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**Traumatized selves in Janice Galloway's *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* and  
A. L. Kennedy's *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains***

Emma Jelínková

Emma Jelínková is a research assistant at Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic. Her research interests include Scottish literature, women's writing and satire. She is the author of the survey *British Literary Satire in Historical Perspective* (2010) and the Czech-language monograph *Ambivalence v románech Muriel Sparkové* (2006). She has co-authored a series of collective monographs on aspects of Scottish fiction, including *Scottish Gothic Fiction* (2012) and *Scottish Women Writers of Hybrid Identity* (2014).

**Abstract:**

*This paper presents the case of Scotland as a traumatized nation haunted by ghosts of the past. Scottish national identity has been profoundly influenced by the country's loss of sovereignty in the 1707 Act of Union. As a result, the stateless nation deprived of agency built its literature on the foundations of idealized stories of its heroic past. It was not until the 1980s that Scottish literature started to tackle the collective trauma and gave rise to works focusing on the weak and the exploited rather than the brave. Janice Galloway and A. L. Kennedy both epitomize this new vein of literature of trauma and explore the links between national and individual experience and strategies for healing the trauma.*

The development of modern Scottish literature has been moulded by diverse influences; however, many of them can ultimately be traced back to one and the same source. A single event in the national history has had a profound impact on the character of the country, its people and, by extension, its literature. This turning point was the 1707 Act of Union, which joined the formerly sovereign kingdoms of Scotland and England into what became the United Kingdom. From the beginning, it was a marriage of reason rather than love, as evidenced by the subsequent Jacobite risings, in which supporters of the Scottish Stuart dynasty fought for its restoration to the throne. Following the fateful 1746 Battle of Culloden, in which the Jacobite rebels were crushed, repressive measures were introduced to eliminate the distinctiveness of the Scottish Highlands culture. The Gaelic language was outlawed, as was the wearing of the kilt and the practice of the traditional clan system.

Scotland did not let go of its independence easily, and events of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries confirm that the independence question remains an unresolved issue even today. In 1979, a nationwide referendum rejected Scottish devolution, but a second referendum in 1997 showed a change of heart and resulted in the establishment of a devolved Scottish parliament. Furthermore, the call for complete independence kept on growing to the extent of justifying the independence referendum of 2014. While support for independence turned out to be insufficient, the current political climate strongly suggests that a second independence referendum is a possibility. What follows from this brief overview of pro-devolution and pro-independence initiatives is that Scotland has continued to feel uncomfortable in its union with England and has been continuously attempting to sever the bonds.

Scottish identity, therefore, revolves around a lack of identity; a non-identity experienced by a stateless and language-less nation. Rather than forging an independent identity of its own, Scotland tends to define itself in opposition to England. This involves the romanticization of the nation's past, with a heavy focus on a rebellious male hero who takes on almost mythic dimensions. Whether it is the cult of the legendary figure of Ossian, the heritage of the bard Robert Burns and his Scottish-dialect verses celebrating freedom and loud masculinity, or the embellished renderings of national history from the pen of Walter Scott, the stereotypical image of a Scot disseminated by canonical Scottish writers is one version or another of Braveheart, a defiant warrior who stands upright till the end but is doomed to defeat.

Defeatism constitutes an essential element in the definition of Scottishness, since the quality of being Scottish is, to a considerable extent, based on the experience of trauma. The inherited trauma operates on national as well as individual levels; it is simultaneously a public and acutely private wound afflicting the whole of the nation, as well as its members. On the shared history of trauma and the coping mechanism of devising idealized revisions of the past, Monica Germanà (2011, p. 4) comments: "The impact of the surfacing of historical memory has a damaging effect on both individual and national psyches. A pervasive sense of alienation is generated by the gap between present identity and its bogus foundations based on forged narratives of the past." Although it is becoming increasingly obvious that the sentimental and grandiose narratives rooted in the nation's history do not adequately capture the present conditions of the evolving nation, Scottish writers have long been struggling to create more suitable alternatives that would more accurately reflect the spirit of Scotland today.

In the seminal novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), which marked the beginning of what is known as the second Scottish literary renaissance, Alasdair Gray expressed a defeatist despair regarding his nation's contribution to culture:

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. (Gray, 1981, p. 243)

Since the publication of *Lanark*, however, Scottish creative writing has been on the rise, and a host of innovative writers have emerged who venture to tackle the trauma that was politely glossed over by the previous generations. More rounded and realistic representations of contemporary Scottish experience often seek to break with the pathological obsession with the past, but to do so, they first need to come to terms with how the past impacts on the present. Trauma does not dissolve when it is simply replaced by a positive revisionary narrative. Trauma may only start to heal once it is acknowledged as such, which is what much of new Scottish writing sets out to achieve.

Among the many omissions of Scottish literature prior to the 1980s is the lack of women writers and representations of women's lives. Scottish culture has historically been hypermasculine and hence did not provide a favourable background against which female writers and characters could develop their distinctive voice. Scottishness has been traditionally associated with bravery, resistance and toughness, and these qualities have been stereotypically ascribed to men, not women, not children, not anyone who might come across as weak. Two of the pioneering writers in redressing this imbalance are Janice Galloway and A. L. Kennedy. Both are preoccupied with small people, ordinary characters who have nothing epic about them, yet whose undemonstrative daily struggles require what can only be described as the heroism of everyday life. Both Galloway and Kennedy prefer to portray vulnerable characters susceptible to exploitation: abused women and children and neglected senior citizens make frequent appearances in their novels and stories. Both authors explore ways of dealing with trauma, whether inflicted on a nation, an individual or both.

Perversely, trauma tends to be accompanied by guilt and shame, not on the part of the perpetrator but on the part of the victim. When describing the position of the Scottish woman writer in the early 1990s, Galloway (1991, p. 5) observes:

Scottish women have their own particular complications with writing and definition, complications which derive from the general problems of being a colonised nation. Then, that wee touch extra. Their sex. There is coping with that guilt of taking time off the concerns of national politics to get concerned with the sexual sort . . . Guilt here comes strong from the notion we're not backing up our menfolk and their 'real' concerns.

The motif of guilt also underlies Galloway's ground-breaking first novel, *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989). The novel deals ostensibly with the purely personal trauma of Joy Stone, who struggles to piece together the fragments of her life after the death of her boyfriend in an accident. In a masterly stroke, though, Galloway interrelates the realms of the private and the public, the individual and society. Joy's boyfriend was separated but formally a married man; therefore, Joy is deprived of the possibility of getting a sense of closure by openly sharing her grief over the death of her partner at his funeral. Joy is the mistress who has no place among the legitimate mourners and who becomes obliterated by the words of the clergyman: "Extend our sympathies, our hearts and our love, especially our love to his wife and family" (Galloway, 1989, p. 79). Instead of taking a step towards healing her trauma, Joy is presented with a painful epiphany: "The Rev. Dogsbody had chosen this service to perform a miracle. He's run time backwards, cleansed, absolved and got rid of the ground-in stain. And the stain was me. I didn't exist. The miracle had wiped me out" (Galloway, 1989, p. 79).

The emotionally fragile Joy is bullied into feelings of guilt and shame, and in trying to cope with them, she fails to take into account the root cause: trauma. The sudden death of her partner acts as a trigger that sends Joy on a downward spiral of depression, eating disorder and self-harm. She seeks help from the social system which is supposed to be in place for this very purpose, but during her voluntary stay at a psychiatric ward, she is treated more as an offender than a patient. Joy's reasoning illustrates her persistent feelings of guilt at the mere fact of her existence: "I have to get better because a) it'll stop other people worrying about me; b) I'll stop being a drain on the NHS" (Galloway, 1989, p. 179). Joy's twisted logic does not include the intention of getting better for her own sake, as if she were a nonentity rather than a valid person on a par with everyone else. Overwhelming generic guilt for nothing in particular pervades all aspects of Joy's life, supporting the impression of Monica Germanà (2013, p. 158), who contends that "the collective psyche of Scotland, a nation possessed by the ghosts of its repressed traumas, is eminently affected by a profound, endemic guilt feeling".

Joy's increasingly surreal experience often verges on the edge of the grotesque, as she interprets grave incidents through the lens of morbid humour: "I toy with suicide. . . . But there's no real enthusiasm. . . . Every time I try to work out how to do the thing properly it cheers me up" (Galloway, 1989, p. 199). As Douglas Gifford comments, Galloway utilizes "traditional urban-Scottish humour, so that she is simultaneously reflecting and satirising the way in which it mingles the humane and the cruel, the sympathetic and the savagely sceptical" (Gifford, 1997, p. 609). Humour serves Joy as a coping mechanism which makes her traumatized existence slightly less unbearable. Despite its decisively dark strain, humour in *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* contributes towards the healing of trauma with greater success than silence, which prevails at the beginning of the novel. Joy refuses to name the trauma and carefully avoids even words such as anorexia, bulimia or depression, though her behaviour leaves no doubt that these terms apply. Alexis Logsdon (1997, p. 154) suggests that "Joy's non-naming becomes an act of resistance to being boxed in"; however, it also indicates Joy's "shame about the state of her life".

Motifs of shame, guilt, trauma and the unspeakable also recur in many of the stories collected in A. L. Kennedy's first volume, *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990). Like Galloway, Kennedy works with the implications of silence, omission and fragmentation of reality to the point of the surreal. All these features typically accompany a traumatic experience. The opening story, "Translations", establishes the preoccupation of the collection with violence, abuse and death in various forms. The story characteristically evades direct naming, but what transpires from the scattered fragments are scenes of violent fantasy, murder and genocide which may or may not be mere figments of the imagination of the abused protagonist, who does not even begin to grasp the trauma he has been exposed to:

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, 1990, p. 13)

Mitchell Kaye (2008, p. 51) observes that the defamiliarization manifested in this description of sexual abuse serves "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." The protagonist's

mind is unable to process the traumatizing events on a rational plane, and hence it resorts to reimagining them in the defamiliarized terms of magic being conveyed to him in a magician's hut.

In an interview concerning her often peculiar choice of characters, Kennedy (March, 1999, p. 117) explains her motivation in giving a voice to the voiceless, even if in her characteristically evasive manner: "The people that come to me tend to be people who can't say what they want to say, so I say that they can't say what they want to say." Kennedy's story "The Moving House" provides a perfect example of this strategy in action. A helpless child finds herself alone in a new and unfamiliar house with her new and abusive stepfather, who scares her into silence and submission:

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, 1990, p. 41)

Here and elsewhere, the victim is made to believe that it is her who is at fault, which adds an extra layer of guilt and shame on top of her traumatic experience. What Kennedy achieves is to expose the seemingly insignificant individual traumas of small people and set them in the broader context of a traumatized nation, which needs to recognize and name its collective trauma in order to facilitate the healing process for the whole of the nation as well as its individual members.

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*Palacký University*  
*Philosophical Faculty*  
*Department of English and American Studies*  
*Křížkovského 512/10*  
*779 00 Olomouc*  
*Czech Republic*  
*ema.jelinkova@upol.cz*