

**My Words Should Catch Your Words:
myth, writing and social ritual in
A.L. Kennedy's *Everything You Need***

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On the occasion of a reading for the *Aye Write!* Festival in Glasgow, A.L. Kennedy spoke about her experiences as a student of drama and showed her conviction that using another's voice (the specific example was acting roles from Shakespeare's plays) 'unleashes a force that transforms the actor as well as the members of the audience.'¹ Kennedy's novel *Everything You Need*, first published by Cape in 1999, offers a study of such transformative force of voice.² In *Everything You Need* one's voice is envisioned as inevitably accommodating others' voices that speak through it. This understanding of voice poses questions regarding manifestations of authority and control of narrating agency. Who else tells our story when we define our subjective identity through it? The answer that the novel proposes is that 'our story' is not only the story of ourselves, but also a story about ourselves as characters in socialisation scenarios we derive from myths that guide our acts in the social world.

The visions derived from myths that guide the narrative presentation of ourselves to ourselves and others, and our fantasising our identities, can be constraining or empowering, as, for instance, Marina Warner points out:

Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context – they can lock us up in stock reactions [...] but they're not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed [...] newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones.³

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Through the analysis that follows, I will argue that this is precisely what Kennedy's novel does. The plot of *Everything You Need* is developed from several intersecting stories. Although each character is devoted extensive space in this lengthy novel, the main story relates the stages of a young woman's becoming a writer, intertwined with the story relating her father's recuperation of creative power. Mary Lamb becomes one of the seven writers on Foal Island, an island off the coast of Wales, where she is offered a writing fellowship when still a novice. There, she is mentored by Nathan. He is Mary's father, but for most of the novel he does not reveal this to Mary, who was a child at the time of Nathan's separation from his wife Maura, which in turn also separated him from Mary. Nathan had not produced a literary novel for a long time, thriving instead, gracelessly, on genre fiction. Nathan's and Mary's stories are intertwined, as they draw strength from each other in their efforts to find what the leader of the writers' guild on Foal Island, Joe, terms their own 'piece of the Grail.'⁴

Sarah Dunnigan notes that '*Everything You Need* explicitly uses the medieval romance metaphor of the Grail' to embody the specificity of 'love's saving grace' 'as rooted in a quest structure.'⁵ The references to the Grail myths in Kennedy's novel do not suggest a preoccupation with the disciplining effects of this particular corpus of myths, but rather an artful exploitation of its ethos. For Mary, the quest for her 'piece of the Grail' is the adventure of becoming a writer. While Mary gets acquainted with the power of words, Nathan struggles with it like a Grail knight who fails to ask the question that heals.⁶ The Grail question, 'Whom does the Grail serve?', is rephrased in Kennedy's text by Joe as 'Whom does the word serve?'.⁷ As is the fate of Grail knights, it is only when Nathan finds an answer to this question that he is healed of his graceless longing for redemption. In the process, Nathan understands that words should not be used to subject others, which is also what the novel seeks to reveal to its readers.

The reviews of *Everything You Need* show mixed responses to Kennedy's third novel. Val McDermid, reviewing for the *Los Angeles Times*, notes that the novel 'stretches the suspension of disbelief almost beyond the breaking point' but nevertheless praises it 'as another distinctive monument in the landscape of contemporary Scottish writing ... truthful, surprising and visceral.' McDermid also notes the novel's preoccupation with 'the impossibility of escaping the vocation of words.'⁸ In the

New Statesman, Toby Mundy notes the dreariness of the novel, complaining that 'the unremitting scatology, the obsessions with pain, desperate sex, wounds and death bludgeon us, and become dull and dulling.' The plausibility of the plot and the narrative construction of the story are also criticised: 'More often than not, she leaves questions of motive open: thoughts and actions slip and slide into each other, while characters fumble and flap at crucial moments.'⁹ Ron Charles too notices these shortcomings in his review for the *Christian Science Monitor*, but he believes that they are attributable, and to some extent justified by, Kennedy's 'syncopated style that's perpetually surprising, mingling her own voice with the internal and spoken voices of her characters. (Even Nathan's big-hearted dog jumps into the mix now and then.)'¹⁰ The *Spectator*'s Katie Grant criticises the novel for its unsubtle and excessive scenes of graphic sex, and for its inability to control the multitude of themes it approaches, of which 'none is brought to completion.'¹¹ In *Women's Review of Books*, Pamela Petro's praises are almost unreserved; she finds that the two main stories and the satellite stories are well integrated, with the latter helpful in defining the main characters.¹² On the contrary, Mona Knapp, writing for *World Literature Today*, again deplores Kennedy's use of profanity and the novel's implausible plot, while nevertheless conceding that 'A.L. Kennedy wields a forceful pen. In syntactically sophisticated sentences that almost snap with emotional intensity, she weaves her characters' complex perceptions into riveting narration, commanding the reader's full attention.'¹³ As these reviews indicate, leaving aside the criticism of Kennedy's liberal use of language and plot construction, the novel evinces a preoccupation with intersecting and competing narrative planes and stories. It is this intersection of voices melting into each other or running in parallel streams that concerns me here, and not so much the question of whether or not these voices and the stories they tell are sufficiently tightened in a balanced narrative structure. Perhaps the narrative itself is an effort of making sense of the writer's own insecurities at a crucial point in her career, as a narrated interview by Yvonne Nolan suggests, and therefore its importance lies more in its sense-making effort than in the plausibility of the events it relates.¹⁴

That the novel reflects a need for using narrative to order the reality of experience is noted in Mundy's review as a point of general human interest:

Kennedy is terrifyingly alive to the human need to make sense of the recalcitrant world, and to the fallacies, sops and delusions that fleetingly transform chaos into order.¹⁵

In my analysis, I will explore Kennedy's narrators' vision of how this need is satisfied through using the ordering power of narrative. Nolan points out that the novel is almost a 'how to do' guide for the creative writing process. Charles also wrote in his review that 'as a story about a life of words, *Everything You Need* is literally everything you need.'¹⁶ Indeed, Kennedy's novel engages in manifold ways with questions of what it means to tell a story, although it may be difficult sometimes to distinguish whose story is told by whom: various myths are invoked throughout the novel in reference to the power of storytelling by characters who themselves may be associated with the myths characters, the past is shown as taking off from the experience of the present, and one's voice is home to voices come from the past that may speak against one's will.

When Sarah Dunnigan argues that 'the complex, haunting constellations of memory [...] are a constant theme in Kennedy's work', she illustrates her argument with a quotation from *Everything You Need*: memories haunt as ghosts 'with a time past restoring.'¹⁷ In my analysis I connect this haunting with the authority one exercises through discourse. The ghost referred to in the above passage is a Nathan-created Maura, the ghost of his estranged wife. Her ghostliness is due to the fact that for Nathan, who does not realise it at first, she is also a kind of mythological creature that he has fantasised and to whom he has given identity through writing. But Maura herself rejected the identity scenarios Nathan created for her, which is to say that she refused to be disciplined by the discourses (Nathan's writing) that convey these scenarios. Maura refused to be subjected to Nathan's fantasies, because she realised that her realness to him was an effect of acts of narrating. To clothe herself in that realness would have meant, for Maura, to change *her* reality, that is, the identity which she designed for herself. This subplot of *Everything You Need* allows us to organise the analysis around the main issues it deals with: the issue of what haunts one's voice, and the issue of how one's voice affects the social reality of human interaction and relationships. In the following, I will examine each of these issues in turn, beginning with the former. My analysis will integrate these issues

with the overarching vision of *Everything You Need*, a vision about the mythical power of words, about reality as an effect of writing and about the social rituals through which word-power is harnessed to create visions of the real.

The ability to create or change reality using words is shown as an integral part and defining characteristic of what it is to be human. As Nathan puts it,

we've lost the way it should be. You know the Aztecs thought paper was sacred? *Amatl* – it was an offering for the gods. And in ancient Egypt, the word was the deed, it was powerful in itself. The naming of life, it's in the Bible, it was man's first duty. All this was ours and we lost it. The life we lived in ourselves, the power of that, the way we made it speak, it was taken away. [...] But *real* fantasy, *real* fiction – the kind with power, the kind we're born with, that's our right – we're not supposed to want that anymore – we have to be helped with our minds, we have to be prevented from letting them go too far.¹⁸

The passage suggests that the power implied in voicing stories should be reclaimed by individual people. Kennedy's novel, to put it all too simply, tells the story of such reclamations. However, each individual's way of reclaiming word power is different as this power is slippery and can easily become ungovernable: it is also wielded by those whom our stories cannot avoid evoking. Joe defines this power thus:

our words are for the dead, all of the dead: the dead who made us and the dead we loved; the dead moments passed from time; the dead passions spent; and all of the dead possibilities, the things that never were. We make them live and speak, we have that privilege.¹⁹

Mary learns throughout her seven years' fellowship, together with her father and mentor, that words can help one think the world into being, rather than helping them to own the world; that is, stories should not be used to subject reality and people, but to add to reality the voices that speak in one's voice, to bring the dead to life.

The power of words to shape identity has been a constant preoccupation in feminist thought. While noting that Kennedy

does not describe herself as a feminist, one also notes how fittingly her vision of the relationship between words and authority in *Everything You Need* answers feminist concerns such as those expressed by Adrienne Rich. Rich believes that

words *can* help us move or keep us paralysed, and that our choices of language and verbal tone have something – a great deal – to do with how we live our lives [...] we can deflect words, by trivialisation, of course, but also by ritualised respect, or we can let them enter our souls and mix with the juices of our minds.²⁰

In a different context but in the same spirit, *Everything You Need* posits the swerving power of words as the Grail's grace when it suggests that the question the quest hero must ask is 'whom does the word serve?'. Kennedy's answer is that words should not belong to anyone; they are vehicles of others' voices from the past or from around us. The novel suggests that our acceptance of these voices in the stories through which we present ourselves to ourselves and to others is empowering.

The belief that the act of telling a story can be empowering is a belief Kennedy shares with other writers interested in the power of myth, for instance Alice Walker or Toni Morrison.²¹ Like these writers' texts, Kennedy's novel explores, to use Susan Sellers' words, how 'myth's form and collaborative gestation offers empowering paradigms for our collective and individual presentations, analyses and transformations.'²² As in Alice Walker's or Toni Morrison's texts, such exploration entails, as Clayton remarks, the narratives' 'association with unauthorised knowledge' which 'can be and often is emphasised by drawing on oral forms (folktales, myths, legends, oral histories)' and the identification of the contemporary text 'with archaic symbolic modes (rituals, dreams, magic).'²³ The storytelling mode of narrative that binds the participants together in meaningful socialisation scenarios is also reflected upon in *Everything You Need*. From the very beginning of her training, Mary Lamb is concerned with how writing, her worded reality, is taken up by other people. Soon after her arrival on Foal Island, Mary gains a vision of what the purpose of writing might be:

She had begun to make meanings and patterns and sequences that she liked, that she wanted to give to

the people she cared about. She wanted to speak out loud but inside other people: inside, the loudest place of all.²⁴

Thus, Mary is not only interested in creating texts. She wishes her voice to become part of a dialogical exchange whereby she may occur 'inside other people,' whereby she may inhabit their reality. The embodied self is seen as a forum, a chamber where intersecting voices offer multiple 'meanings and patterns and sequences.' Mary's reflections suggest her early intuition that while we may temporarily own our self through stories that make up our subjectivities, the voice in which we express ourselves could also be intertwined with others' voices.

A similar understanding of voice is expressed by other characters at various points in the story of *Everything You Need*.²⁵ It also comes up in other texts by Kennedy. One of Kennedy's beliefs seems to be that in the absence of others' voices one is truly lonely, as is the case with Jennifer, the main woman character of an earlier novel, *So I am Glad*, first published by Cape in 1995.²⁶ Dunnigan notes Jennifer's 'sense of herself as a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet of canvas on which to be written,' when Jennifer confesses that 'I can dig down as deep as there is to dig inside me and truly there is nothing there, not a squeak.'²⁷ Jennifer only acquires a viable social self through her (imagined?) dialogues with a miraculously embodied Cyrano de Bergerac. In *Everything You Need* Nathan and Mary too can only become 'whole' through each other's stories that they spin together. The novel endorses a vision of the role of the writer as someone who works with the awareness of the fact that the position of telling inscribed in discourse cannot be owned solely by the storyteller, but it is created also through 'citations' of stories that have ceased to be an author's own.

Having introduced the topic of how the novel envisions the relationship between stories and inner reality through a concept of voice that implies the acceptance of heteroglossia, of the possibility that others' voices speak through one's voice, I will now explore how the novel envisions the relationship between voice and the outer, social reality. A few comments on Kennedy's short story 'The Role of Notable Silences in Scottish History,' first published in *Bête Noir* 8/9, republished in the collection *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains*, may serve as a suitable introduction to my readings.²⁸ The story contains Kennedy's

clearest affirmation of the conviction that social reality is constructed through stories. Susanne Hagemann analyses this story in order to show that it evinces faith in the belief that ‘existence’ ‘is textual,’ even though ‘significantly, textuality does not imply truth.’ As Hagemann indicates, for the narrator of this story ‘what matters is the text, which produces reality – in so far as reality can be said to exist at all.’ Hagemann underlines the narrator’s vision that ‘the stories, once written, can be rewritten at will’ and that ‘no aspect of any text can be regarded as permanent,’ which is why ‘identity, basically consists in nothing but the ability to ‘make up your past as you go along.’²⁹

In *Everything You Need*, one of the writers of the guild on Foal Island, Louis, tells Mary about the Foal Island writer who did not survive the self-provoked ritual encounters with death, and thus made possible Mary’s fellowship. Louis concludes apologetically:

‘I am sorry, that’s not a pleasant story, is it? Not one to tell over tea.’ The backs of Mary’s calves relaxed.

‘It’s a story?’

‘Yes.’

Her feet relaxed, too.

‘A true story.’

And then both of her legs cramped up their length.³⁰

As Louis playfully reminds us, stories and reality interact. The description of Mary’s physical reactions indicates only the most trivial way in which storytelling can affect the physical reality. At another point in the story of *Everything You Need*, Nathan shows his conviction that

writing is like wishing [...] what you choose to write about will come and seek you out. What chooses your fiction can choose your reality, too. [...] Quickly or slowly, coincidences will happen: faces, phrases, tricks of speech, foreign cities, accidents – you’ll see what you dreamed, what you thought out of nothing, what you wrote.³¹

The passage suggests that what one fantasises, ‘dreams out of nothing,’ ends up organising the reality one inhabits, governing one’s awareness of reality, making sense of it. Throughout *Everything You Need*, elements from stories that derive from myths, or that have constituted myths, are used to make sense of

the characters' reality. This vision of reality as seething out of stories adds weight to the call for awareness of the voices that speak in these stories, because the reality that these stories construct may be amenable to certain authority. In *Everything You Need* the authority stories derive from myths is a central concern, as I will now seek to demonstrate. The narrator of Kennedy's novel draws into the story content material from Judeo-Christian myths, some of which reflects on Grail fabulas. In order to explore how the relationship between story and myth is envisioned as a relationship of authority, I will draw parallels between the content material of mythological fabulas and that of the fabula shaped in the narrative of *Everything You Need*.

The characters' features are often contoured through associations with mythological characters. Joe's character echoes God. Nathan too acts in God-like manner even though his character also shares features with the questing knight character of the Grail tradition. Mary Lamb can also be read as a character derived from the Grail myth ethos that refracts the image of Virgin Mary. Maura's character, Nathan's estranged wife, resembles a pagan goddess who, it is hinted, may be of Celtic inspiration.

These associations allow the narrator to show that patterns of myths may be detected in the fate of characters whose 'home-world' is not the sacred realm of myth but the profane realm of social reality. Thus, the persistence of patterns of myth in the characters' stories is made relevant in terms of the social identities they can create. An example of how this works can be given by examining a passage describing an encounter between Mary and Joe. The association between Joe and God or Jesus is triggered by traits these characters share or by traits shared among the contexts within which they appear. Joe's main pleasure on Foal Island is his garden, whose description resembles that of Eden. The garden responds to Joe's gestures and thoughts, its perfection matching the gardener's mastery. After a day's work Joe

set down his hoe and the garden relaxed, shivered back to its tight, lush perfection, defended from salt and gales by careful walls draped in honeysuckle, clematis, climbing roses, trained plums. Joe loved his garden and – generously, apprehensively – it loved him back.³²

When he invites Mary for conversation:

He patted the bench and she couldn't help but stroll towards him, rose scent coiling apart and then closing round her. 'So.' His eyes were Bunsen burner blue. 'We're in my oasis, you know that?'³³

Joe knows what everyone else thinks, and is the leader of the seven writers of the guild. His constant references to the power of words to create reality echo the fabula related in John's Gospel. In John's Revelation there are seven spirits of God who also accompany the Lamb and correspond to the seven angels of the seven churches (Revelation 1:12–17, 5:6, 11:15). While God's Angels are seven, Joe presides over six writers, however, a seventh is mentioned, whose suspicious death made possible Mary's membership. Joe's full name is Joseph Christopher, also suggesting an association between his character and Jesus Christ.

Joe's patience can be patronising and Mary feels intimidated by him: 'Something about his manner, his *shine*, seemed always to render her inadequate or vaguely ashamed.'³⁴ It is possible to see Mary's discomfort as the consequence of patriarchal socialisation modes legitimated through Biblical myths. Witness Mary's reaction to Joe's call, her hypnotic attraction for, and smothered rejection of, the logo-centric seat of power Joe seems to occupy:

'Mary?' Rather than force her to ignore him for any longer, Joe called to her – gentle, friendly, something smoky, or floury, about his voice which made it very easy to listen to and, therefore, very effective when it decided to serve up even the gentlest reproach. After all, it seemed to imply, how could she *not* want to face him and chat with him honestly: how could she manage to be so intimidated by his patent goodness when goodness was such a good thing: how could she still believe, however discreetly, that he was mad?³⁵

Although God's mythic power reverberates through Joe's character, it is His human version that impresses and affects Mary directly: she cannot question the 'patent goodness' of the man made in God's image, and she doubts herself in his presence. However, even though as a humanised version of God or Jesus, Joe evokes the power of patriarchy, he also condones the handing-over of

word power from Nathan to Mary.³⁶ Thus, through parallels with elements of the Biblical myth, the narration of Mary's meeting with Joe suggests a critique of the male dominated circles of the literary establishments, where male charismatic figures preside in what may seem a forbidding and intimidating Eden for novice women writers. However, the passage also suggests ways in which these Edens could be changed with the sharing of authority over word power among men and women. Mary's story, if her wish would become true, could be spoken 'out loud but inside other people.'³⁷ Perhaps she means the readers who live in the material reality beyond Mary's fictional realm. If Mary's story would become spoken loud in one's presentation of herself to others in social reality, would not this story shape the material reality of readers, handing over authority to them? Could this be the Grail's grace? Goering argues that

the object and the image that would become the Holy Grail in the hands of Chrétien de Troyes and his successors originated in the high Pyrenees, in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, as an otherwise unattested attribute of the Virgin Mary.³⁸

Mary Lamb's name echoes the domestic-otherworldly Virgin Mary. But she is also Lamb, which echoes John's identification of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God in the New Testament. Thus Mary is associated both with the idea of such power as is that of the wielder of words, and with Virgin Mary's message of love. It is because of Mary that Nathan will eventually find grace by asking whom the words serve, and finding that they shouldn't be made to serve.

In *Everything You Need*, the relationship between authority, narrative, myth and reality is also explored in reference to other stories derived from myths, significantly, through narrating various situations from Nathan's life. Nathan's character is consistent with the pain, self doubt and inner splitting that characterises Job. When we first meet him, he recounts how he contested the possibility of faith in others in a conversation with Joe, the godly leader of the writers' guild, which ended up in Nathan's punching Joe.³⁹ The narration echoes Job's contestation of faith in God, after God allowed him to lose everything in order to test his faith. But Nathan, a complex character, enacts many other mythic roles: in his vision of his relationship with Maura he often enacts the role of a Celtic king who quests to regain a fairy

bride. More relevant perhaps, his ailing, the wasting sickness of a king without a tutelary goddess, triggers an association between his character and that of the Fisher King of the Grail myths. I will now discuss Nathan's character in order to further clarify the novel's vision of how stories shape reality. This will help me to assess how the characters of Nathan and Mary help readers explore the patterns of the Grail myths as means to make sense of their own experiences in the contemporary social world.

I will begin by focusing on the construction of Nathan's character in relation to myth. I will discuss Nathan's position as a character inhabiting several juxtaposed myth fabulas, showing how these fabulas relate to the Grail myth fabula which forms the 'core' interest of the novel. Throughout the text, Nathan is given a prominent role as capable wielder of word power. However, he often uses the words' power for myth-making in ways that affect the reality of social relationships. Nathan is the writer who in the social realm acts, however unconsciously, as a creator of worlds in God-like manner. His way of writing reality affects adversely the women in his life, and indeed himself. Dunnigan observes, in relation to Nathan's suicide attempts and Lynda's morbid psycho-sexual tendencies (she is another writer of the guild), that the novel 'draws correspondences between writing and mutilation, a creative act which can also be self-destructive.'⁴⁰ In my reading, the idea that writing can be self-destructive is connected with the authority gained through stories designed to subject others. This connection is explored in *Everything You Need* through the relationship that ties Nathan to his wife Maura and to his daughter Mary.

Nathan is at first shown as someone who uses this authority to subject his wife and daughter. In this context, the question arises of whether the reality Nathan writes is graced or graceless, and the ways in which these questions are raised are inflected by the Grail myth and its message of redemption through love, such love as is attributed to Virgin Mary. The grace Nathan is seeking (his best friend's name is Jack Grace, the only person Nathan claims he trusts in the whole world) is tied up with questions of authority, of how authority (and the position of author) inflects others' voices in ways that subject them through the power of words to create the identity of those whom they represent.

In order to see how Nathan's story reflects elements of the Grail tradition, it is necessary to show how it also relates to elements of other traditions that engender myths. Like everyone

on Foal Island, Nathan undertakes the seven steps initiation process. The forms of the ritual seem to be derived from an apocryphal interpretation of the events in the *Book of Job*. In *Everything You Need* the seven writers attempt to die in order to be reborn closer to the final revelation. As in the Book of Job they have to confront 'six troubles' and, if 'saved,' in the seventh they would acknowledge the presence of divine force. A reference to this comes with Nathan's mocking of Joe's vision: '*He shall save thee in six troubles. Yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee.*' *Quoting the bloody Book of Job to me.*⁴¹ Nathan's ritual is markedly an encounter with death and mortality.⁴² He carefully prepares an installation for hanging himself leaving but a small possibility for saving his life. He then undergoes the hanging but releases the ropes at the last minute and survives. The whole process triggers a near death experience. Nathan's feelings throughout this experience are akin to Job's torment, marked both by an accusation of, and longing for, the divine.⁴³ Like Job, who yearns for signs of God's presence, even though shown through painful trials, Nathan longs for the revelation that the world is beheld in some kind of Divine. But as with Job, Nathan's quest for epiphanic revelation takes him through shadow realms of doubts and denials. Nathan ponders the result of his near death experience:

*What did I find. What did I bring back to tell you? Nothing. [...] Because I do this for me and only me, because who the fuck else is there? [...] You know and I know, when you're steamed right back to your bone, when there's fuck all else for you to find, then a big, fucking, comfy, intrusive narrative voice will say: LOVE, NATHAN – THAT'S THE IMPORTANT THING. [...] YOU KNOW THERE REALLY IS NOTHING ELSE, DON'T YOU? [...] BUT DO YOU HAVE THE BALLS FOR THAT, NATHAN, OR WILL YOU BOTTLE OUT?*⁴⁴

The voice that Nathan finds intrusive is in fact speaking in Nathan's voice (he is the narrator), but he does not recognise it as his own. The message it carries, the answer that love is everything one needs, fits the kind of revelation that the Grail may bring. It may be a voice come from the realms of Grail stories that flows into Nathan's voice. It may even be Mary's voice, speaking the Grail truth she will have found when Nathan's story is complete.

The vision of the Grail myth given in Kennedy's novel

helps the characters to find a sense of purpose. This purpose will be revealed eventually as being redemption through love. That the Grail revelation is redemption through love is not a particularly striking message. Chrétien de Troyes' story would have sufficed to make readers understand it. However, what is particularly interesting about Kennedy's take on the Grail story is how she makes it relevant in terms of contemporary social experiences that could belong to readers. Kennedy's voices, if allowed to speak inside readers, could help them to explore what love means in relation to myths about love, and in relation to the authority these myths vehiculate. In order to understand how these explorations are triggered by Kennedy's tale we must backtrack Nathan's life story using his memories about Mary and Maura, his ex-wife.

In the book Nathan is writing, Maura is represented through the landmarks of a psycho-mythological territory, the envisioning of which echoes Jesse Weston's Frazerian understandings of the Grail myth.⁴⁵ The first recollection of Nathan's life with Maura begins with the description of a party they organised. At one point, they decide to leave the house for the garden. Nathan consecrates the event as a symbolic withdrawal from social reality and entering of the realm of a garden of myth: '*carefully*' leaving their '*politeness and responsibility indoors*', Nathan tells, '*we [...] would ease ourselves right outside and be with our plants and our dark.*' Then:

*The night had hugged us up in a high, open breath of green. I'd staggered a tiny bit, tipped back my head and found I was thumped off balance again by the clarity, by the wholly implausible size of the sky. I opened my eyes to it all and then faced her, wanted to hold her, did just that.*⁶⁴

Nathan experiences Maura in an epiphanic revelation of universal '*clarity*.' The entire cosmos participates in their union: '*the night had hugged us up in a [...] breath of green*' and the sky wholly embraced their coming together. Thus Nathan idealises Maura as a goddess of myth.

Eventually, he places his daughter in the same kind of realm of myth. Nathan's first account of Mary as a child occurs in a chapter entitled 'New Found Land.'⁴⁷ There she is understood as a landscape Nathan surveys:

*She's uncovered herself, my daughter, and was sprawled, expansive and relaxed, out for any count, for any spark. I [...] sat on the floor by her head, watching [...] the rush of different lights across her.*⁴⁸

Nathan's daughter is shown as an otherworldly realm, a 'sprawled', 'expansive' landscape across which 'rush' 'different lights.' Maura witnesses Nathan's contemplative stance and understands his subjection of Mary. She indicts it: '*you're always feeding off people. Always taking notes. You make me tired.*'⁴⁹ Rejected by Maura, Nathan symbolically leaves 'Maura's land,' wherein he was no longer 'known,' for 'Mary's land,' and crosses from an envisioned otherworld into another:

*Sleep caught me on the brink of morning and I dreamed of somersaulting into skies filled with raging shadow and twisting light. And I landed, chill and giddy, in an unforgiving country where I was not known. Then my daughter woke me, crying, and I went to her.*⁵⁰

Maura is imagined as an 'unforgiving country' and her child, Mary as an alternative realm Nathan could master through using the signifying power of words.

Other Nathan-authored representations of Maura contribute to rendering her an almost mythical goddess. Nathan recounts their togetherness as otherworldly, again mystically each other's, in a 'subtly alien' reality: '*I could feel her there, shining into me [...]. Two Celts together, wanting to be together, on a subtly, subtly alien train.*'⁵¹ Maura's inaccessibility is frequently hinted at ('the weight of the unobtainable rushed in at him from every side – Maura, completely wanted and completely out of reach'⁵²) and most expressively in the following rendition of Nathan's thoughts: 'His own imagination was performing a type of well-informed rape: penetrating him painstakingly with a ghost, with a time past restoring, an unreachable skin.'⁵³ The Maura Nathan remembers is a 'ghost' that inhabits a mythical time 'past restoring': an unreachable way of being in one's flesh that ambivalently sanctions both Maura's ever receding physicality and Nathan's own possibility of physically existing in the myth about Maura that he has created. The landscape of myth and the

landscape of social reality remain separated in Nathan's mind, although this separation clearly affects Maura's social identity. For him, the landscape of myth is a realm of the sacred, only accessible through the power of a writer's words to trigger epiphanic revelation. But for the real Maura, the Maura of social reality, this realm is inaccessible because in the realm of myth she is ghostly, refined out of existence through Nathan's myth-making.⁵⁴

Nathan will eventually transcend his addiction to word power, a process that culminates with his visit to Maura in London, many years after they broke apart: he finds out that she has started a new life with someone else. As Nathan's goddess is clearly demystified as otherworldly, Maura finally appears to be just a worldly woman. Yet this is a woman who had the power to leave an unsatisfying relationship and regenerate her social life on her own terms. Maura refuses to play the part of mythical inspirer of poets that Nathan assigns her in his idealisations. While disempowered as a mythical goddess and muse, she is empowered as a real woman, as an individual who inhabits a recognisable social space and not an imagined transcendental space of myth disconnected from the social reality of individual needs for recognition and personal fulfilment. The vision of the relationship between narrative and reality that *Everything You Need* proposes regards narrative as important means of organising reality and of finding one's place in it. Mary Lamb and Nathan Staples both realise that setting forth stories moulds not only their own subjective identity but also that of those with whom they interact and who are figured in one's fantasising identity. This is especially clear in Nathan's construction of reality as a psycho-mythological territory wherein Mary and Maura are assigned identities they will disavow. The novel instructs writers and readers to beware of such mythologizing that silences others' voices. On the other hand, the novel condones the use of myth to add others' voices to reality. This is visible in the fact that the narrator of *Everything You Need* uses the Grail myth structure to envision Nathan's redemption from his abuse of the power of words and Mary's access to the power of words as a power through which she can nurse reality into being rather than subjecting it (as Nathan has done in the past).

This places Kennedy's novel in context with literary works that, as Clayton puts it, make 'explicit claims about the power of narrative.'⁵⁵ According to Cornis-Pope:

By fracturing the discrete flow of narration into conflicting 'voices' and diegetic roles, novelists such as Raymond Federman, Marianne Hauser, Gilbert Sorentino, and Sukenick restore a performative dimension to the act of storytelling. Their fiction takes on a 'platformatic' aspect in the sense both of a narrative mise-en-scène and of a polemical confrontation between teller and told, teller and listener, speech and writing.⁵⁶

In *Everything You Need* we find the vision that one's voice can always be seen in conflict with others' voices. These conflicting voices provoke for the main characters, often acting as narrators, confrontations between their position as tellers and as listeners to others voices becoming manifest in their telling. I would argue that the text entices readers to experience these confrontations in terms of their own experiences.

Throughout Kennedy's novel, words are trusted with the power 'to let *Life* speak,' as Nathan emphasises, although not knowing at that point what this means in relation to Mary and Maura.⁵⁷ Indeed, he literally brings Sophie, Joe's daughter, to life through word power.⁵⁸ Having just rescued her from drowning, while Joe performs the CPR basic steps, Nathan continually speaks to Sophie. He tells her:

'My father and my mother uttered my name, and they hid it in my body when I was born, so that none of those who would use against me words of power might succeed in making enchantments to have dominion over me,' which was Egyptian, but he couldn't think what, and that was when she moved her head and coughed.⁵⁹

Nathan's speaking to a seemingly dead body leads to his fulfilling the myth of the story he tells: he 'hides' his words in Sophie's body so that she can be born again. By restoring word power to Sophie, he brings her back into being: the being through a story, or rather, the being through the flux of words that animate her consciousness, a flux not necessarily her own, but passing through her and reconnecting her to a community of people and to the traditions they use to represent themselves to themselves and to others.⁶⁰ The passage relating Sophie's reanimation through using the power of words entices us to read *Everything You Need*

as condoning the role of narrative theorised through the concept of ‘surfiction.’ Surfiction is fiction that

Rather than serving as a mirror or redoubling on itself, fiction adds itself to the world, creating a meaningful ‘reality’ that did not previously exist. Fiction is artifice but not artificial.⁶¹

In this context, *Everything You Need* can be read on the one hand as a text that reflects on the power words have to add fictional worlds to the world of reality, thereby changing the latter meaningfully. On the other hand, the text can be seen as adding itself to the reality readers inhabit in ways that make them reflect on the meanings that emerge through this addition. Especially the question of how authority changes with this addition is of interest in this case.

Authority is shown as belonging to men at the beginning of the text, through evoking for instance Joe’s patriarchal authority and Nathan’s authority as a writer. However, word power is progressively handed over from Nathan to Mary. As he finishes his last book she finishes her first. This handing-over of power is witnessed by the godly figure of Joe whose approval seals Mary’s recruitment to the ranks of powerful word wielders.⁶² But this empowerment of the characters of *Everything You Need* adds something to the metanarrative reality of readers to the extent that it entices them to assist in the characters’ efforts to find their way. The novel creates for readers the experiential reality of a possible Grail quest. In the Grail stories, the knight Perceval’s life is graceless as long as he fails to ask whom the Grail serves. In *Everything You Need* the terms of the quest are defined by a revised Grail question: whom does the word serve? On this quest, experienced through reading, readers are constantly called upon to ponder whom the stories serve, which involves re-evaluations and repositioning of readers in reference to narrative authority, as in reference to the authority of the voices that speak in one’s telling. As Nathan puts it:

Anyone can steal words, forget them, remould them, deny them, but their shadow and the way to make them is still here, a part of me. [...] I like to recall, now and then, that language belongs to me, to the individual, to each and every individual – that everyone who tries to *own* it is trying to own *me*.⁶³

However, there are elements in the construction of the novel that warn against the dangers of claiming too much word power. Nathan's position is initially self-centred: his statement does not indict *his* attempt to possess other people's language, to appropriate their own versions of their stories – the means through which they present themselves to themselves and to others, – thus appropriating their identities. As Maura explains to Mary, it was precisely because she had become a 'real fantasy' that she had to leave Nathan:

And then there was that whole thing of being the professional man's wife. Not myself. I lost my name [...] As if I was someone that he was imagining. [...] The things he *loved* had to be his, absolutely his. [...] It can feel very good to be wanted so much. Feeling *owned*, that's different. That stops you being a person anymore. [...] Have you ever made love to a man and been absolutely sure he wasn't thinking of you? Better than that, have you been completely certain that he was comparing you to a woman who didn't exist, a woman he'd made to please himself, a woman he spent every day with?⁶⁴

Maura left because she refused to fulfil the fantasy roles Nathan assigned her, however real that made her to him. Nathan's possibilities of redemption imply the understanding that the hold words have on reality cannot be used to possess it. As Mary put it, inside is 'the loudest place of all' where other voices speak too, and they must be listened to.⁶⁵

Nathan's 'piece of the Grail' is a mythic Maura, yet he eventually understands that he cannot replace reality with the dominion of words. This leads to the seventh rule he lays down for the writer Mary:

Here's one last rule for you: Rule Seven. I think that I have tried to follow it and not done well, but I do still believe this to be the most useful and beautiful Rule of all, the one that is most true: *do it for love*.⁶⁶

It is this love, which we understand as also implying caring for the voices that speak through one's voice that fuels, as Dunnigan put it, Nathan's desire 'to change the narrative, 'his story,' to efface its pain by the wilful act of 'editing out' or

resorting to fictive inventiveness.⁶⁷ As a vision of quest for the Grail of writing, Mary's story echoes that of Christian mythologizations of the Grail quest: the purpose of writing is to create with love. The love that inspires Mary's writing is presented as a force that should hold sway over the reality storytellers set forth through their stories. Mary is able to speak 'inching her words forward, picking them to carry tenderness and weight' and works 'to build a proper fabric of sense, to set out love.'⁶⁸

Notes

¹ Approximate quotation. A.L. Kennedy, *Aye Write!* Festival reading, Mitchell Library Theatre, Glasgow, 19 February 2007.

² I will be using the Vintage edition throughout this analysis: A.L. Kennedy, *Everything You Need* (London: Vintage, 2000).

³ Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time (The 1994 Reith Lectures)* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 14.

⁴ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 449.

⁵ Sarah Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction: Articulate Grace', in Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (eds.), *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 144-55, p. 154. Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 396.

⁶ In Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*, the first known Grail story, Perceval is chided for not having asked who is served from the Grail. The story is unfinished and does not explain Perceval's perceived foolishness. Joseph Goering, summarising Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, emphasises that the king Anfortas, who is served from the Grail, is cured of an illness that lasted for years when the knight asks what ails him. Chrétien de Troyes, *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, trans. David Stains (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), ll. 6364-6433, 416-7; Joseph Goering, *The Virgin and the Grail: Origins of a Legend* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), p. 35.

⁷ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 555. In his analysis of the origins of the Grail story Joseph Goering shows how the power of the Grail is connected with the power of words: 'no surviving book containing 'Celtic marvels' or descriptions of a pagan or Christian ritual or relic' fits the source specifications given by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Conte du Graal*. Chrétien de Troyes claims that his romance tale is based on a book offered by Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders, and does not clarify what the Grail is (he never uses a synonym for the word 'graal'). The power of this enigma has haunted writers ever since, enticing them to fantasise histories and meanings of the Grail. In a sense, the power of the Grail stems entirely from the power of words. Goering, pp. 4-15.

⁸ Val McDermid, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', *Los Angeles Times* (26 August 2001), p. 5.

⁹ Toby Mundy, 'Novel of the Week', *New Statesman* 128, no. 4437 (24 May 1999), p. 49.

¹⁰ Charles, 'No Man—or Writer—Is an Island', p. 19.

¹¹ Katie Grant, 'More Four-Letter Words Than You Need', *Spectator* 282, no. 8912 (29 May 1999), pp. 40-1.

¹² Pamela Petro, 'School of Wales', *Women's Review of Books* 18, nos. 10-11 (July 2001), p. 30.

- ¹³ Mona Knapp, 'Review of *Everything You Need*, by A.L. Kennedy', *World Literature Today* 76, no. 2 (spring 2002), p. 151.
- ¹⁴ A.L. Kennedy and Yvonne Nolan, 'A Dream Not Her Own', *Publishers Weekly* 248, no. 30 (23 July 2001), pp. 43, 46.
- ¹⁵ Mundy, 'Novel of the Week', p. 49.
- ¹⁶ Charles, 'No Man.', p. 19.
- ¹⁷ Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction', p. 145; Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 274, original italics and bold. The words in bold indicate Nathan's realisation that not only he, but all of us have lost 'the way it should be'. He had begun by saying 'I've lost' ... but corrects himself.
- ¹⁹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 555.
- ²⁰ Adrienne Rich, 'Toward a More Feminist Criticism', in Anna Tripp (ed.), *Gender* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 42-50, p. 45.
- ²¹ For comments on the American authors' beliefs in the empowering effects of telling a story see for instance Jay Clayton, 'The Narrative Turn in Minority Fiction', in Janice Carlisle and Daniel R. Schwarz (eds.), *Narrative and Culture* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 58-76, p. 63.
- ²² Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), p. viii. Dunnigan comments that while Kennedy's work as a whole 'is about the emotionally and politically disenfranchised and dispossessed, it also aims to discover the means of (re)enchantment.' Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction', p. 154.
- ²³ Clayton, 'The Narrative Turn', p. 62.
- ²⁴ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 110.
- ²⁵ See for instance Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, pp. 88, 295.
- ²⁶ My references are to the Vintage edition: A.L. Kennedy, *So I am Glad* (London: Vintage, 1996).
- ²⁷ Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction', p. 147. Kennedy, *So I am Glad*, p. 7.
- ²⁸ The first edition of the collection was published by Polygon in 1990. I refer to the 1993 Phoenix edition: A.L. Kennedy, 'The Role of Notable Silences in Scottish History', *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (London: Phoenix, 1993), pp. 62-72.
- ²⁹ Susan Hagemann, 'Women and Nation', *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, pp. 316-328, 325-6. Kennedy, 'The Role of Notable Silences', p. 64.
- ³⁰ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 88.
- ³¹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 162.
- ³² Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, pp. 149-50.

- ³³ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 150.
- ³⁴ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 123, original italics.
- ³⁵ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 123, original italics.
- ³⁶ As Dunnigan observes, by the end of the novel 'Mary becomes the ultimate judge of Nathan's writing in a reversal of roles.' Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction', pp. 149-50.
- ³⁷ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 110.
- ³⁸ Goering, *The Virgin and the Grail*, p. xi.
- ³⁹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, pp. 6-8.
- ⁴⁰ Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction', p. 149.
- ⁴¹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 42, original italics and bold.
- ⁴² His initiation process recalls the doctrines of St John of the Cross, according to which God perfects the soul's yearning for purity and grace through heavy trials.
- ⁴³ See *The Book of Job*, trans. Raymond Scheindlin (New York: Norton, 1998).
- ⁴⁴ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, pp. 44-5, original italics and capitals.
- ⁴⁵ Jesse Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (New York: Doubleday, 1957).
- ⁴⁶ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 46, original italics and font.
- ⁴⁷ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 63, original italics, underline and font.
- ⁴⁸ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 71, original italics and font.
- ⁴⁹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 72, original italics and font.
- ⁵⁰ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 72, original italics and font.
- ⁵¹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 116, original italics and bold.
- ⁵² Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 119.
- ⁵³ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 5.
- ⁵⁴ The distinction between the realm of myth and of social reality is developed through the distinction between the sacred and the profane theorised by Mircea Eliade. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1957).
- ⁵⁵ Clayton, 58. See also Marcel Cornis-Pope, 'Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting: The Pynchon-Morrison-Sukenick Connection', *Narrative and Culture*, pp. 216-37, 225; Raymond Federman, 'Surfiction – Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction', in Raymond Federman (ed.), *Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow* (Chicago: Swallow, 1975), pp. 5-15.
- ⁵⁶ Cornis-Pope, 'Narrative Innovation', p. 225.
- ⁵⁷ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 138, original italics.

⁵⁸ Having noted the association between Joe's character and the God of Jewish mythology, one notes that in the latter Sophia, whose name means 'wisdom' in Greek, was seen as sitting with God. For debates surrounding the Sophia myth see for instance George W. MacRae, 'The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth', *Novum Testamentum*, 12 (1970), pp. 86-101.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 461, original editing.

⁶⁰ Dunnigan interprets the passage as a 'fable of loss and restoration' that is metaphorically related to the main narrative 'of daughter-father love which refuses silence.' Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction', p. 151.

⁶¹ Cornis-Pope quoting Sukenick, 'Narrative Innovation', p. 225. See also Ronald Sukenick, *In Form: Digressions on the Act of Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985), pp. 31-32.

⁶² Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, pp. 539-40.

⁶³ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, pp. 294-5, original italics.

⁶⁴ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, pp. 332-7, original italics.

⁶⁵ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 110.

⁶⁶ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 567, original italics and font.

⁶⁷ Dunnigan, 'A.L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction', p. 149. See also p. 150.

⁶⁸ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ Kennedy, *Everything You Need*, p. 16.