

**INTIMACY, VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY:
THE FICTION OF A.L. KENNEDY**

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ABSTRACT

This essay will discuss Kennedy's major fiction: *Looking for the Possible Dance*, *So I Am Glad*, the novella *Original Bliss* and the short story "Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains." In a postmodernist world where traditional relationships have broken down, Kennedy posits an overwhelming desire for intimacy. However, many risks have to be taken in 'new' relationships. It is not easy to get to know people and even when they are known they are sometimes looking for a commitment which is not necessarily a concomitant of intimacy. The problems raised by not knowing one's partner or by wanting different things are often filled with violence as personal and capable of reaching the innermost depths of a person's being as the intimacy of which it is the dark aspect. The essay will also examine Kennedy's narrative technique as a means of expressing the hesitations, fears and bravery of modern relationships.

A.L. Kennedy's fiction is highly regarded by contemporary reviewers and has won many literary prizes. In "Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains," *Looking for the Possible Dance* and *So I Am Glad*, Kennedy established herself by creating a range of late-twentieth century urban voices facing the difficulties of constructing relationships in a society characterised by flux. Sometimes these fragile relationships survive; this is her optimism; but there is a dark, violent aspect to her fiction and a popular response to her fiction is to argue that its violence is 'unnecessary.' In this essay I hope to show that violence is often the corollary of intimacy; where intimacy exists violence may also exist *to the same extent*. It is within this polarity that identity is constructed. In order to shed light on the Kennedy's themes I will utilise the work

of a variety of contemporary critics, in particular that of Camille Paglia, to supply a context for the sadomasochistic elements of Kennedy's work.

"Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains" is the title story of Kennedy's first collection of short stories published in 1990. This story is the creative seedbed of all Kennedy's fiction, thus it is worth analysing in some detail. The title is striking because of the curious use of 'geometry' and the even more curious juxtaposition of 'geometry' with Garscadden trains. 'Geometry' is a simple metaphor for the pleasing order or pattern of the subject's relationship with her husband; 'Night Geometry' indicates the sexual dimension of the relationship. But Garscadden? Garscadden is a rather nondescript area of Glasgow, west of the city centre. It has neither the multiple deprivation of Drumchapel to the north nor the attractiveness of neighbouring middle-class suburbs such as Hyndland and Jordanhill. However, Garscadden is a definite locale and its use by Kennedy demonstrates her interest in metropolitan life. The subject, who remains unnamed but reveals herself through an intimate first-person persona, is a commuter who catches a train three mornings a week from an orange-coloured, graffiti-covered shelter in Garscadden to the city centre where she works for a firm of debt-collectors (during the 1980s orange indicated Strathclyde Region's corporate transport identity.) Debt-collecting is merely one detail among many which Kennedy includes in her writing as she refuses to ignore the poverty, dispossession and alienation which is the only urban experience some people have:

Debt, as Mr McSwiggan often said, could be very democratic —Mrs Gallacher with two small boys, no husband and her loan from the Social Fund turned down was in debt. And so was Peru.¹

Although politics is not often the main theme of her work, Kennedy is a politically literate writer. This quotation not only shows her awareness of the problem of debt but also of its political context. The Social Fund was introduced by the Conservative government and, according to opposition politicians in an acrimonious debate, replaced a more generous system. Thatcherism is one of the features of urban British life Kennedy opposes, although Kennedy's prose is not simplistically anti-Thatcherite. The story's main character earns her living from debt—a choice in which pragmatism wins out over idealism. In postmodernist literature, Kennedy's insistence on this particular world and this time should not be overlooked.²

While the trains have secondary political significance, the main point to be made about them is that they are enigmatic. Although they stop at intervening stations, no one gets on or off. The trains appear to be functioning rationally but are actually caught up in absurdity. The trains are a metaphor for failure to communicate and for the misleading nature of appearances and as such are the key metaphor for the story's theme which is about non-communication between husband and wife which underlines the facade of good communication.

Intimacy and violence, aspects of urban life, are synonymous with Kennedy's fiction. Although the metropolis is the site of much alienation in twentieth-century literature, Kennedy examines the precarious possibilities of constructing relationships on the transience, anonymity and routine which characterise the city. The subject meets her husband-to-be, Duncan, one night in a bar. Eventually, the couple marry

and the subject enjoys the ordinariness of the relationship which includes milky cocoa in bed, cooking puddings and nursing her husband when he has flu. It also includes the less pleasant aspect of putting up with his disagreeable habits —washing towels “scaley with peelings from his feet” and stopping him “trimming his fringe with the kitchen scissors” (30). When the relationship goes sour, the narrator concludes, “Intensity is easy, it’s the simple nearness that you’ll miss” (27).

The gentle ordinariness of the relationship is expressed in the banal dialogue and indirect narration which Kennedy uses skilfully to reveal ordinary people trying to get to grips with the deep meanings of their lives. Like the American short story writer Raymond Carver, Kennedy creates character and in this case, the tone of a relationship through dialogue which, though the vocabulary and phrases are hackneyed, is actually being used by the subject to convey the stated meanings:

‘I love you.’

‘Uh hu.’

‘I do love you.’

‘I know that. I feel that. I love you, too.’

‘I want to look after you.’ (27)

This intimacy is shattered when it is revealed that while the woman has been sincere the man has not. Thus the dialogue, through banality, expresses both the touching faith of the woman and the perfunctory responses of the man. The intimacy of the confessions of Kennedy’s personae is one of the hallmarks of her writing. Slowly the woman realises her husband is being unfaithful; a realisation caused by laundry: “his trousers developed concertina creases and needed washing much more regularly” (31). The woman does not leave him or broach the subject with him. The routine of the city is implicated in the denouement of the story as the wife only finds her husband in *flagrante* because her train *doesn’t* come and for once she gives up waiting. Until then the city’s routine was her husband’s accomplice.

She *intends* to murder her husband and his girlfriend and it becomes clear that this fictional persona who has given the impression of being a victim, may actually have deceived the reader, initially she announced: “It was a Garscadden train that almost killed my husband” (25). The implication is that her husband met his death in a transport accident. So persuasive is the voice, so clever in building up the case against her husband, with honest good intention and a blackly humorous, clear-eyed realism when she realises how she has been deceived, so intimate is that relationship with the reader, that it comes as a shock to realise that what Duncan did to his wife, his wife did to her readers: deceived them —in her case about the immediate cause of Duncan’s brush with death. The little housewifely voice which can be heard in the narrative —“there is nothing worse than a bed full of crumbs” (27)— is capable of deadly violence when outraged. This story is more problematic than any simply poignant interpretation can account for.

And violence is another phenomenon associated with city life which Kennedy discusses. One of Kennedy’s central fictional positions is that violence is so much a part of the human condition that it cannot be attributed to certain sections of society, though there are places where violence is more obvious, or people with special names

such as ‘murderers’ or ‘vandals,’ whose crimes merit punishment. Violence may erupt at any time. It often occurs in the same space as intimacy as readers realise when it seems the narrator is about to kill her husband. Violence provokes violence and the avenging carving knife is symptomatic of a sought-for restitution for the systematic and serial abuse of trust, the violence which Duncan has practised on his wife.

Yet again, however, the reader cannot settle comfortably with this reading for it fails to account for a series of references to the narrator’s mother. When these references are examined they throw light on a further expression of the theme of identity. The way the theme is developed can be explicated by using psychoanalytic insights. The references to the mother are seemingly peripheral to the story. They turn up as asides in the subject’s narrative and seem to be there to flesh out a character with the kind of details which are the stuff of prose. At the beginning of the story the mother is already dead. She bequeaths three things to her daughter: a cryptic saying; a dog and a carving knife. The sentence “Esau was a hairy man” (25) is a Biblical quotation from Genesis 27.11 and refers to the twins Esau and Jacob. It is what is said about *Jacob* that links with Duncan. Jacob was distinguished from his brother by being “a smooth man,” that is lacking in hair. In addition Jacob’s name is often glossed as meaning ‘Twister’ or ‘Deceiver.’ Both these characteristics fit Duncan who “wasn’t hairy at all”:

He had almost no eyebrows, downy underarm hair and a disturbingly naked chest... I don’t believe he ever shaved. There was no need. (26)

Reading the death of the mother as the onset of the Oedipal crisis, then the cryptic saying turns out to be a warning.

Not only is Duncan surprisingly hairless for a male, he is continuously described *by the narrator* as being a child. His chest is “pale with little boy’s skin” (26). His infidelities, his wife comes to realise, are expressed by times when their ‘night geometry’ changes, when he puts his head on her shoulder instead of the other way around, “it was his body’s way of saying... he was going to be a good boy from now on” (30). He “was my wee man” his wife says (28). But what does this language suggest? Is the woman infantilizing her husband? Certainly, when she does regard him as a man he does not seem at all prepossessing: “He would look like those embarrassing forties photographs of working class men at the beach or in desert armies” (26). Perhaps this epicene boy is not ‘Duncan’ but the subject’s construction of the man to whom she was married.

The woman looks after her mother’s dog. This animal prompts a comparison with Duncan as she reflects on how close she and Duncan had seemed: “Even my mother’s dog, when he slept with his head on my lap, would eventually breathe in time with me” (27). The irony of this is that the mother’s dog is a more faithful source of comfort than Duncan:

Finally, the woman picks up the mother’s carving knife: I was going to run back to the bedroom and do what you would do with a carving knife maybe to one of them, maybe to both, or perhaps just cut off his prick. That thought occurred. (33)

The extent of the woman's wounding is reflected in the fact that the social part of her mind has been ripped open and violent, libidinal drives from the unconscious are becoming apparent. The mother bequeathed a warning about men, a male substitute and a means of disempowering male sexuality.

These maternal gifts have implications for the subject's identity in process. To resolve the Oedipal crisis, a girl may come to terms with the loss of the mother by assimilating 'male' characteristics such as aggression or competitiveness or else take on a stereotypically 'female' role. And indeed this is what the woman in the story does. She actively enjoys her domestic role but the repetition of the word "little" and the appearance of nursery food casts doubt on how realistic, no matter how intimate, her marriage relationship is—it has some of the overtones of little girls playing at "houses":

We had cocoa in bed. I made it in our little milk pan and I whisked it with out little whisk, to make it creamy, and we drank it sitting up against the pillows and ate all butter biscuits, making sure we didn't drop any crumbs. (27)

If this adoption of a role is a resolution of the Oedipal crisis then the woman has solved it as we all do: unconsciously. Although she comes to realise that Duncan perceived her as a series of roles, her experience is, "I always felt with me" (30). Her summing up of herself is, "[I] have generally been a good wife" (31). In other words her subjectivity found satisfying expression with that role. The problem was that Duncan did not perceive her in that way:

I repeated the roles that Duncan chose to give me in his head—wicked wife, wounded wife, the one he would always come back to, the one he had to leave... Duncan was turning me into Claire [a previous girlfriend]... It seems I was either a victim, an obstacle or a safety net. I wasn't me. He took away me. (30-31)

Given this psychic disturbance Duncan has set up about the subject's identity, she has to set about finding out who she is all over again. She looks in the mirror, "There I was; reflected; unrecognisable" (31). She experiences depression and tries to reconstruct her identity, "looking for achievements that I'd made that weren't to do with being a wife" (32). Crucially she does not tell Duncan that she knows about his infidelities, nor does she leave him. For a long time "things were very calm" (32). 'Calm' is a dangerous word in Kennedy's fiction for inevitably this sort of 'calm' is the 'calm before the storm;' an idea developed at length in *So I Am Glad*. All the damage done by Duncan is simmering inside the subject and is uncontrollably released when he is found in bed with—the final insult—"a very young lady" (33). Jacques Lacan theorises that the entry to the social self can be identified with the entry to language and Julia Kristeva develops that theory arguing that the third position which women may adopt as a means of resolving the Oedipal crisis is to exist on a threshold—a border between the semiotic and the symbolic, the unconscious and the conscious, the psychic and the social:

It is on this threshold site that the social and the psychic interact in a dialogue or dialectic which produces communicative utterance [...] Similarly, identity is

constructed on this intertextuality or boundary between unconscious drives and the social; self is thus a dialogic interaction of these two dispositions and produces a subject also 'in process.'³

When the narrator sees her husband in bed with someone else this theory is dramatised as she states to the reader: "I don't believe I said a single word. There wasn't a word I could say" (33). Because there is no word for the mixture of anger, hurt and resentful fury this woman feels, there is no social protection of language, no negotiation with the unconscious and therefore the desires to murder and castrate are released.

However, the knife slips and the woman wounds herself. When she sees that Duncan thinks she tried to kill herself and that "the idea seemed to disturb him" (34), she takes no other action, seemingly satisfied that she has imposed a new role on herself in his consciousness. Even though this is the role of a masochist she does not seem to mind. At least it is a role she has given herself, not one he has imposed on her.

Without a human mirror to reflect her, she is left wondering whether or not she exists. The media, the seeming verifier of existence, does not include people like her or her mother. Only in death notices and the disasters it reports are the deep sadnesses in which ordinary people are caught up given any recognition. In a grey world of shifting loyalties and identities the subject's conclusion is: "this is not enough" (34).

These themes of intimacy, violence and identity are developed in Kennedy's subsequent fiction where there is a spectrum of intimate relationships —some erotic— and all more or less violent. In *Looking for the Possible Dance*, the violent attack on Colin McCoag is a revenge attack perpetrated by a gang of loan sharks and it could be seen as emanating from the city's dark side. In *So I Am Glad*, the heroine, to all intents and purposes a "nice" girl, is involved in a sadomasochistic relationship. While both books are located in contemporary time and space, their fictionality is highlighted and enriched by Kennedy's use of literary allusion in *Looking for the Possible Dance* and magic realism in *So I Am Glad*. This combination of realism and metaphor does much to produce the emotional scope and tone of Kennedy's fiction. So, where does the violence fit in? Why does a nice heroine who is genuinely despairing about contemporary bloodbaths in Bosnia take to sadomasochism? Although the heroine describes herself as not being "nice," the reason she has to tell the readers is because up until then, as far as the narrative is concerned she has seemed indubitable "nice." And why does the equally nice hero of *Original Bliss* who is able to suggest ways of enriching life for others indulge in such grim pornography? In an interview with Kennedy, the journalist says:

Kennedy worries about the things she sees in the papers, and writes about some that disturb her. She attributes much of the world's evil to the pressure everyone's under. "Everyone's so taut and nobody has any time or is on pills or is taking cocaine... Part of why you write is to say, look, I now know about this and I have to tell you. Not just because it's a terrible thing, but because it's a terrible thing that was done by somebody who was not dissimilar to you. Just certain things were different."⁴

Kennedy characterises society as violent and realises that people try to escape from its pressures by various means. Some of those who do violent things are not otherwise violent people. This critique has some uncanny echoes in Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*:

Society is our frail barrier against Nature. When the prestige of state and religion is low, men are free but they find this freedom intolerable and seek new ways to enslave themselves through drugs or depression. My theory is that whenever sexual freedom is sought or achieved, sadomasochism will not be far behind [...] We may have to accept an ethical cleavage between imagination and reality, tolerating horrors, rapes, and mutilations in art we would not tolerate in society. For art is our message from the beyond, telling us what nature is up to. Not sex but cruelty is the great neglected or suppressed item on the modern humanistic agenda.⁵

Paglia continues:

Sadomasochism will appear in the freest times, in imperial Rome or the late twentieth century.⁶

This critique enables the problematic violence of Kennedy's fiction to be addressed. What makes Kennedy's fiction great is her ability to articulate the spirit of this "freest" of times by putting "cruelty on the humanistic agenda," by showing that cruelty is a much more pervasive force in our lives than we may like to admit. We routinely deny the cruelty involved in infidelity because it happens so frequently. Yet when it provokes murder as in "Night Geometry," we find woman's reaction "understandable." Implicitly modern people know that infidelity is one of the cruellest personal injuries that can be perpetrated. Kennedy's fiction may be read as a disturbing reflection of what happens when social limitations on the libidinal drives of the unconscious are relaxed yet it also shows the humanity and vulnerability of those who are victims of such cruelty or, sometimes, of those who perpetrate it. Besides all of which there is the complicating factor that on the pain/pleasure continuum, not all people site 'normality' in the same place. As Kennedy says: "But if it's [a miserable relationship] crap you can always write about it. Pain is lovely."⁷ By examining *Looking for the Possible Dance* and *So I Am Glad*, we can extend this analysis.

Looking for the Possible Dance again begins with an absent mother. In that absence, Margaret forms a very close bond with her father. One of her earliest memories is of him dancing with her at a local Anniversary Ceilidh at the Methodist Church Hall. He is "graceful," "his eyes glowing blue with the dance."⁸ This relationship has definite erotic overtones: the physicality of their relationship, though always just about appropriate, is lovingly described:

He folded his hands round her waist, nearly tickling but not quite. He bristled his stubble against his cheek, blew on her nose... 'I love you.' Loud and firmly a quiet shout, and then, 'I love you.' [...] This became the only way he could say these words to anyone, although she didn't notice this for sometime. (13)

When Margaret meets Colin McCoag, a fellow-Scot in her English class at an English University, she falls in love with him. McCoag is another of these wimpish-looking Kennedy male characters: this time instead of looking like a desert rat, he looks like a Mormon elder (38). Colin walks out on her just before graduation and Margaret goes back to Scotland. When he returns to find Margaret a few years later, he spends some time watching her before he engineers a meeting. This is ironic. He thinks he is in control of his own life but does not realise that someone will begin to watch him with malign intent. Margaret is glad to see him, the relationship begins again, and the two become closer. Margaret finds it difficult to commit herself to him, partly because he walked out on her, partly because of the strength of her father's influence on her, and partly because of her own temperament. This becomes a point of conflict. Even although Margaret "introduces" Colin to her dad, Colin always goes too fast for her. Colin is "like being approached by a bulldozer, a hard mind. Margaret thought she might prefer it slow" (61). When he buys her a ring without telling her, she says: "'I'm worried but this is important. If you'd told me, I could have come with you. We might have bought it together. We might have talked about it'" (203). Finally Colin leaves Margaret again because she cannot make the commitment he's looking for.

Their relationship provides a number of responses to pain. Margaret has a vaginal cut which makes intercourse painful. She goes to the doctor and when she returns Colin is happy to treat her as an "invalid" (119). Again he likes to control their lives. Colin himself sustains some back pain as a result of running. He visits Mr. Ho, who gives him relief by inserting needles into his body and whose motto is "I happen to think this doesn't work so well, if it is less painful" (137). So far so good: pain is either cured or regulated for positive ends.

When at the community centre where Margaret works with members of the urban underclass, Colin overhears a man whom he realises is a loan shark trying to urge a poor woman to take out a loan, Colin exposes the man who leaves immediately. This incident is the basis for a number of conversations situated throughout the narrative. At the dentist's one day, Margaret meets a man she does not know. This man claims to have killed a man and punished himself by refusing to take pleasure in anything for eight years. This saved him going to jail but he felt he repaid his debt to society. Other snippets of narrative relate to this figure but the climax of the story is reached when, after Colin has left Margaret for the second time, he is kidnapped by the loan shark he exposed who works for Mr. Webster, the man Margaret met at the dentist's —Margaret never knows he is responsible for the assault on Colin. To punish Colin for interference Webster crucifies him to the floor. However, the deliberate torture recalls the hideous, languorous cruelties of Jacobean tragedy, whose master was John Webster. Webster plays Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* while torturing Colin so that he will hear the music in his mind and inevitably remember the savagery. It becomes clear that Webster has thought in details about how the torture is to take place. Camille Paglia quotes one of de Sade's characters saying, "Murder is a branch of erotic activity, one of its extravagances."⁹ When Webster returns to Colin, his behaviour seems tender:

Mr Webster [was] kneeling on his arms. This prevented Colin moving and pulling at the nails they had fixed through his hands and feet and was a charitable, almost loving act [...] (232)

Colin feels cool, smooth hands slid beneath his ears and cupping his neck. There is a tension in Webster's voice, a hardness which appears as something soft, deep, hot. (131)

Colin feels a kiss come on his forehead. (132)

This is indeed the most intimate violence, the violation of the body and of the mind. Webster declares that he is part of society not extraneous to it:

This is our small Terror, Colin. You can gather it every day from everywhere; post office and court rooms, your evening paper, your evening streets. We just make our own use of it. This is the way we live, do you see; we cannot exist outside society and so we do our best to use it. To offer it reflections of itself. (230)

Because of Webster's self-imprisonment from pleasure, he himself takes great sensual delight in every moment of every day. His description of the awakening of the Glasgow Street is very beautiful. Webster describes himself as free: "I was free. Free in capital letters. Effaredoubleee. FREE" (49). Yet no one is more enslaved to the pleasure in cruelty than he is.

This free identity should be contrasted with the other freedom found in the city in the manifesto of the ceilidh which is held at the centre where Margaret works. The centre-users decide to put on a ceilidh to bring some anticipation, joy and celebration into otherwise depressing lives. One of the more philosophical members of the group reflects on this process. The ceilidh, he thinks, is a Scottish way of reflecting on various aspects of life and Scottish identity. This is often mawkish, sometimes beneficial and usually drunken:

Our present and our past creep in to change each other and we feel angry and sad and Scottish. Perhaps we feel free. (146)

That cruelty produces more cruelty is not surprising but that the cruelties of urban deprivation might produce fleeting freedom, is.

The ceilidh and Webster share one other common interest. Both are aware of the reality of death. This is the great "secret" Webster shares with Colin, telling him that in the light of it, he must live life to the full. Webster continually explains his attack on Colin as a "lesson" that he must "Seize the day." The reality of death is also recognised in the purposes of the ceilidh:

Among these [the purposes of the ceilidh] 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 vomiting or contemplating the certainty of death. (145)

Because of death, urban poverty forces people to look for freedom.

Freedom, when it is as perverted as Webster's, forces attention on what true freedom consists of. It is hard to escape the meaning that lies on the surface of the prose

that Colin does “learn a lesson” from his attack: that there are vast influences on his life which he cannot nor should he try to control. This is ferocious interpretation: Colin’s purgation is on a par with Mr. Rochester’s in *Jane Eyre*. Colin returns to Maggie as an invalid, realising now that their positions are reversed, that invalidity is not a role he relishes. He realises too that he cannot coerce Maggie into commitment and in the end encourages her to go to London, to take some time out, knowing that if she comes back it will be of her own free will, not because of his abilities to control. Both identities are stronger: any future union will be entered into and sustained freely. The ending is optimistic.

So I Am Glad continues the discussion. The absorbing plot is the arrival of Cyrano de Bergerac in a Glasgow flat. He had been transported through time, returned from the dead (he died in 1655) and glows in the dark. He is a metaphor for all that is beautiful and tender in romantic love. The main character, Jennifer, falls in love with him, and is eventually able, like Maggie, to commit herself to him. Paglia comments:

Sex is the point of contact between man and nature, where morality and good intentions fall to primitive urges. I call it an intersection. This intersection is the uncanny crossroads of Hecate, where all things return in the night. Eroticism is a realm stalked by ghosts. It is the place beyond the pale, both cursed and enchanted.¹⁰

Jennifer’s relationship with Savinien is both cursed—it is blighted by drug addiction when Savinien leaves because he thinks he is being a burden to Jennifer—and it is enchanted:

And he shone, you know. He really shone. We had the brightest bed in the world. I remember how quickly I caught his fire and the two of us burning and gleaming between electric sheets.¹¹

However, the other ghosts who stalk the erotic intersection between Jennifer and nature are her mother and father who had the perverted habit of making love in front of Jennifer when she was a child. The parents were later killed in a car crash. When Jennifer introduces the narrative she says: “You should be aware of my principle characteristic which I choose to call my calmness” (4). Others are inclined to see her as cold. Jennifer maintains that her calmness is not due to her upbringing. However, she cannot express emotion spontaneously; she has to think about them first.

As usual the narrative presents these facts partially. Thus it is not until Jennifer’s despairing days after Savinien has left that her depression allows her anger to erupt. For Jennifer sex was an indifferent experience until with one lover, Steve, she began experimenting with sadomasochism. This continued until she felt that the violence was reaching unacceptable levels and the relationship broke up. As she grows closer to Savinien she throws her handcuffs into a skip with its empty syringes; evidence of “our public sicknesses” (95). When Savinien leaves, she is prey to her darker desires and in a one-night sadomasochistic stand with Steve, assaults him so badly that he has to take a week off work. While Jennifer is reluctant to admit it, it seems reasonable to interpret her calmness and furious outbursts as a means of expressing the rage

she feels because of her coerced inclusion in her parents' perversion. At work, Jennifer is advised by a well-meaning member of the personnel staff:

'I said I would certainly bear her suggestions in mind and she warned of the dangers of unexpressed rage. Presumably she was unaware of how personally dangerous she would have found my expressed rage.' (226)

This black humour is a feature of Kennedy's writing particularly in moments of despair or difficulty. In this ghost-ridden family romance, the tenderness of Savinien who also has a violent past and can therefore understand her, is used to exorcise the baneful influence of her parents:

'Don't ever let me hurt you, Savinien. Even if I ask.'
'Ah.' He smiled into me. 'No, I won't let you do that. But neither will you.'
(208)

Through all of this she comes to find a new identity in writing and her calmness is replaced by gladness and perhaps the possibility of a relationship with Arthur.

By looking at the themes of intimacy, violence and identity in A.L. Kennedy's fiction, I am aware that I have looked quite briefly at only a few of the salient themes which characterise her fiction, where there is much more than has been alluded to in this essay. Kennedy is one of the foremost writers of our generation because she so clearly articulates the spirit of the age. Paglia's argument that all sorts of unconscious desires are released into society when social limits are relaxed is borne out by Kennedy's writing and that is why the violence in her work is not peripheral but central to what she is expressing. It is also clear that she can image in beautiful simplicity the deepest stirrings of the unconscious which we recognise even when we cannot fully explain them. That from this maelstrom of violence, realistically intimate relationships can exist between people who have constructed workable identities which recognise and avoid the dangers in themselves and determine to find joy, is one of the genuine triumphs of postmodern fiction.

Notes

¹ A.L. Kennedy, *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990; London: Phoenix, 1995) 29. Subsequent references are to this edition.

² In *Postmodern Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987) 95-6, Brian McHale observes that postmodernists sometimes falsify history to problematise the partial nature of history narratives; this is not Kennedy's point. Indeed in "Night Geometry," *Looking for the Possible Dance*, and *So I Am Glad*, Kennedy's work could be read as a "secret history," the ordinary person's view of the effect of policy implementation as opposed to triumphant media narratives of renewal. This awareness of modern society makes Will Self's argument that Kennedy is unaware of society because she does not read newspapers look silly. (See Will Self, "Come down from Your Tower, Alison," *Independent on Sunday* 22 Aug. 1999, 4-5). Kennedy does read and write for newspapers —see note 7 below— and her

work contains a trenchant social critique which deals in detail with the media particular in *So I Am Glad*.

³ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (1993; Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 145-6.

⁴ "Interview," *The Independent* 29 Jan. 1997, 5.

⁵ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (1990; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) 3, 39.

⁶ Paglia 263.

⁷ *The Independent* 5.

⁸ A.L. Kennedy, *Looking for the Possible Dance* (1993; London: Minerva, 1994) 2. Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁹ Paglia 236.

¹⁰ Paglia 3.

¹¹ A.L. Kennedy, *So I Am Glad* (1995; London: Vintage, 1996) 250. Subsequent references are to this edition.