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‘Make Sure You Don’t Murder Your Coffee!’ Comedy and Violence in the Poetry of Luke Kennard.

Paul McDonald

Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between comedy, violence, and postmodernism in the work of the British poet, Luke Kennard. It has been argued that British poets of the twentieth century have an ambivalent relationship with postmodernism because, while they accept that certainty is elusive, they refuse to ignore meaning and value, and their writing frequently exhibits “an ethical demand.” I claim that this can also be said of Kennard’s twenty first century postmodernist writing. In an analysis of his popular poem, ‘The Murderer,’ I show that what initially seems to be a typically postmodern, morally disengaged treatment of violence, also employs characteristics associated with traditional comedy, and the combination of the two modes of humour creates a space in which values can be reclaimed.

Abstract

Cet article traite de la relation entre la comédie, la violence et le postmodernisme dans l’oeuvre du poète Britannique, Luke Kennard. Certains soutiennent que les poètes Britanniques du XXe siècle ont une attitude ambivalente envers le postmodernisme, car, bien qu'ils acceptent que la certitude est insaisissable, ils refusent d'ignorer la signification et la valeur, et leur écriture fréquemment présente “une demande éthique.” Je prétends que cela peut aussi être dit de l'écriture postmoderne de Kennard du vingt et unième siècle. A partir d’une analyse de son poème populaire, “The Murderer,” je montre que ce qui semble au départ être typique de l’écriture postmoderne, représentant la violence d’une manière non-

engagée, il emploie également des moyens associés à la comédie traditionnelle et cet assemblage de deux types d'humour crée un endroit d'où peuvent ressortir les valeurs.

Keywords

"postmodernism," "comedy," "poetry," "Luke Kennard," "black humour."

Mots-clés

"postmodernisme," "comédie," "poésie","Luke Kennard," "humour noir."

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Text

In his 1996 book, *New Relations*, David Kennedy discusses some of the British postmodern poets who had begun to publish in the 1980s and early 1990s, and who are represented in the hugely influential anthology, *The New Poetry* (1993). He identifies a "distinctively British postmodernism," arguing that the early work of writers like John Ash, Ian McMillan, and Peter Didsbury suggests a "distrust of the more apocalyptic claims made on behalf of postmodernist theory and practice" (85). Postmodernism's "apocalyptic" associations are well documented, of course, and are generally associated with the descent into relativism, uncertainty, and, as Christopher Norris puts it, the loss of "those grandiose Enlightenment ideas of putting the world to rights" (278); they are connected, as Robert L McLaughlin points out, with "a culture of irony and ridicule" where "no assertion goes unmocked," and hence where "nothing positive can be built" (70). Following a line of argument developed by the poet Ian Gregson, Kennedy makes a distinction between British postmodern poetry and the kind of American postmodernism exhibited by the likes of John Ashbery, whose unwillingness to engage with reality implies a lack of moral purpose or possibility. For Kennedy, his work seems entirely self-referential, apparently having given up on meaning: "[a]n Ashbery poem, typically, enacts a mime of meaning, rejects a poetry of persons and objects" and "describes nothing but its own purposes" (101). Where American postmodernists like Ashbery cannot relate to the world beyond language and seem devoid of social responsibility, however, British postmodern poetry is far more positive. Whilst acknowledging that "Reality…is too complex to be documented according to an A=B model," British postmodernism has not "followed [John] Ashbery in offering language itself as the only reality, or the poem as a self-reflexive parody (110). On the contrary, the work of Ash, McMillan, and Didsbury, among others, reveals "the basis of an ethical demand" (112). For Kennedy, they are representative of those British postmodernist poets who reach beyond

language toward a world of values: Ash's poetry, for instance, "seems to yearn for justice" (113); McMillan's suggests that "aesthetics and politics are inseparable" (114); while "for Didsbury, 'the search for a just politics' begins with language itself" (117). According to Kennedy, British postmodern poets of the 80s and 90s, exhibit a healthy scepticism toward master-narratives, but maintain an active search for meaning and value: their insistence on political engagement implies a moral purpose that is incompatible with postmodernism as it is often perceived.

Since becoming the youngest writer to be shortlisted for the Forward Prize in 2007, the English poet Luke Kennard has often been discussed negatively in relation to postmodernism, suggesting that he might be out of step with the kind of British postmodernism that Kennedy describes. One reviewer, for instance, suggests that, at its worst, Kennard's writing is "full of in-jokey academic references…and glimpses of dystopian postmodern capitalism," and that even at this early stage in his career, it "feels self-parodic" (Bowden, upaginated); another points out his penchant for "embracing many of the techniques of (post-)modernism in his writing" (Mackenzie, unpaginated); another goes so far as to describe his work as a "fractured postmodern collection of picture postcards" (Beagrie, 74-75) . Indeed, in his 2013 interview with William O'Rourke, Kennard himself expresses a fondness for what he terms "the best American postmodernist" work, and admits the influence of proto-postmodernist authors such as Richard Brautigan (Kennard, O'Rourke, unpaginated). Ostensibly at least, Kennard does exhibit a postmodern aesthetic, certainly if the latter is characterised, as Richard Shusterman suggests, by "[a]ppropriation, eclecticism, difference, pluralism, contingency, playfulness […] fragmentation, ephemerality, and superficial frivolity" (781). As Charles Whalley points out, there is an "obvious surface quality to Kennard's poetry" suggestive of the ephemeral and the superficial; there is appropriation and eclecticism in its

abundant “literary theory or pop culture references;” there is a suspicion “of its own ability to speak plainly, or with any authority,” which attests to its contingency and playfulness; above all, there is a tendency “to hide any suggestion that there might be an earnest moral purpose to it,” which has contributed to the criticism that it may merely be “postmodern or clever, rather than much else” (Whalley, unpaginated). Postmodern in the latter sense suggests disengagement from questions of value and a lack of moral purpose, of course, which is exactly the criticism levelled at American postmodernists by Kennedy.

Despite the influence postmodernism has had on his writing, however, the poet has frequently taken pains to distance himself from that label, and particularly from the lack of values associated with it: in interview with Caroline Bird, for instance, he goes so far as to call himself a “love poet,” suggesting that his work is “not postmodernist or surrealist poetry, it's just part of the world. And it seems silly to divide that from love;” in other words, despite his obvious irony and self-consciousness, Kennard claims a connection to reality, and value, insisting on emotional and moral engagement:

> I guess the sense of wonder in my work comes from the fact that we love each other in spite of all this bullshit. In spite of being broken and almost incapable of a single, unselfconscious act of kindness. I get so cross when a critic accuses me of wanting to "shock" some imaginary *Daily Mail* kind of audience. What they should be accusing me of is being a sentimental old moralist (Kennard, Bird, unpaginated)

Here he clearly links the notion of moral engagement (“acts of kindness”) with a move beyond postmodern irony - toward “unselfconscious” communication. My paper discusses Kennard’s uneasy attitude to postmodernism in relation to his interest in comedy and

violence. Despite his claims to be a "love poet" and "sentimental old moralist," a number of critics have picked up on a prevalence of dark humour and violence in his work, one 2010 reviewer deeming it both "hilarious" and "cruel" (Tod Swift, unpaginated). I am particularly concerned with his long comic poem, 'The Murderer,' which exhibits both of these traits. Here the speaker of the poem has been assigned to facilitate a murderer's rehabilitation, and the piece addresses the implications of violence, whilst employing what Kennedy might deem a typically American postmodern humour and moral disengagement. I will explore the possibility of squaring his apparent postmodern relativism with Kennard's own claims to be "a sentimental old moralist," and his insistence that his poetry not be separated "from love," despite its ostensibly postmodernist orientation; moreover, I will show how Kennard's humour strives to reclaim value, even as it appears to deny its possibility, and make a case for Kennard as a poet who continues the tradition of British, rather than American, postmodern poetry as Kennedy describes it.

'The Murderer' appeared in Kennard's second full length poetry collection, *The Harbour Beyond the Movie* (2007), and was also included in the portfolio of poems submitted as part of his University of Exeter PhD thesis a year later. As the poem chosen for inclusion in *The Forward Book of Poetry 2008*, it remains one of his best known poems to date. While Kennard is primarily associated with prose poetry, this is a free verse piece constructed of 42 three line stanzas. Like much of his writing it combines elements of surrealism with bleak, absurdist humour, as can be seen from the first of its five sections:

> I. THE MURDERER
>
> I take the murderer for coffee.
>
> 'Make sure you don't *murder* your coffee!'

I joke. He likes my jokes.

Later I swing a plank into his face:

This is to stop him enjoying himself –

Which is integral to the rehabilitation process.

His mouth trickles blood like a tap quarter-turned.

He likes my analogies. ‘Hey, Murderer!’

I yell, ‘*Murdered* anyone recently?’

The murderer likes to play badminton.

When he loses, I say, ‘That’s what you get for being a murderer.’

When he wins, I say,

‘I guess you got yourself in pretty good shape

Murdering all those people.’

I’m not about to let the murderer forget he’s a murderer.

When I dance with the murderer I let him lead

Because he is the more proficient dancer –

‘Just be careful not to murder me!’ I tease.

The prison sits on the horizon like a great ash-tray –

When we travel I give him the window seat.

‘Hey, murderer, would you like a sandwich?’ I say,

> ‘Or would you rather murder someone?’
>
> The murderer eats his cheese and ham sandwich.
>
> ‘The forecast is for snow,’ I tell him (17)

The murderer is known only by the word that denotes his crime, and the speaker of the poem is also unnamed. The repetition of the word ‘murderer’ gives the piece phonetic cohesion, and contributes to the humorous tone of the poem; importantly it also serves to dehumanise the murderer, foregrounding his crime more as a signifier than as an act. The latter isn’t shown or overtly referenced so it is hard for readers to respond emotionally to the murderer’s deed. The implication is that the speaker functions as a kind of guardian or Probation Officer for the murderer, and his role is to keep him in check and provide moral direction. The poem presents the speaker and the murderer in a variety of comic situations, including picnicking, dining at a restaurant, visiting a Job Centre, and finally attending a conference discussing a “Government Paper Addressing Care for your Murderer” (21). Throughout it is the speaker rather than the murderer who behaves in a morally dubious way as he taunts, belittles, and physically abuses his charge. It is evident from the section quoted above, for instance, how the speaker’s violence creates an unsettling tone in the poem, qualifying the humour to some extent. Thus while the poem initially suggests that humour creates a bond between the two men (“He likes my jokes”), this is immediately qualified by the speaker’s decision to “swing a plank into his face.” Unsettling also is the fact that, in contrast to the speaker’s rudeness and violence, the murderer is placid and contrite: “The murderer never cleans the house” we’re told, “Due to self-esteem issues. / He doesn’t believe that he deserves a clean house: // He believes that the house should mirror his soul”(19). Despite his own shortcomings, the speaker of the poem assumes moral superiority and certainty, at one point explicitly ridiculing the notion of moral relativism in a conversation with the murderer’s girlfriend:

…

‘I hope *you’re* not a murderer, too,’ I say.

‘One murderer in my life is quite enough for me.’

‘Actually,’ she says, quietly, ‘I think we’re *all* murderers.’

I brake for a red light. ‘That’s lucky,’ I say.

‘I imagine it would be difficult going out with a murderer

If you weren’t a moral relativist.’

… (21)

In my own correspondence with Kennard he suggested that the poem’s message is that “there’s more than one way to murder someone, and the narrator, in his vaudevillian, repetitive cruelty, is the real murderer.”[i] So we are meant to see the moral shortcomings of *both* of the central characters, and the piece appears to make a case for moral relativism: the speaker’s moral pronouncements are comically undermined and the poem seems consistent with postmodernism’s refusal to construct a moral hierarchy. The style of the poem has much in keeping with postmodernism too. Like a great deal of Kennard’s writing it has a self-conscious dimension, signalling its own status as a literary construction. The speaker makes reference to himself as a writer, for instance, and celebrates his own skills as a poet. Thus in the final section he boasts about his ability to create metaphors; he references “the undersides o*f* seagulls illuminated by floodlights,” and continues:

‘God bless you, tiny flying cathedrals,’ I mutter.

‘You probably don’t understand that, being a murderer,

But it’s called a metaphor. It’s a thing I use for talking about seagulls’ (21)

The apparent absurdity of this metaphor is significant as I will show later; here it is sufficient to note the degree of self-awareness generated by the reference to literary technique, and the emphasis it places on the poem as a constructed narrative. Interesting also is the speaker's apparent assumption that an ability to think figuratively is a noble skill distinguishing him from the murderer: he appears to assume a relationship between a refined aesthetic sensibility and virtue which consolidates his sense of moral superiority and certainty. The murderer also has an artistic facet to *his* character, having written a libretto, but the speaker insists that his former crime qualifies the value of his art: "'It's not bad, *for a murderer,*' I tell him" (19, emphasis added). Because the notion of the speaker's moral superiority is undermined by his own violent behaviour, this again works to expose the folly of his assumptions. The references to writing, and to the speaker as a creator of metaphors, keeps the idea of the poem as a construction in the reader's mind, then, and contributes to the playful tone that is sustained throughout. So the poem declines to take itself seriously; it also refuses to create a point of wisdom from which to evaluate questions of value, constantly ridiculing the moral and aesthetic assumptions of the speaker. Thus it might be seen to demonstrate the kind of negative postmodernism criticised by Kennedy, reinforcing the idea that Kennard's work is indeed, to quote Charles Whalley, merely "postmodern or clever, rather than much else." The poem exhibits the characteristics of postmodern comedy as defined by Lance Olsen, for whom comedy complements the postmodern condition and its tendency to interrogate "all that we once took for granted about language and experience." According to Olsen, postmodernism is often accompanied by comedy that creates "polyphony and plurality" and which focuses on "question rather than answer, process rather than goal" (148); its key feature "is its refusal to see truth as something that exists along an –either-or axis" (Olsen, 19). In its playfulness and ostensible moral ambivalence, Kennard's humour apparently conforms to this view, and we could indeed be forgiven for seeing it as comedy for its own

sake, offering only disengagement or ambivalence, rather than an attempt to address questions of value.[ii] According to David Kennedy, this would be untypical of British postmodern poetry, of course, so where is the "basis for an ethical demand" that might allow us to place Kennard's writing alongside the likes of Ash, McMillan, and Didsbury? To find it we need to look beyond the self-awareness and postmodern playfulness of the poem to those significant elements that pull in the other direction.

In addition to its postmodern characteristics, 'The Murderer' has several interesting features in common with traditional comedy: it has five sections akin to the five acts of classical comedy, for instance, but more importantly it ends with a union between the speaker and the murderer. We saw how the first stanza of the poem references a human connection between the protagonists: they bond at the level of humour ("He likes my jokes"), and this reference to bonding implies a status quo which is quickly disrupted by the speaker's violence in the second stanza. As the speaker continues to abuse his charge, we remain uneasy about their relationship, until the end where Kennard finds a way of re-establishing the relative harmony suggested at the outset. In the final section, the speaker is assigned a new murderer, while his old charge is "left in a holding pen for reallocation;" someone leaves the door of the holding pen open letting the murderers wander free, and the speaker loses his murderer. When he finds him again "sitting alone in the car park," the speaker invites his murderer into his car with the words, "Come on murderer, / Let's go home" (22). In other words there is reconciliation between the speaker and the murderer which re-establishes our sense of their bond, and sends us back to the beginning. Endings that offer union or reunion are a staple of traditional comedy, of course, typically taking the form of marriage, which, as Andrew Stott notes, is "the conclusion towards which traditional comedy inevitably moves, a cultural symbol of…harmonious symmetry and the resolution of troubles" (77). While it might be

difficult to construe Kennard's reconciliation as a marriage as such, it does establish a union – or reunion – that creates closure and implies that there is value in human bonding. The ending may be absurd and incongruous, but it is also surprisingly touching. The speaker continues to refer to the murderer by the word that denotes his crime, but the tone is softened by the reference to home, with its connotations of comfort and domestic bonding. Despite the speaker's former cruelty and violence toward his charge, the prospect of being separated from his murderer generates a convincing emotional response in him which informs his desire to reconnect; and given that the murderer complies, "Silently" volunteering to climb "into the passenger seat," we conclude that this is appreciated and reciprocated. In other words this is presented as an emotional bond, and the relationship between the two men is posited as something of value, in a context where values are elusive. In a more traditional context this may be perceived as a trite and mawkish ending to the narrative, but that is not the case here. Kennard gestures towards the sentimentality of the traditional comic ending but, at the same time, the self-conscious irony of the narrative context qualifies the possibility of his ending becoming sentimental itself. The tone here is akin to what Mikhail Epstein terms "trans-sentimentality":

> Trans-sentimentality is sentimentality after the death of sentimentality. It has passed through all the circles of carnival, irony and black humour, in order to become aware of its own banality, accepting it as an inevitability and as the source of a new lyricism (461)

Kennard's ending is an example of what Epstein sees as a "post-postmodernism" that acknowledges the inevitability of corniness, potential insincerity, artificiality, etc., and which, by so doing, manages to create a space where the formally sentimental can be reclaimed.

According to Epstein this is a condition that refuses to recognize a distinction between irony and reality:

> This ‘post-postmodern,’ neo-sentimental aesthetics is defined not by the sincerity of the author or the quotedness of his style, but by the mutual interaction of the two. What is characteristic is the elusive border of their difference, which allows even the most sincere utterance to be perceived as a subtly quoted imitation, while a commonplace quotation may sound like a piercingly lyrical confession (456-468).

Epstein’s ideas seem particularly relevant here because Luke Kennard has also spoken of his desire to close the gap between irony and reality: again in my correspondence with Kennard, he expressed a desire to “break down the dichotomy” between what might be termed a self-conscious, playful work of art, on the one hand, and a “purely serious, purely sincere” work of art on the other (Kennard, McDonald, unpaginated). In his PhD thesis he expresses a similar hope that “We might move…away from… ‘parody vs. sincerity’ towards an acknowledgement of humour and self-awareness as a necessary element of self-knowledge, and therefore a fundamental element of writing.”(Kennard, *The Expanse*, 132). Clearly he feels that self-conscious humour does not necessarily have to be evasive or disengaged, as those who criticise postmodernism would suggest. In ‘The Murderer,’ humour and self-awareness work to make an assertion of value possible by creating the conditions for a reclamation of the otherwise banal and sentimental comic ending. Without the humour the final lines of the poem – “let’s go home” - would be mawkish and corny; the comedy offsets this, but at the same time, and crucially, it doesn’t diminish the poignancy of this ending, or its potential relevance to reality; indeed, despite the absurdity, incongruity and comically deconstructed nature of the ending, it retains emotional force partly *because* it feels applicable to the world outside the poem. This has something to do with the nature of the

incongruity in Kennard's final lines. Most Incongruity Theories of humour suggest that, while humour always tends to be based around incongruities, only certain incongruities have comic potential. An incongruity must be resolvable on one level or another in order for it to be viable as comedy; the ostensibly disparate elements of the incongruity must in some way be congruous or compatible before it can provide a basis for humour. Jerry Palmer, for instance, refers to this phenomenon as "the logic of the absurd," arguing that jokes include a dual process: firstly the iteration of the joke involves, "[t]he sudden creation of a discrepancy, or incongruity, in the joke narrative" which disrupts the norm; then, secondly, we are presented with "a bifurcated logical process, which leads the listener to judge that the state of affairs portrayed is simultaneously highly implausible and just a little bit plausible" (96). Incongruous elements need to be configured in a way that makes them credible, then, and the nature of that configuration will depend on the elements in question and the context in which they appear. The uniting of the speaker and the murderer at the end of Kennard's poem creates just such a plausible incongruity: it is incongruous because it unites two morally unsound, violent people in a context associated with love and companionship, but its plausibility is partly due to the expectation created by our understanding of traditional comic plots: the union is typical of estranged characters in classic comedy, and hence *not* absurd in this sense. It is also worth remembering what Kennard said about his work's status as love poetry; he feels that he can make this claim because his poetry references and constitutes reality: "it's just part of the world," he tells us, and as such it "seems silly to divide" his ostensibly postmodern writing, "from love." And of course the apparently incongruous ending *can* be squared with the reader's knowledge of how the world *might* work in reality: the need for companionship is arguably a fundamental one that readers potentially identify with, a fact that enables a partial resolution of the incongruity in this sense too, again rendering it "just a little bit plausible." While the absurdity of their final union makes us

laugh, then, its plausibility and authenticity have the capacity to move us in the way a traditional comic ending might, facilitating a degree of emotional engagement. We could also say that the happy ending asserts the relationship between speaker and murderer as a state of *desirable* order in the otherwise unstable world of the poem: what Stott refers to as a "resolution of troubles;" more specifically, it posits the notion of human bonding as something of worth. The fact that the union takes place between two morally defective characters does little to undermine the perceived significance and value of the union itself: it still signifies as poignant, positive, and plausible (plausibility being a precondition of its comic appeal). The self-conscious humour in this poem allows Kennard to create the conditions for a "new lyricism," then, reclaiming a comic trope – reunion – that gestures toward value in a world of moral uncertainty; it creates a "neo-sentimental aesthetics" in which the "sentimental old moralist" can operate.

Kennard's reference to himself as a "sentimental old moralist" suggests a desire for certainty which is clearly expressed in 'The Murderer.' In order to explore its relationship with humour more fully it will be useful to draw on Gillian Pye's Lacanian reading of humour. Developing some of the ideas that Susan Purdie presented in her 1992 book, *Comedy: the Mastery of Discourse*, Pye, like Palmer, sees incongruity as fundamental to humour, but she is particularly interested in how it relates to the dislocation between the signifier and the signified. She argues that humour often depends on exploiting the plurality of meaning in language, and the lack of connection between words and reality: puns, for instance, utilise the slippage between signifier and signified, as do most verbal jokes. Discussing the function of jokes, Pye says:

> The joker deliberately transgresses the one-to-one relationship of signifier to signified that generally governs signifying processes. He deliberately invokes more than one ‘‘definitionally different’’ signifier or signified in one semantic space. In other words he overloads signifying structures and in so doing draws attention to them. This marking of aberrant usage, the clear indication that the joker knows he is erring is […] absolutely central to the nature of humour. In marking his error, the joker is effectively asserting his knowledge of the ‘‘correct’’ procedures of signification, and thereby his identity as a fully competent ‘‘master of discourse” (56).

Jokers assert the possibility of cohesive meaning by intentionally violating those structures that produce the impression that meaning is possible. In this sense comedy itself is an act of violence, as jokes shatter the comfortable illusion of an unproblematic bond between language and reality. However, such transgressions are signalled as counter to the norm, and in this way jokers unsettle and simultaneously support the illusion of coherence:

> In other words, the comic attention is drawn to the fact that subject identity itself is based on a sleight of hand; on the illusory concept of plenitude […] By touching on psychological incoherence and the randomness of signifying structures, however, the joker is able to mark such incoherence as aberrant, as abnormal. This balancing act, in which the possibility of unified meaning is reasserted, may then be conflated with an (illusory) image of the coherence of self (57).

Jokers expose the lie of signification in order to suggest their control over the signification process, and in turn reinforce their sense of individual wholeness. In a manner of speaking, they do violence to order and coherence, in an attempt to *assert* order and coherence. It is

worth considering this in relation to Kennard's poem, and particularly the speaker's choice of metaphors for "talking about seagulls." As argued earlier, this is a deliberately ridiculous comparison: having him refer to seagulls as "tiny flying cathedrals" is a joke at the speaker's expense, serving to ridicule his pretensions; however it is also a joke about signification and the uncertainty of meaning, which is always a particular issue in literary discourse where ambiguity flourishes. In constructing a context where seagulls are compared to cathedrals it foregrounds the randomness of signification, only to signal this usage as aberrant when we realise it is a joke. The comic inappropriateness of the metaphor posits the speaker (i.e. the butt of the joke) as a fool, but it constructs the poet (the author who essentially makes the joke) as a "master of discourse," simultaneously doing violence to, and re-asserting "the possibility of unified meaning." Pye's Lacanian reading of jokes suggests "that humour usually involves connecting inequitable relationships, whether they are perceived in the world of the joke or in the world it represents, with the fundamentally inequitable situation of subject identity itself" (60). Likewise Kennard's poem acknowledges "psychological incoherence" but at the same time asserts a desire for a coherent identity; and this sits alongside another "inequitable situation," and another desire: while the poem admits the inevitability of "apocalyptic" uncertainty, on the one hand, it simultaneously asserts a desire for value – for moral and emotional engagement - on the other. So a desire for "coherence of self" reflects a desire for value in Kennard's poem, and the ethical striving that David Kennedy sees as indicative of British postmodern poetry is evident in Kennard's 21st century postmodernism. Rather than embracing relativism and uncertainty as Ashbery's does, Kennard's postmodern comedy could be seen as, in Pye's terms, "a strategy to master anxiety" (68), not just over subject identity, but over the moral uncertainty born of the poet's self-confessed status as a "sentimental old moralist" in a postmodern world.

Two years after the publication of *New Relations*, David Kennedy was asked in interview about the poet's "responsibilities" in the modern world, and his response is worth citing by way of a conclusion here:

> I think that one of the responsibilities of the poet is to register our continuing desire for definitive statements and our corresponding awareness of their increasing unlikelihood; and the way our desire for definitive statements is a nostalgia for stability which, in its turn, relates to ideas of order (Kennedy, 'Interview,' 19-20).

Kennedy could be describing Kennard's preoccupations in 'The Murderer' here: as I have hopefully shown, the "desire for definitive statements," the "nostalgia for stability," and "order," all feature in Kennard's writing. They register a need that American postmodernists like Ashbery seemingly do not share: to create poetry that does more than describe "its own purposes;" and while "stability" and "order" are elusive, perhaps to desire them at all implies a laudable reluctance to submit to the "apocalyptic."

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Notes

[i] When I first began to develop an interest in Luke Kennard's writing in 2011, I emailed him a series of questions about his method and purpose in 'The Murderer,' and elsewhere is his work. I am indebted to him for his thoughtful and copious responses.

[ii] So called postmodern comedy has often been criticised in these terms, of course, in work as diverse as *The Simpsons*, and the films of Quentin Tarrantino. Critics of such humour suggest that it precludes the possibility of genuine satire, lending itself to moral detachment, or relativism (see McDonald, 12-15).