardly be seen as a straightforward feminist with an obvious agenda, her writings relentlessly comment on what it feels like to be a woman in general, and a woman in Scotland in particular.

As for Kennedy’s sharply observed portrayals of the peculiarly Scottish experience, Mitchell concludes that Kennedy’s works “all contribute to and disseminate some idea of ‘Scotland’ and ‘Scottishness,’ regardless of her desire for her writing to be judged independent of considerations of national identity. In producing some kind of narrative of Scotland, however, her writings do emphasise precisely that heterogeneity and ambiguity which the very notion of nationhood has sought, strategically, in the name of unity, to suppress” (45). There is no single unitary Scottish national identity, and any effort to establish such a sentiment will come out forced and inauthentic, as in Kennedy’s *ceilidh*. Even the century-old, now slightly outdated binary notion of Caledonian antiszygy – currently being revised into the more accurate idea of multiculturalism – already acknowledged the inevitable existence of contradictory characteristics within one person as well as within one nation. Any identity, whether individual or national, is a multifaceted entity, and what Kennedy does is explore some of the many facets of Scottishness rather than seeking to set up one definitive version of it.

3. Writing: A Paradoxical Activity

Much has been written on Kennedy's ambivalent approach to her craft. She is a solitary being, the only creature in a rather solipsistic universe she has created for herself, but at the same time a writer, dependent on a response by definition, forever reaching out to communicate with her readers, or at least with herself, the most important consumer of her fiction. Sarah M. Dunnigan comments on Kennedy's elusive ways thus: "unwilling to be pinned down to any literary philosophy or credo of gender or nationalism" (145). "When I write," observed Kennedy, "my aim is to communicate, person to person. . . . If I respect my reader and am willing to enter into a relationship of trust, if not love, with them, I would prefer not to be labelled and categorized in return" ("Changing" 100–02). Kennedy will not have her artistic creativity restricted by limiting labels; she both refuses to describe her own work in specific terms and also expects the reader to approach her writing with an open mind, without bias or prior expectations as to what it should be like.

Kennedy pays little attention to the public persona of a writer; she willingly reduced her name to initials,⁵ rendering her gender invisible and enjoying freedom from being slotted into the category of women writers and the expectations that duly follow it. In a way, Kennedy has found freedom by continually reducing her characters to a series of disembodied voices, each of them having a story to tell. Those who are obsessed with biographical details about Kennedy ultimately find them, perhaps surprisingly, in her books of non-fiction, *On Bullfighting* (1999) and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1997). The texts feature Kennedy – otherwise a person very protective of her privacy – as being as truthful and (even brutally) honest about herself as possible and also as generous as possible with her innermost thoughts. However, one may not always like what one finds, having looked for "the real Kennedy." The opening lines of *On Bullfighting* calmly announce her desire to die, to kill herself by jumping out of her window on the fourth floor: "It's only me I want to kill. And I don't wish to be gawped at while I'm killing. I believe I've had enough embarrassment for one life. . . . I would like to think otherwise, but currently, I don't" (Kennedy, *Bullfighting* 1–2). One cannot help thinking Kennedy might be pulling one of her protective tricks by inviting the reader to share the most personal, intimate details imaginable, since people generally wish to be spared certain kinds of details and run away from morbidity, not toward it. Apparently, the idea of "A. L. Kennedy" might turn out to be a textual construct, an artistic creation not dissimilar to her own writing.

The less attention she pays to herself as the author, the more care she invests in her characters. I have opted to discuss her early prose since I am convinced it serves as a springboard and it already contains most of the elements that characterise her subsequent fiction. She portrays unimportant, common, helpless, voiceless people in precarious situations – victims, loners, and failures. To them, love or friendship is painful, out of reach, or even impossible. Kennedy's realistic stories are often seasoned with Gothic elements, and employ fragmentation and defamiliarisation, in contrast to her characters' (vain) attempts to communicate a sane message.

4. Silence and Storm

Kennedy's preoccupation with the motif of silence means that her readers are presented with a particularly challenging task. Kennedy taunts the reader by suggesting, implying,

but never telling directly and thus satisfying the curious reader with an easy answer. There are no ready answers in *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* as the characters meet with what are often Gothic, grotesque and fantastic incidents and struggle to make sense of their confusing experience. In some stories, the protagonists face an epiphany which undermines their knowledge of themselves, others and the world at large, leaving them groping for words to adequately describe what they are going through. Other stories present vulnerable characters, often women and children subjected to domestic violence or other forms of abuse, who find their experience too traumatic to be acknowledged, still less articulated. What gives Kennedy's stories their Gothic chill is precisely their silence, rife with possible meanings. Monica Germanà concludes that the trope of silence is the salient feature of Scottish Gothic, whose horror often derives from "the coming to terms with the fear of not knowing what one is" (5).

No text can exist without its reader, someone to piece together the puzzle.⁶ The whimsical narrator often sprinkles the text with possible clues, but these turn out to be perfect pieces of cleverly engineered manipulation, and the answer is to be found either in the fleeting and the fragmented, or in the very silence itself – the in-between-ness, the words not uttered but only hinted at or circled around, the silence within the storm of words. Kennedy often lulls the reader into a false sense of security, only to peel away the protective cocoon bit by bit, finally to confront the reader with a shocking epiphany. "The Role of Notable Silences in Scottish History," a short story that promises much (since Kennedy ["Changing" 102] claims: "Because I love Scotland I will always seek to write about it as enough of an outsider to see it clearly . . . I hope to communicate a truth beyond poisonous nationalism or bigotry."), turns out to contain very little about Scotland. What is more, by the author's own admission, all of the tale she has been spinning so far is a lie: "None of this is true, of course, but it is far more interesting than a brown and green glen with rocky grey bits and a couple of sheep . . . And there is no point in being Scottish if you can't make up your past as you go on. Everyone else does" (Kennedy, *Night* 63–64). Here, Kennedy comments on Scotland's tendency to romanticise its past to the point when it becomes more of a fictional story than a factual history.

And instead of her view of silences in the nation's history, Kennedy presents a series of apparently random factoids to the unsuspecting reader. Instead of seeing those snippets meet and fold together into a neatly organised narrative, the reader is suddenly rebuffed with the notion of another silence – the one that roars about us, ominous, ever-present, in the knowledge that each of us must join it one day, to become a silenced nonentity. As much as the author loves silence, there is nothing that haunts her as much as the idea of this silence.

The simple language fits the naivety of the characters, and therefore some experience may be beyond words, silenced, since the character lacks knowledge of what is going on. The task of searching for an explanation is thus delegated to the reader. Mitchell points out Kennedy's usage of the technique of defamiliarisation "as a way of approaching subjects that might otherwise be considered non-narratable. In brief, it can be used as a way of dealing with trauma" (51). This utilisation of the technique is illustrated in "Translations," where the young Indian boy can hardly explain away his sudden, impulsive drives to violence, since no psychology lesson can give him insight into certain aspects of living in an old magician's hut:

When he was old . . . he still dreamed of the One Handed Man and the nights in his hut. He would wake and remember the hand and the ointment, pushing between his legs, sliding and hot, the other arm around his stomach, gripping, and the ugly pressure of the stump against his thigh. He remembered he was no longer in possession of himself, when he was an empty thing. Most of all he would remember how much he believed it was magic that was pumping into him. (Kennedy, *Night* 13)

In “Tea and Biscuits,” a young woman, a former blood donor, picks a man a generation older than herself to find steady happiness with him, much to her own surprise and satisfaction. As a gesture of gratitude, she decides to become a regular donor again. The atmosphere changes as sinister hints begin swirling around the page, until the reader is finally able to do as the character does, to pick up the pieces of a shattered life, or what remains of the life of an HIV-positive person: “And now I am not what I thought I was. I am waiting to happen. I have a clock now, they told me that. A drunk who no longer drinks is sober, but he has a clock because every new day might be the day that he slips. I have a clock like that. I look at my life backwards and all of it is winding down. I think that is how it will stay. I think that’s it” (Kennedy, *Night* 8).

“The Moving House” also uses a favourite organising principle, the importance of which is not uttered. Its character is a schoolgirl with a new address and a new stepfather, silently pondering the unspeakable horror her new life has in store for her:

Please, Grace. Grace. Fuckun say it. You won tell. You don even think about it. Stupid cunt. Nobody’s gonny believe you. Who are you? You’re fuckun nuthun. See if they do believe you; they’ll say it was your own fault. You. Pretty, Gracie, fuckun you. Just you fuckun sleep on that. You do not tell. Think I couldn make it worse? You do not fuckun tell. (Kennedy, *Night* 41)

Next morning on her ride to school the girl sits in the car in bewildered yet helpless silence, while a storm rages outside, in the mind of the reader, who has been led into recognition of the true nature of events the author has been circling around so far.

Finally, Kennedy’s meditation on “the unfamiliarity of the apparently familiar” (Mitchell 50) is most pronounced in “Cap O’Rushes,” a playful take on a well-known fairy story, in which a courageous girl finds a way out of her present misery. The female protagonist determines her own family, her three sons and husband, are goblins.

If there was anything which had convinced her that Colin was the Goblin King, then it was probably his shirts. His shirts, even very new shirts, not yet washed, would change when he put them on. The layers that made up his collars would bubble and peel away from each other, like paint on an old door. Clothing seemed to decompose around him and within hours it would seem he had brought it from his grave. There was something about him rotten. Rotting. (Kennedy, *Night* 111)

The more the woman watches her family, the more disturbing and bestial they become. At some point, she cannot even abide their smelly presence and their sloppy table manners: “Colin’s jaws would slap together and suck apart, answered by miniature slaps and sucks

from his sons. They did not eat, they consumed. Forks, hands, spoons were filled, scraps pursued, juices sopped. The mouths were always open, anxious, grim” (Kennedy, *Night* 113). The protagonist leaves the goblin household and makes a good life for herself, ultimately finding a home that suits her and a job she likes. The nameless woman’s household of brutes feels like a light-hearted dig at traditional Scottish working-class masculinity with some stereotypical behaviour attached. The female turns out to be an unreliable narrator after all. She congratulates herself on having escaped the Goblin King and rejoices in finding a flat and a job that conform to her tastes – devoid of people, of humans, of close, let alone intimate, relationships. The outcome of the story hinges on an ambivalence embedded in the text. Who is identified as the monster in this text? An oppressed fairytale girl may be entitled to cut and run to save herself, but the idea of a real – perhaps Scottish – mother of three leaving her home without as much as a glance back or a thought is going to haunt the text more effectively than any presence of goblins ever could.

5. Conclusion

A. L. Kennedy’s first volume of short stories is striking for its overall diversity despite the material she has used – small people, losers, psychiatric cases, victims of love that hurts or is not given. Kennedy is determined that these “insignificant” people lost in silence are to be given voice in her stories, but not necessarily by pointing at their lot directly. The stories do contain a central revelation, but it is arrived at through various techniques, defamiliarisation being one of her favourites. Kennedy, with her typical evasiveness, seems to point out that no words speak louder than the ominous silence of the recognition of the true nature of events one has been oblivious to so far. And therefore, the idea of “the eye of the storm,” the quiet, motionless, yet most dangerous place imaginable, might, as a bold oxymoron, well befit Kennedy’s courageous prose.

Notes

¹ The term was in circulation even before Hugh MacDiarmid’s *New Renaissance* in the 1920s and 1930s (Walker 15–16).

² Polyphony refers to the coexistence of a multitude of voices and viewpoints which interact dynamically but are never subsumed into one unifying discourse. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s novels characteristically manifest “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices.” Bakhtin argues that “what unfolds in his [Dostoevsky’s] works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; yet rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin 3).

³ Homi K. Bhabha might add more features of the colonised nation (which Scotland had truly become on the dissolution of its national parliament in Edinburgh to merge with the British Parliament in Westminster in 1707; hence a “languageless, stateless” part of Great Britain) and the subsequent rise of postcolonial nations (Padley 175–77).

⁴ Besides Kennedy and Galloway, both of whom published their first works at the turn of the 1990s, other major contemporary women writers include, for example, Kate Atkinson, Ali Smith and Louise Welsh.

⁵ “The authors I first loved all had initials—J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, E. Nesbit, e. e. cummings – and I actively did not want to know who they were or have them get in the way of my enjoying their story and their voice” (qtd. in Bedell). And obviously, Kennedy chooses “A. L.” over “Alison Louise,” hiding her female identity since “Male writers are allowed just to write, to just be . . . You are a writer. It is a non-sex-specific word because it is very often about areas in which you are not gender-identified” (Mansfield 107).

⁶ Reader-response critical theory, as formulated by Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader* (1972) and *The Act of Reading* (1976), works with the concepts of the implied reader and narrative gaps. The implied reader fulfils two interrelated functions: that of “a textual structure” and that of “a structured act.” The implied reader as a textual structure covers “the reader’s point-of-view as found within the text” (Iser 35). The reader’s point of view is that of his or her own experience, which is the lens through which the reader approaches the text. Individual experience, beliefs, and bias affect the way the text is perceived by a particular reader. In the act of reading, the reader forms a set of constantly evolving expectations, most of which will be frustrated as the text unfolds. The reader as a structured act refers to the expectations that are formulated, thwarted, and reformulated in the process of the negotiation of the text by the reader. The reader’s expectations seek to fill in the narrative gaps on the basis of the clues provided by the text itself. The reader actively interacts with the text and becomes a creator of the text’s meanings rather than a passive recipient of pre-existing meanings.

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