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Kennedy's Night Geometry and the
Garscadden Trains***

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In Capel Gofeg after sunset, the air would taste of damp smoke and coldness, and the possibilities of fear. The town dreamed brokenly of gunpowder plots and deaths by fire.^[1]

Kennedy's short stories introduce readers to a range of women's voices that offer alternative views of women within diverse social structures. Her characters voice subjective experiences that point out women's frustrations as regards the ways in which society regulates women's socialization. In her work on the social construction of subjective experience based on women's stories of their everyday memories and experiences, Frigga Haug finds that in these narratives,

The individual's analyses of reality, which we have decoded as her or his way of appropriating the world and which we wish to track down in our everyday stories, move on the terrain of dominant cultural values and counter-cultural, subversive efforts to extract meaning from life.^[2]

Kennedy's short stories, through the analyses of everyday experiences that her women characters undertake, make visible the areas of conflict where women struggle to make sense of their lives against the pressures of constraining cultural values. Such efforts may indeed appear subversive when the characters' voices reveal that women's ways of appropriating social reality run counter to the expectations derived from established social meaning structures. These voices offer as many opportunities for women readers to recognize themselves as

articulate and capable members in social constituencies thus allowing them to enact modes of socializing that mainstream social discourses have hitherto obscured and marginalized.

Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains

The first story sets the tone of this collection. A young woman's life is framed within the time span marked by the deaths of two men: the death of her grandfather marks the girl's entering into adulthood as an autonomous woman, while the foreseeable death of her elderly lover becomes the measure of her own life after he infected her with HIV. The narrator's entire life seems regulated by these men, one the symbol of continued patriarchal linearity, the other a symbol of masculine wisdom. Not only do they stand as references in relation to which beginnings and endings can be defined, bracketing the woman's entire existence, but also the illnesses that afflict them are transferred to her, therefore regulating and timing her life rhythm, measured, as the narrator puts it, in the ticking of her blood pulse.

Douglas Gifford connects this story with the next one in this collection, "Translations", through their reference to Indian mythology seeing a common ground in the themes of "dreamtime and assuagement of guilt"^[3] while March associates it with betrayal considering that it enacts "physically what occurs emotionally in 'Bix'"^[4]. In a broader perspective Michael's (the narrator's lover in "Tea and biscuits") guilt and betrayal integrate into a symbolism encompassing the limitations masculine myths of wisdom place on women's life rhythms. The psychological implications of these limitations are shown through correlatives on the physical level. In "Tea and biscuits" the passage describing the woman's sexual initiation declares it "extremely odd". The oddness is correlated with the contrast between Michael's conventional gestures and conversation and the narrator's finding the experience "a gift and a thing to remember". Offering tea in bed Michael enquires:

'How are you feeling?'

'Very nice.'

'You don't hurt?'

'No. I ache a bit.'^[5]

Michael's use of the word "hurt" suggests his rather neutral interest in the physical damage or emotional distress he may have caused. The woman's interpretation of the sexual encounter is more refined, qualifying "hurt" as "ache", i.e. as, psychologically, the beginning of a painful yearning whose physical correlative is a lasting dull pain. Indeed, the passage evinces a cynical note when we realize at the end of the story that the woman's sexual initiation has also been an initiation in death marking her body as irrevocably diseased.

The story also underlines the opposition between creativity and death as forces at work in shaping one's life. The woman's mother gave birth to her laughing:

(...) in a silence, she laughed. She laughed and she found she couldn't stop laughing. Her laughing made her laugh. (...) She gave birth weeping and giggling, amazed, and thinking of that first, secret thing that started her laugh.^[6]

As the narrator, herself nursing dreams of motherhood, records the possibility of women's enjoying their bodies and its perhaps secret magic in a mythology of womanhood that remains unknowable, a discourse that connects women with life is created, reinforced by the narrator's position as a blood donor. Women are pictured as nurturers, withholding an intuitive knowledge about the rhythms of life and literally using their bodies to give and support life. The narrator finds that her blood "was a lovely colour, too. A rich, rich red. I told my mother about it and she laughed."^[7] It is in her blood, also seen as the bond between daughter and mother, that the secret of creation and joy might be found.

This vision of life as having a secret rhythm whose impulses can be recounted in laughter is contrasted with the masculine wisdom imparted by Michael. The narrator remembers:

that thing (...) about the American tribe. Those Indians. They thought that we went through life on a river, all facing the stern of the boat and we only ever looked ahead in dreams. That's what I'll have to do now. I think he told me about that. It sounds like him.^[8]

The Indian myth implies that reality is either past memory or dreams of the future: a painful yearning. It is never laughter. Laughter requires one to be in the present, living. Also the linearity implied in the Indian story echoes the narrator's own positioning since it refers to her passing into the stages of her life through having always been assisted by men. The mastering of the secrets of life, relationships and death in a patriarchal context seems to be "some kind of start for the conversation" between author and readers in the stories to follow.

In the next story, "Translations", a young man is struggling to make sense of the past through the patriarchal mythologies whose conflicting and overlapping symbolisms define his mind and body as sites of colonisation. The Indian setting echoes the reference in the first story. If in "Tea and biscuits" the emphasis is on the physical colonisation of a woman's body through the initiations in death assisted by male figures, here it is the spirit of the "Dead Man" that infiltrates a young girl's mind. While the girl is asleep beside him the young man tells his story about "how the magic that had killed her daughter first came to him."^[9] When she woke up "she looked a little frightened" and he reflects: "Perhaps she had heard too much of his voice. But she didn't seem hurt, it seemed she was well."^[10] The hurt threatening to nestle insidiously in the young girl's mind is perhaps the psychological translation of the bodily hurt nestled in the woman's body in "Tea and biscuits". Like the woman narrator of the first story, although she seems to be well, the young girl may be bearing an ache rooted in a hurt not so immediately visible. The intertextual relationship between the two stories may also be inferred from the mentioning of the girl's dead daughter in "Translations" which reminds us of the narrator of "Tea and biscuits" while the anteriority suggestion creates a temporal framework of generational handing down of death.

In “Translations” the mythological becomes psychological as the young man deals with physical rape by the One Handed Man whose reality is clouded in the liminality of a masculine rite of passage. The One Handed Man’s teaching about the magic of love also defines it within the confines of an exclusively masculine relationship. On the other hand the boy is confronted with the cultural rape performed by Christian colonists; “the Fathermacdonalt” teaches him about a Christian love that is diseased with death for it is this ‘love’ that gave birth to a history of violent colonisations where the colonised becomes the coloniser in an infectious spread across continents and peoples: the Scottish priest left his country for Spain only to become a colonizer himself in South America. Thus, it is the translation of physical colonisation into psychological insecurity and ambiguity that Kennedy is concerned with in this story. As Cristie March points out, in terms of technique this narrative involves a blurring between the real and the fantastic with Kennedy “experimenting with [fantastic] themes that become believable embedded within realist narrative.”^[11]

The story giving the collection’s title explores the troublesome incongruence between the landscape of the city and the landscape of the mind. The geometry of the city seen as underlain by a railway network that limits physical movement to “terminating” destinations where life seems to “finish” reflects the narrator’s intuitions of inadequacy and closure. Gifford sees this story as typical of Kennedy’s narrative method as she has “the teller circling around the deferred central revelation, with hints of unease, insufficiency, betrayal, together with prevailing images of claustrophobia and desired escape.”^[12] For Gifford, the trains represent a kind of correlative summing up the issue of pointlessness and ordinariness in the woman’s life.

Indeed, the regular, impersonal forms of the city are translated into the dynamic of bodies, with the narrator registering the incongruence between her rich emotional life and the couple’s repetitive night geometry:

It was strange. However we flopped together, however haphazardly we decided to come to rest, the fit would always be the same.

His right arm, cradling my neck.

My head on his shoulder (...) ^[13]etc.

In spite its sameness, the woman initially invests their physical dynamics with a sense of “feeling safe and complete” and when their position reverses with mirror like precision, offering her the possibility to inhabit her partner’s bodily posture she invests it with a sense of uniqueness that she considers the cornerstone of their love: “I told him I could never do enough, or be enough or give enough back (...). I told him I belonged to him. I think he was asleep.” ^[14]

A threatening hint comes with the reference to the Inca’s conquest by the Spaniards blending in echoes from the previous story with its themes of psychological colonisation. But in this story it is the geometry of urban life that distils into even the most intimate gestures and has shaped the narrator’s mind ways. Eventually she realizes that their bodies’ postures signify social roles rather than emotional communication. Kennedy’s concern here is with society’s colonization of the woman’s emotional space with social myths:

Finally, of course, I realised the most original things about us were our fingerprints. Nothing of what we did was ever new. 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 and I never even noticed. ^[15]

On the one hand Kennedy points out the constraining effects of social myths about the wife and indirectly about the lover, as we may infer that Duncan’s women likewise fulfil roles of mistresses, the psychological awareness of which determines the narrator’s sense of bodily discomfort. On the other hand on a meta-narrative level the story feeds back the vision of the dreariness of Scottish urban life into the larger discourse established by the preceding generation of writers strengthening the mythology of urban realism they have created to replace that of

a rural, idyllic Scotland. However, Kennedy's engagement with literary constructions of industrial Scotland lines up with the efforts of the first generation of post-war women's writing who, as Gifford remarks, "refused to throw the ailing baby of community out with the industrial bathwater"^[16]. As March observes, the ending of the story, while noting the insignificance of small lives, also suggests a determination that may germinate positive change. Indeed the urban dweller's sense of identity loss and of society's passivity that reduces her emotions to "incendiary incidents" is counteracted with the narrator's resolute assertion that this will not do. These themes will be taken up again in Kennedy's novels; specifically, the ending of "Night geometry..." seems to nestle the seed of her following book, *Looking for the Possible Dance*:

There is only one thing I want more than proof that I existed and that's some proof, while I'm here, that I exist. (...) We have small lives, easily lost in foreign droughts, or famines; the occasional incendiary incident, or a wall of pale faces, crushed against grillwork, one Saturday afternoon in Spring. This is not enough.^[17]

The following two stories dwell on concrete aspects relating to the theme of women's silenced minds and derided bodies. After schoolgirl Gracie is sexually abused by her mother's partner he seeks to silence the victim while at the same time attempting to minimize the importance of the event, to reduce it perhaps to the scale of "the occasional incendiary incident": "It's something you do with a friend, Grace, and I'm your friend. I'll be good to you. Don't worry, honey, the next time, it won't hurt."^[18] The word "hurt" echoes the sexual initiation of the woman in "Tea and biscuits" as well as the themes of colonisations from "Translations".

"Genteel potatoes" is a crucial story in that it registers not only the possibility of taking action against the constraints that social myths effect on the social stage, but also, and more importantly, an awareness of the fact that a discursive struggle exists and can be conducted around the central issues addressed in the collection

on the whole. From the very beginning we are told that this is “no more than a story about Grandmother, because it cannot be the truth. If you and I were there to see it now, it might be the truth, but as it is, this is a story.”^[19] As we read, the story reveals elements of a conventional fable of class resistance, based on which we may associate it with proletarian mythology. However, the ending suggests that although a discourse of resistance based on transcendental social ideals may validate a mythology, it can also provide resources for constructing subjects enabled to act strategically in the meta-narrative world. Grandmother’s acts could provide models of empowering social performances. Myths of resistance, once released from the metaphysical space of conceptual abstractions, can help shape the social reality of lived human interactions, and “Genteel potatoes” aptly proves how the here and now is coloured by particular stories positioning subjects in histories that come to embed what counts as truth. The question of how much reality stories contain triggers, in the collection’s context, the question of what stories are selected that make possible the account of truth. The diachronic is collapsed into the synchronic as we realise that whether or not the Grandmother’s defiance is fact matters less than the possibility of performing the empowered subjectivity the story proposes. As the narrator puts it, the reality that “happens” “before Grandmother and I will even meet and before I can begin this story” (p. 46) cannot be accessed except through the recounting performed with the story-telling voice. In an intertextual relationship with Gracie’s story “Genteel potatoes” offers the kind of role that might replace Gracie’s subjectivity of denial and silence suggested through the words Gracie keeps saying to herself: “Think of something else to keep it away.”^[20] Stories like that recounting Grandmother’s refusal (in a different context) to “think of something else” in order to keep the hurt away could offer a mythology of resistance as a basis for creating empowered subjectivities for women in like situations, or in situations like Gracie’s. The subjectivity script offered in “Genteel potatoes” could inspire women’s social acts that feed back empowering performances in society.

In a following story, “Sweet memory will die” the narrator is able to discard memories of an abusive childhood as she gives up thoughts of revenge and “no longer cares”. As Cristie March suggests, however, “such release can be bittersweet for [Kennedy’s] characters”. The narrator in “Sweet memory...”, in spite of her gaining a long fought for independence, finds that there is “no recompense for the life she had lost.”^[21] Kennedy is a writer who never loses sight of a humanity that she finds in excess of words.

“Didacus”, following after “Genteel potatoes” is quick to deconstruct a mythologized vision of the working class that the previous story might have been seen to propose, suggesting that Kennedy is a writer keen on preserving the ability to migrate between discourses without allowing the reader fixed stances. Jean, a working class housewife, has given up dreams of setting up a business together with her husband and casually commits adultery. The story suggests her commitment to a memory of freedom as means to defend herself against the imprisoning habits to which she is confined by her working class status. Unlike in “Genteel potatoes” this woman’s voice is silenced against the grillwork of another day in the city:

The city is going to work, filling up the loans with footsteps and breathing. Maybe the year before there would have been conversation; room for a voice in the mouth. It’s too late now for that.^[22]

“The freedom ahead” she and her husband contemplate is marked by lifelessness and silence. Like the narrator in “Sweet memory will die”, Jean no longer cares.

It is precisely the silences of “small people” that make it difficult for the narrator in “The role of notable silences in Scottish history” to tell “the truth”. This story is remarkably concerned with how forms of writing create institutional fields that shape identities through discourses. The narrator, a historian, reflects:

I enjoy my work, it is clean and varied, it pays a good wage. Sadly, it is also a constant temptation. Time and again, it presents the perfect

opportunity to lie. It begs you to lie. It also repeatedly proves beyond all shadow of doubt that nothing is less believable than the truth.^[23]

The passage indicts institutionalised forms of discourse for covering up social realities they are not designed to register, for instance the murdering of “insignificant” people. Such murdering is “too recent to become history” and soon becomes “too old to be news”^[24]. The issue of agency is made visible suggesting institutional entrepreneurs concerned with a “historical geography” that, echoing the mechanical geometry of the city in “Night geometry...”, fails to map the inner dramas of its inhabitants:

Now while I’m working, I try not to think about the truth and concentrate my full attention on the words instead. Words just say what you want them to; they don’t know any better. We get on very well together, even in the dusty mornings when all we have to amuse ourselves are maps and historical geography.^[25]

This interpretation of the relationship between words and truth is related to past discursive practices of ignoring the real to the purpose of constructing ideologically convenient representations of Scottishness for the present. In these discursive practices the idea of Scottishness has been for a long time either related to notable historical figures or spatialized in landscapes, the narrator comments, invariably containing “a brown and green glen with rocky grey bits and a couple of sheep.”^[26] As such representations do not account for the “insignificant” people, tragic events in their life are attributed to chance and coincidence and therefore social responsibility is erased: the narrator cannot place the random killing of her partner on the social map.

Engaging mythologies of Scottishness, Kennedy shows that in their metaphysical reference they are only able to account for “murders” into which institutional entrepreneurs read a “point”, the suggestion being that of nationalism: “there’s no point being Scottish if you can’t make up your past as you go along.”^[27] These discourses, however, are unable to account for the murders of “small people”

whose qualification as chancy and coincidental renders them unsuitable matter for official concern. Kennedy's technique here seems to be a kind of eidetic future in the past, as she points out how past discourses will have already made possible the silences of the present while also showing how the erasures performed in discourses *about* the past are taken up in, and influence, what can be said about the present. She sees for instance how the preoccupation with prominent historical figures reflects more of a concern with prominence rather than with those figures' reality. This preoccupation shapes contemporary discourses that allocate far more space to an image of prosperity than to the reality of the poor, as the article on buses ironically suggests. The narrator becomes aware that her partner's death cannot be accounted for without foregrounding the wrongs of an entire tradition of selective constructions of truth, seeing that her partner's murder will be treated as a minor concern and its root cause will not be carefully addressed: he died without a cause. It is precisely the possibilities for the future foretold through the past that remain invisible in official discourses.

On a meta-narrative level the investment of the past with unreality that the concluding passage effects suggests the possibility of a present liberated from the constraints of history where stances can be created for writers with a will to note down the "roaring" "silences" of Scottish mythologies:

Someone else (...) [will] take us out and write us down. My only contribution on the subject is already here: the obituary I wrote him before we first met. It is inaccurate.^[28]

"The high walk" explores the psychological trauma of betrayal, as Annie's efforts to break with a pattern of familial abuse fail when she discovers her boyfriend's affair with their flatmate Marie. The story engages social myths about the couple offering a liberating role with Anne constructed as an independent, successful woman in spite of the past challenges. According to March "the male narrator cannot understand Anne's choice to see him once but not renew their relationship. She does not conform to 'type', refusing to assume the role of forgiving lover and

source of comfort.”^[29] The narrator’s sense of loss and guilt is illuminated allegorically through the concurrent story of a missing child, echoing the lack of personal fulfilment consequent to his betrayal.

“Star dust” further develops the theme of unfulfilled relationships as the story explores the psychology of women who, unlike Anne, cannot break out from stale emotional spaces. March points out that the narrator’s attempt to leave a loveless marriage to join the man she truly loves, given up for the sake of her daughter, is the only memory of happiness she can cling to, investing it with a cinematic quality. But on the other hand we realise that the narrator’s involvement with cinematographic discourse references social stereotypes in complex ways. After marrying, the narrator and her husband, Tam, do “the thing that films always want you to do.”^[30] Kennedy points out that the ways in which certain social clichés construct “extraordinary” identities are also insidious ways of making those identities ordinary through the sameness in difference underlying their display. Mythologies of ordinariness are thus created. However the narrator is aware that cinematic constructions can only give a reality effect because ultimately the stories they propose depend on the conceptual arrangements film directors make:

I look at him [Robert De Niro], and the other ones like him, and they spend so much time and energy on just looking ordinary. There are lights and backgrounds and special effects and music – that’s a very important thing – and all of this is there to make them look better than ordinary.^[31]

Through her narrator Kennedy establishes a dialogue with mythologizing discourses of “ordinariness” in order to expose their constructed nature. Life as experience of the ordinary is contrasted to the conceptual ordinariness of characters in films like *Taxi Driver*:

I have an idea that the ordinary people should be in the films. They wouldn’t have to waste their time forgetting they were stars and they would get their chance to be wonderful.^[32]

The narrator refuses to mythologize her love affair with Archie: “You have to be very careful when you imagine and you’re alone. Some people I’ve seen have locked themselves up in their heads and swallowed the key.”^[33] Rather than locking herself up into a metaphysical space of ideals, the narrator prefers a kind of discourse that remains open, connected to the reality of experience; a kind of discourse allowing her to participate in the story it tells by performing it rather than by letting herself be performed by it. She controls the “exposure times” and “depths of field”, how the reality “happens” and how she can participate in it:

I love these words. These words are lovely. They are happening now, they are young words and, because I understand them, part of me can still be happening now and young.^[34]

Thus, it is the storyness of the story, its performative dimension, rather than its conceptual referential field that guarantees its meaning for the woman in “Star dust”.

The following two stories deal with the shaping of experience under the pressure of social myths about the lover. In “Bix” the narrator’s idealization of his wife prevents him from being able to grapple with her reality as an autonomous woman. According to the image of her he had constructed in his mind she “had carried her joy and love for him like a baby. The nursing of it made her a second Mary (...).”^[35] He then uses another myth, of the mistress, to get rid of her but cannot control the experience of emptiness and loss this causes. “The poor souls” echoes “Night geometry...” with the female narrator aimlessly travelling by train constructing the city as an alternative realm of ghostly visions as she is unable to control the reality of her husband’s betrayal. Like the narrator in “Bix” she must confront the pain of loss of faith in a mythology of family joy and fulfilment. In her imagination she sees her husband

in the window of the pizza house, at a table with a woman and a laughing boy. They ate and talked together. It was plain they loved each other:

father, mother, only son. (...) If I had just kept faith with him, we could have been that family now. ^[36]

In spite of the fact that struggling to make sense of a reality pervaded by various mythologies makes her characters experience pain and loss, Kennedy suggests that an awareness of the constructed nature of these discourses offers the opportunity to create empowering subjectivities.

“Cap O’Rushes” is written with an awareness of the stories’ power to effect social structures. However, the woman in Kennedy’s version of the story reinvests, with irony and determination, the roles the traditional folk-tale enshrines. The focus is on the family roles and hierarchies that the folk-tale legitimates: a young woman is rewarded for patience, restraint and for acquiring the skills required for undertaking the home chores; daughter and father are reconciled and the young woman gains a husband. Kennedy’s version of Cap O’Rushes’ story highlights the suppression performed in the faery-tale’s conclusion: what happens after Cap O’Rushes earns her prince? What does “being happy ever after” mean? Perhaps, as Kennedy’s version suggests, the young woman continues to perform the home chores, except that this time there is no reward. The folk-tale character of the princely husband is reconstructed within images of greed, self-sufficiency and ego-centeredness. In Kennedy’s story, the behaviour of the husband and of the children he controls is likened to that of mythological goblins, traditionally represented as mischievous faery creatures. Prince Charming becomes the Goblin King. We are led to reflect on the mischief performed with the folk-tales’ scripting of socialization guidelines for married women. The stifling atmosphere of the social space shared in marriage is represented in imagery specific to caves. Having tidied-up after the family dinner the wife joins the rest of the family in the communal space of the living room:

She washed up and came through to join them, noticing, when she opened the door, that the room now smelt like a cave as she walked in. A cave where someone had recently spilt gravy.

The curtains were tight drawn and only the dead blue glow from the television lit the room.^[37]

In Kennedy's version of "Cap O'Rushes" the social space of the home is forever tainted with the persistent smell of "recently spilt gravy". The married woman remains confined to the scullery. This image of a married woman and of the social space of marriage is contrasted with the image of the independent woman she becomes in the absence of her husband and demanding children. When they are away she is able to reconstruct the social space of the home in positive ways as a space where "she could breathe easily and she felt clean"^[38]. Eventually, rejecting the housewife role by leaving her family the woman is empowered to take active part in the shaping of her social environment. This positive experience is possible, according to March, because she "has shed the cultural baggage that urged her initially to marry the Goblin King."^[39] The woman's attitude towards her new life is shown in her reflections on the typing job she had taken up to maintain herself:

She continued with her typing. When she was into the flow of it, the words lined across the paper, as if she was rubbing the whiteness away; not putting a blackness on. She was squeezing the words out from where they were already hiding. This was a comfortable idea. It had nothing to do with the sense of what she wrote, nothing to do with reality at all and it meant that she couldn't be wrong, because she was only finding something, not inventing it.^[40]

The passage also reflects Kennedy's poetics. Words are used to find experience, not to invent it. The whiteness of the page referred to here suggests the silences that are rubbed off in the discovery process a story presupposes instead of being buried in legitimating tales of myths. Stories 'squeeze' the words out from where they are already hiding. The words that fall into place belong to new found voices rather than to the voices invented (put into place) through a mythology or another. This suggests a call to demythologise authority (i.e. the power, socially invested in authors, to authorise a privileged version of reality). Discourse is a fluid space

that gathers a variety of voices, rather than *a* voice which programmatically interlocks sense and reality. Kennedy's poetic art entails a perspective on discourse that regards it in its eventfulness as dialogue, thus opening discourse up as a participatory social space.

While the first story of the collection shows a woman whose reality obtains between representations of herself in reference to two men, her father and her lover, the journey Kennedy has taken the reader through nears completion with the representation of the autonomous subjectivity of a woman who has taken hold of her inner reality. In "The seaside photographer" the narrator repossesses her relationship with her father with an empowering awareness of both the freedoms and the limitations social myths embed in constructions of the real. The story also suggests that reality is larger than its discursive constructions and registers the impossibility of texts to render that excess: "If, in this world, I could, I would write you whole (...). All I can do is write you words (...) and feel them between us."^[41] However, Kennedy seems to point out, in the social relationships that this world is based on, words are all we have.

The final story is also a story of repossessions. Kath repossesses her identity as lover struggling with definitions, wondering which might befit her and becoming aware of the lack of a social category that might register her independence: "You telling me you're not single? You're not married, you're not engaged, you must be single."^[42] The strictures of social reality are reflected in the woman's perceptions of a constraining physical space. Her husband determines the night geometry of the couple with Kath realising its suffocating pressure and his trespassing into her space:

You're lying on me. This is my side.

Which was true, Bobby had always slept on the left hand side. It belonged to him. He was there to be clambered over, or crawled around. For eleven years she had been sandwiched between his back and the wall, his stomach and the wall, his elbows and his knees and the wall.^[43]

However, this is a story, as March remarks,^[44] which offers a character empowered to attain a fulfilling relationship by reclaiming her independence. Leaving her husband, Kath leaves behind the security that the normality of social myths offer but instead learns to see the positive aspects of her independence: “She enjoyed her space now, dreamed expansively, and was glad she hadn’t weakened and bought a single bed.”^[45] She learned that while “single” is not a viable definition of herself, accepting it is a starting point for negotiating the limits of her social space. The rejection of rigid, static roles empowers the narrator to repossess her identity as lover in ways that neither restrict her inner life nor impose limits on her physical presence on the social stage. As Kath, looking for the possible dance, finds her own rhythm, she is able to step into the reality of her experiences confident and unafraid:

Kath felt herself sink into sleep; aware of losing awareness and liking it. Next, she would sleep, while dawn rolled round the world towards tomorrow. Today it was hot.^[46]

Conclusion

The short stories collection *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* presents a finely layered account of women’s subjectivities as constrained by social myths scripting women’s social roles. According to Douglas Gifford the volume “has a coherence emerging from different perspectives, tones and narratives, so that the reader has a final sense of the author’s whole way of looking.”^[47]

Indeed, the unity of the work is maintained by intertextual cross-references, which also strengthens the sense of fluidity of the discursive space the writer creates, and anchors the reading experience in the present. The texts constitute a discourse with its own ethos making available critical dialogic positions that confront stereotypical socialization patterns. Kennedy exploits the symbolic value of day-to-day gestures, turns of phrase and routine patterns of behaviour from multiple viewpoints in order to capture how women’s reality is channelled and regulated by various social myths. She is concerned with the constituencies women inhabit

on the social stage and with the ways in which these construct women's subjective realities, exploring how women's subjectivities function in the flux of social life. Kennedy's literary technique relies on fragmentation, shifting perspectives and attention to detail in order to capture how reality is invested subjectively and explore what pressure comes from elements that connect inner life to organized social spaces. Thus she is able to engage with larger discourses whose reified views of women have helped establish as many mythologies about them. In doing so she points out how these rigid versions of women have failed to capture the fluidity of their social life.

Engaging social myths of wide significance, Kennedy is sometimes concerned with how these are formed in myths of Scottishness. On the one hand she is concerned with nationalist stories that make official the kind of murder perpetrated through political wars that, official discourses claim, serve a grand historical cause. Kennedy registers the lack of discursive accounts of the murder of "small people" and reveals the need for stories that counteract the prevailing views of national heroes or prestige. The collection on the whole aims to provide accounts of the "ordinariness" of "insignificant" lives that remain side stories to prevailing versions of Scotland and Scottishness: Kennedy neither idealises figures of a glorious past nor is she willing to contribute to the aura of "Scottish working class hero" that some recent writing struggled to create.

The main themes, however, are related to situations of women grappling with the pressures of the social myths of lover, wife and daughter. The stories question the meaning and "reality" of such conceptualizations through strategies that reveal the borderlines between the private and the public creating sites of interaction where the mythological becomes psychological. The conflicts thus revealed are between various geometrical arrangements of society, specifically those of urban Scotland, with women finding it difficult to configure a meaningful identity on their own terms. However, by investing details that often go unnoticed because conceived of as casual in the prevailing social discourses, with symbolic meanings that span entire psychological sites of alternative, fragmentary and discontinuous realities,

Kennedy exposes the constructed nature of social myths and shows that their solidity is relative. In changing the symbolic infrastructure of social myths, Kennedy contributes to the strengthening of subject positions for women that are empowering through the new meanings they invest women with, and through the participatory dimension that her strategies uncover.

For all the relativization she performs on social myths, Kennedy's discursive strategies do not create an esoteric subjectivity, thus avoiding traditional dichotomies. Her stories register symptoms of bodily discomfort that complement women's psychological experiences of insufficiency and inadequacy.

Psychological discomfort is thus shown as constraining women's ways of socializing their bodies. While the characters' subjectivity is seen as a site of private negotiations of social meanings it is also shown as a space wherein understandings of their bodies are conceived, influencing women's public performance. The reality Kennedy refers to in these stories is neither objective nor confined to transcendental, metaphysical spaces of the mind. Rather, reality is seen as constituted on the interface between the two.

According to Phillips and Hardy, invoking Collins and quoting Boje:

Microsociologists such as Collins contend that the social world exists neither as an objective entity nor as a set of meanings that people carry in their heads, but in repeated actions of communicating. Collins conceived of these communicating actions as conversations that generate collective action through the *activity* of talking. Narrative theory tells us that action is also generated through the content of talk by "defining characters, sequencing plots, and scripting actions".^[48]

Indeed, such theoretical perspectives seem to inform Kennedy's writing and perhaps the author's awareness of such research influenced her stylistic development. Nevertheless, not only does Kennedy show characters striving to establish communication channels but her stories imply the writer's own stance whereby she acts to create dialogic spaces of social negotiation. The short stories

of *Night Geometry*... signal a writing style that is attuned to the necessity of communicating women's psychological and social difficulties vis-à-vis social myths that construct them either as symbolic objects referencing their worldliness as wives, lovers and daughters, or within ideal, and therefore unreal, otherworldly spaces. Kennedy's characters definitions, her plot sequencing and the scripting of her scenarios entice women to claim participative membership in the construction of social constituencies. Sketching empowering understandings of women, Kennedy's stories may steer the readers into positive social action.

Endnotes

[1] Kennedy, A. L., *Everything You Need*, Vintage edition (London: Vintage, 2000) 10.

[2] Frigga Haug, *Beyond Female Masochism* trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 1992) 21.

[3] Douglas Gifford 'Contemporary Fiction II: Seven Writers in Scotland', in *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* ed. by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 617. [All following references to *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* will be: Gifford and McMillan, *HSWW*].

[4] Cristie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland. Welsh, McLean, Warner, Banks, Galloway and Kennedy*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) 142. [All following references to *Rewriting Scotland. Welsh, McLean, Warner, Banks, Galloway and Kennedy* will be: March, *RS*]. "Bix" is another story of the same collection.

[5] A.L. Kennedy, *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains*, Phoenix edition (London: Phoenix, 1993), p. 3 [All following references to *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* will be: Kennedy, *NG*].

[6] Kennedy, *NG* 6.

- [7] Kennedy, *NG* 7.
- [8] Kennedy, *NG* 8.
- [9] Kennedy, *NG* 9.
- [10] Kennedy, *NG* 23.
- [11] March, *RS* 153 (brackets inserted).
- [12] Gifford and McMillan, *HSWW* 617.
- [13] Kennedy, *NG* 26.
- [14] Kennedy, *NG* 28.
- [15] Kennedy, *NG* 30.
- [16] Gifford and McMillan, *HSWW* 591.
- [17] Kennedy, *NG* 34.
- [18] Kennedy, *NG* 41.
- [19] Kennedy, *NG* 42.
- [20] Kennedy, *NG* 35.
- [21] March, *RS* 135 (brackets inserted).
- [22] Kennedy, *NG* 50.
- [23] Kennedy, *NG* 62-3.
- [24] Kennedy, *NG* 72.
- [25] Kennedy, *NG* 63.
- [26] Kennedy, *NG* 64.
- [27] Kennedy, *NG* 64.

- [28] Kennedy, *NG* 72.
- [29] March, *RS* 141.
- [30] Kennedy, *NG* 89.
- [31] Kennedy, *NG* 86 (brackets inserted).
- [32] Kennedy, *NG* 86.
- [33] Kennedy, *NG* 86.
- [34] Kennedy, *NG* 83.
- [35] Kennedy, *NG* 9.
- [36] Kennedy, *NG* 108.
- [37] Kennedy, *NG* 113.
- [38] Kennedy, *NG* 112.
- [39] March, *RS* 137.
- [40] Kennedy, *NG* 118.
- [41] Kennedy, *NG* 126.
- [42] Kennedy, *NG* 129.
- [43] Kennedy, *NG* 129.
- [44] March, *RS* 137.
- [45] Kennedy, *NG* 129.
- [46] Kennedy, *NG* 138.
- [47] Gifford and McMillan, *HSWW* 616.

[48] Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy, *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction* (London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002) 56.

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Gifford, Douglas. 'Contemporary Fiction II: Seven Writers in Scotland'. A *History of Scottish Women's Writing*. Ed. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

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First Response

This essay offers a reading of A. L. Kennedy's short stories in order to suggest that they show how experiences of gender and class serve to question ideologies or social myths that have become too rigid and imprisoning. Whilst it is argued that Kennedy's fiction makes an appeal to experience, the essay also addresses the performative aspects of her work where attention is given to how language shapes perception. There is a seeming tension between the experiential and the performative that constitutes an intriguing potential for further work where such a tension could be teased out and interrogated. There is evidence of sympathetic critical insight into the stories, particularly as regards the ways in which

genealogy and tradition may be retrospectively revised. It is implied that the stories are pitched against certain nationalist discourses where the work in progress will presumably go on to specify this intertextuality more closely. A generally disseminated understanding of deconstruction is made use of, where Derrida's work could (in future) be engaged with more closely. The essay successfully engages the interest of the reader in the work of Kennedy.