

Austin Clarke



Austin Clarke

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# Chapter 1

## Austin Clarke, 1896–1974: Life and Times

Austin Clarke's first book of memoirs, *Twice Round The Black Church* (1962), opens with an intriguing admission: 'For many years I could never hear without a moment of uneasiness, the name of Shakespeare mentioned by anyone'.<sup>1</sup> It is a typical statement: ostensibly confessional, yet in the awkward redundancy of its final three words hinting at the evasion that characterizes all his autobiographical writing. Clarke goes on to explain the source of his unease, a portrait that hung in a disused room of his childhood home in north Dublin. He was told that the rough oil painting, whose eyes seemed to follow the viewer's movements, was of Shakespeare. Fascinated by the bellicose connotations of the name and the optical illusion, he began to play at sneaking glimpses at the frightening object, a game that issued in genuine night terrors and an episode of sleepwalking (*Twice Round*, p.2–3). His analysis of the reminiscence is likewise characteristic:

Children can enact in their little way the primary myths, find for themselves the ancient ritual of fear. So, night after night, my mind was drawn in obedient horror towards that room upstairs. [...] Were it not for the childish alarms which all of us remember so well, we would forget the power of our earliest imaginings, forget those first years when the mind seemed to part so readily from the body [...] It is easy to forget not only the workings of our early imagination but the power of the will when we first discover its use [...] The struggle between my will and my imagination was a mighty one. (*Twice Round*, p.2)

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Clarke, *Twice Round the Black Church: Early Memories of Ireland and England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962; repr. Dublin: Moytura, 1990), p. 1

Myth and ritual, memory and forgetfulness, obedience and will, mind and body, fear and imagination: these, starkly opposed or obliquely paired, are some of Clarke's major preoccupations. The episode of the portrait ends in anticlimax – the poet notes that as an adult, he discovered the perspectival trick that produces the effect and learned of its use by painters of religious iconography: 'Such spiritual exercises were not mine, and I fancy that the lay picture which afflicted me in childhood was but a freakish copy [...]. It gave me a bewildering sense of guiltiness, but that was all.' (*Twice Round*, p.3) Bewildered guilt is a common sensation for the Clarkean speaker, and some of the poet's less successful experiments can be bewildering for the reader too.

*Twice Round The Black Church* and its successor *A Penny in the Clouds* (1968) are sources more frustrating than illuminating for anyone wishing to grasp an outline of Clarke's early life. Their structure is one of free association – for example, the account of the painting and the childish terror it occasioned, which must have taken place in the early 1900s, is immediately followed by one of curfew-breaking during the winter of 1920 – and Clarke offers few specifics by which readers might orient themselves. Owing however to the unavailability of external biographical data,<sup>2</sup> the memoirs assume considerable importance.

Augustine Joseph Clarke was born on 9 May 1896, not in the Mountjoy Street house where 'Shakespeare' hung, but about half a mile west of it, at 83 Manor Street. Dublin was little developed north of the river Liffey before the eighteenth century, but Manor Street along with its continuation Stoneybatter is an old road, having been the main route into central Dublin from the west and north-west; as Clarke writes, 'in ancient times part of the highway from Tara of the Kings' (*Twice Round*, p.15).<sup>3</sup> The neighbourhood retained a rustic character almost into Clarke's lifetime, and even now has an atmosphere distinct from that of surrounding inner suburbs.

The poet's father, Augustine Matthew Clarke, was the son of a farm

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<sup>2</sup> The existing critical books on Clarke offer biographical sketches; Maurice Harmon produced a chronology for the *Irish University Review* shortly before Clarke's death in 1974; it is very substantially drawn from the memoirs. See Maurice Harmon, 'Notes Towards a Biography', *Irish University Review* (Austin Clarke Special Issue) 4:1 (Spring 1974), pp. 13–25. Unpublished sources include the holdings in the National Library of Ireland and in the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Austin, Texas. Mary Shine Thompson has compiled a chronology of the poet's life and work up to 1952 (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University College Dublin, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See also James Collins, *Life in Old Dublin* (Dublin: James Duffy and Co, 1913), pp. 70–81.



labourer from Blessington, Co. Wicklow. The poet knew little of his paternal ancestors and records no contact with members of his father's family, though he spent holidays near their place of origin. Augustine Clarke is described as a 'self-made man' (*Twice Round*, p.64); competent and successful at his trade of plumbing, he ended his working life as superintendent of the waste water department in Dublin Corporation. He married Ellen Browne, the daughter of a skinner from Watling Street in south inner Dublin. The Brownes, until the generation of Ellen's father, were well-to-do, with Protestant and ultimately English antecedents (*Twice Round*, p. 13–14). William Browne lost the family's money, and Ellen grew up in a tenement, denied an education. She understandably resented her father's impoverishment, and her son records an indefinable air of disgrace surrounding his maternal grandfather's visits, which in turn ended because of a disagreement concerning the old man's second marriage (*Twice Round*, p.15–16). Ellen Clarke's experience of poverty fostered in her qualities of delicacy and social aspiration; she was determined her family should prosper, but was scarcely a loving parent. Clarke recognised his mother's qualities in himself, and came to a grudging admiration of the 'obstinacy' that provoked conflict between them, particularly about religious matters (*Twice Round*, p.7). Clarke attributes his dislike of Mariolatry to his difficult relationship with his mother, but it is more likely, as with much that is termed 'anti-clerical' in his work, to be the legacy of her fastidiousness, which in her educated son became distaste for simple-minded and superstitious Catholic piety.

Ellen and Augustine Clarke had 12 children, only four of whom survived childhood. Austin's surviving sisters, Mary Esther (known as Doto), Eileen and Kathleen, were all somewhat older than he; they attended boarding school during his childhood. Doto and Kathleen then trained as primary-school teachers at Carysfort Training College in south Dublin; Eileen entered a Carmelite convent, from which poor health later forced her withdrawal. Clarke records a few memories of his younger brother Louis, who died aged two; but his other siblings are remote if 'constant' presences, 'names [...] set down piously on the fly-leaf of the Douai Bible [...] our little brothers and sisters watching us from Heaven' (*Twice Round*, p.15). The personality that emerges from the memoirs is that of an indulged only son and youngest child of a relatively small family, sheltered, sometimes timid. The extreme nicety of Ellen Clarke's manners, particularly where bodily matters were concerned, meant that 'in comparison with it, the religion of the churches we attended seemed gross. [...] it was at Mass

that I got my earliest intimations of immorality, for the language of religion belonged to franker centuries' (*Twice Round*, p.9). 'Immorality' is a misleading word in this context – Clarke goes on to record his shock at a priest's mention of Matthew 9:20, in which Jesus heals a woman suffering from a menstrual haemorrhage, and his mother's discomfort at the mention of the Virgin's 'womb' in the Hail Mary (*Twice Round*, p.10). It was the clergy, also, who gave Clarke his first intimations of prurience: at his first confession, a priest tried to bully him into an admission of masturbation. Clarke, only seven years old, had no idea what he meant, but the priest persisted until, desperate to escape, the boy owned the 'unknown sin' (*Twice Round*, p.130). This scene of psycho-sexual verbal abuse recurs in a number of Clarke's literary works; his subsequent anxiety about the possibility of inadvertent false confession also constitutes a theme.

Most of Clarke's schooling took place at Belvedere College, to which he was admitted in 1905. He boarded for just over a term at Mungret College, near Limerick, in 1910–11; this excursion introduced him to Sousa marches, the 'verbal music' of poetry (Longfellow's *Hianatha*), and homosexuality (*Twice Round*, pp. 158–162), but ended with a tuberculosis scare that returned him to Dublin and Belvedere. A Jesuit foundation modelled on English public schools, Belvedere is familiar to any reader of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Clarke acknowledges in his memoirs that he can add nothing substantial to Joyce's account of the school 'since little seemed to have changed, except that [...] Mr George Dempsey, the only lay teacher employed, had become white-haired and was eating peppermints to relieve his indigestion.' (*Twice Round*, p. 148) Clarke shared with Joyce and many other lower middle class children educated at fee-paying schools embarrassment at his family's comparative poverty and lack of social finesse. His father's ungrammatical speech and 'easy-going' manner caused him particular unease (*Twice Round*, p. 144–5), but – one episode of adolescent lassitude aside (*Twice Round*, p. 163) – Clarke prospered at school. During his last year at Belvedere, he learned Irish as an extra-curricular subject, and developed the interest in the Irish legends on which he would base his early long poems.

Clarke pursued his passion for Irish in his university career. As a student of Arts at University College Dublin he was taught the subject by the Professor of Modern Irish, founder of the Gaelic League and future Irish president, Douglas Hyde (1860–1949), whose *Love Songs of Connaught* (1893) became one of the young poet's touchstones. He found the lectures of the otherwise little known Professor of Modern English, Robert Donovan, 'Victorian' in their

moralising approach and political Unionism,<sup>4</sup> but became friendly with a junior lecturer in English, Thomas MacDonagh (1872–1916), poet, playwright, critic and revolutionary, whose nationalism and enthusiasm for Irish language revivalism accorded with Clarke’s own. He also found influential companions outside the university. Stephen MacKenna (1872–1935), later to achieve fame as translator of the *Enneads* of Plotinus, was already ‘an almost legendary figure in the literary circles of Dublin’ (*Penny*, p.19), and one whom Clarke considered his literary ‘father’, despite being disconcerted by MacKenna’s eccentricities (*Penny*, p.21). MacKenna arranged for Clarke’s earliest poems to be published, but was less important a mentor than the poet, painter and mystic George William Russell, ‘Æ’ (1867–1935), whose agency secured the publication of *The Vengeance of Fionn* and whose advice partially prompted Clarke’s stylistic renovation in the 1920s. He devotes a chapter of *A Penny in the Clouds* to reminiscences of Russell, though most are inconsequential. During his student years Clarke also met the poets Joseph Campbell (1879–1944) and F. R. Higgins (1896–1941), with both of whom he enjoyed friendships conferring mutual artistic benefit. Politically naïve to the extent that he was ‘unaware of the rise of a wealthy Catholic middle class’, (*Penny*, p.2) Clarke was intrigued by Higgins’ Protestantism and socialism, as well as by his extensive reading, which stimulated their discussions of modern poetry. Clarke’s own initial explorations of the *fin de siècle* and the Celtic Twilight had proved confusing – as he points out in *A Penny in the Clouds*, understanding of Yeats’s poetics required extensive knowledge of ‘English literature’ (p.3). Clarke frequently misunderstands Yeats, but here he astutely suggests the older poet’s great debt to English Romanticism. Poetic drama, however, delighted Clarke from his first visit to the Abbey in 1913, when he saw Augusta Gregory’s *The Gaol Gate* (*Penny*, p.3). Around this time he also discovered the epic poems of Herbert Trench (1865–1923), for which he maintained a staunch enthusiasm, though their influence on his own work is perhaps less thoroughgoing than his partisanship might lead one to expect. The opening passages from Fintan’s narrative (section II of Trench’s *Deirdre Wed*) and of *The Vengeance of Fionn* display superficial stylistic similarities. Trench sets his scene:

O sightless and rare-singing brotherhood!  
It was the night of marriage. Word had sped,

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<sup>4</sup> *A Penny in the Clouds* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, repr. Dublin, Moytura, 1990), p.22

Tokens gone out to every rath and ring  
 And every pasture on the woody knolls  
 Green about Eman, of the slaughter blithe  
 Of sheep and boar, of badger and of stag,  
 Reddening the ways up to the kingly house —  
 Of sheep and goats and of the stintless food  
 That should be poured out to his beggary  
 By Connachar, that all time should remember  
 The night he wed the girl from the elf-mound.<sup>5</sup>

Compare Clarke's:

Upon a stormful nightfall when the plain  
 And mountains darkened and the fiery forge  
 Of sundown under soot-black clouds of rain  
 Burned fiercest, like some angered demiurge  
 Brooding in iron through red-glowing smoke  
 Smeltered; up from the smouldering glooms one came  
 To Almhuin while the great slow raindrops broke,  
 Hot ridden from the westward fogs and flame  
 To Fionn, telling of friendship and of feast  
 Under Coiscorrain after stranger years  
 For him and the Fianna and so ceased.<sup>6</sup>

The younger poet's resort to non-linear narrative, flashback and vision, along with his metaphorical use of meteorological detail, makes for a more arduous if ultimately more rewarding readerly experience. From the outset *The Vengeance of Fionn* exhibits an interest in psychology entirely missing from Trench's no-nonsense story-telling.

Clarke's home life was not as conducive to intellectual and literary exploration. His mother disapproved of his choice of reading matter, going so far as to burn some of his books, mostly volumes of theological speculation and philosophy: Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863), Henry Drummond's *The Ascent of Man* (1894) and Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* (1883) among them (Harmon, 'Notes Towards a Biography', p.15). Clarke read

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Trench, *Deirdre Wed and Other Poems* (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Austin Clarke, *The Vengeance of Fionn* (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., 1917), p. 1

Nietzsche with ‘guilty delight’, but also with enough commitment and penetration to note with indignation Yeats’s publicity-seeking reference to the philosopher at a rally (*Penny*, p.11–13). Clarke completed his B.A. studies in 1915; at MacDonagh’s suggestion, he had already begun to plan an M.A. thesis on the influence of lute music on sixteenth and seventeenth century English lyric. After MacDonagh’s execution in the wake of the Easter Rising of 1916, he changed his topic of inquiry to the drama of John Ford. *A Penny in the Clouds* records confused motives for this decision: both the politically-charged atmosphere of Dublin after the Rising, and a romantic disappointment that left him for ‘several months in a stupor’ seem to have contributed to it: ‘the dumb grief in [Ford’s] poetic tragedies drew me, and the subtle, melancholic lines [...] kept repeating themselves in my mind.’ (*Penny*, p.37) Mental distress prompted artistic and professional reorientation several times in Clarke’s working life – this change of research project seems to be the first (comparatively minor) example of a psychological pattern.

Clarke was in Dublin throughout the Rising, witnessed some of the action, and counted a number of fighters – including, of course, MacDonagh, one of the signatories of the Proclamation of the provisional Republic – among his friends. The Clarke family sheltered and aided the escape to America of one of Augustine Clarke’s colleagues, who had been placed in command of a small force meant to occupy a power station, but did not mobilise (*Penny*, pp.35–6). Clarke’s account of Easter Week is of interest for its civilian viewpoint, describing the restlessness, anxiety, tedium and bathos that characterise non-combatant experience of warfare. But it is impressionistic, even whimsical, as when he records an exchange of fire and movement of some British troops, seen from a deck chair in his family’s front garden, as ‘The Battle of the North Circular Road’ (*Penny*, p.33–4). Readers will find nothing like the detailed witness of James Stephens’ *The Insurrection in Dublin* (1916) in Clarke. The aftermath of the Rising confirmed Clarke’s nationalist sympathies, but also provoked in him an escapist response to political commitment: his early work in particular abounds in characters who fly worldly responsibility for pastoral idyll and picaresque adventure. MacDonagh’s execution had for his student consequences beyond the loss of a friend and advisor. After completing his M.A. thesis, well-received by its examiners (even if its register betrays a superficiality of interest), Clarke made some abortive attempts to find non-academic work, then succeeded to MacDonagh’s lectureship in the English department at UCD. The acceptance of this situation no doubt provoked in Clarke guilt and unease, but the year in which the appointment

was made, 1917, was nonetheless one in which the twenty-one-year-old poet seemed set for professional stability and success.

Clarke wrote *The Vengeance of Fionn* over a period of six or eight weeks in the early spring of 1917. He showed the finished work to Stephen MacKenna, and to Ernest Boyd (1887–1946), an early literary historian of the Revival who was then, as Clarke writes, ‘regarded as the leading Dublin critic’ (*Penny*, p. 51). Boyd recommended he send it to Æ, who was enthusiastic and flattering. Within a few weeks, Æ had arranged for the poem to be published by Maunsel in London, and Clarke became a regular visitor to Æ’s *salon*. At these Sunday ‘evenings’, Clarke made connections and friendships among the Irish literary establishment, meeting writers and scholars, collecting recommendations and advice. He also pursued more ‘elusive’ figures, including James Starkie ‘Seumas O’Sullivan’ (1879–1958), pharmacist, poet and editor of the *Dublin Magazine* (*Penny* p. 68). O’Sullivan became a close friend with whom Clarke visited the pubs of Bohemian Dublin.

*The Vengeance of Fionn* was published to friendly reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement* and by Stephen MacKenna in the Jesuit periodical *Studies*. MacKenna’s review is the hyperbole of a supporter, but it notes the precocious ‘maturity’ of the poem and Clarke’s already palpable pleasure in the ‘weight of syllable.’<sup>7</sup> ‘G.C.’ of the *Irish Times* kitschily remarked: ‘Not since Mr Yeats first put on his singing robes has any Irish poet appeared with such decisive claim to be in the bardic tradition.’<sup>8</sup> A notice by the poet, dramatist and Easter Rising participant Joseph Campbell in *New Ireland* was harsh, condemning the poem for derivativeness, but it prompted a long correspondence on the journal’s letters page, generating publicity that sent the poem into a second edition. Clarke was a friend and admirer of Campbell, whose robust but limpid lyricism can be seen as a positive, and enduring influence on the younger poet: Clarke edited Campbell’s collected *Poems* in 1963.

Clarke, who at this period spent much of his spare time cycling to sites with legendary associations, felt himself imaginatively absorbed in Irish mythology: ‘pagan figures of the heroic age became as real to me as religious figures from my childhood’ (*Penny*, p. 84). Others noticed that his ‘religious’ inclinations made the Yeatsian singing robe at best an approximate fit. Yeats irritated Clarke by suggesting he help found a ‘neo-Catholic school of young

<sup>7</sup> Stephen MacKenna, ‘Some Recent Irish Books’, *Studies* 7: 25 (1918), pp. 179–180.

<sup>8</sup> G. C., ‘A New Irish poet’, *Irish Times* (2 February 1918), p. 9

poets' (*Penny*, p.82); while his former lecturer, the Jesuit George O'Neill, recommended he write on a biblical theme, advice more perceptive in general tenor than happy in result, which was the turgid narrative *The Fires of Baal* (1921). Rather later, Æ suggested that the mythological sagas were not Clarke's poetic vocation, thereby prompting him to the 'Celtic-Romanesque' achievements of the later 1920s.

Half-ironically using the lugubrious vocabulary of Catholic moralism, Clarke writes of his early intoxication by mythology as temptation to 'superstition', adding that 'when temptation took the form of women, my difficulties were increased' (*Penny*, p.84–5). In 1918 he met one woman, Cornelia Cummins, who was to increase his difficulties more profoundly than any other. Cummins, known as Lia, was born in 1889, the daughter of a bank manager from Drogheda, Co. Louth. She had a small private income that allowed her leisure to write execrable poems and fiction, which she occasionally published under the pseudonym Margaret Lyster. Cummins's connections among Dublin's theosophists and occultists have led to her being persistently confused with Geraldine Cummins, the novelist and medium. She appears in Clarke's memoirs as an ethereal, vague presence, pale-faced and with immensely long dark hair, who affected a pose of mystery and sophistication: 'She had spent some years in Vienna, but I knew little of her past, except from one of her poems in which she hinted that an Austrian army officer had committed suicide because of her.' Even Clarke, naïve as he was, suspected this was a 'romantic wish' (*Penny*, p.44). At first she resisted the poet's overtures, but by the early months of 1919 he was visiting her regularly.

Given that Clarke had once before been reduced to 'stupor' by difficulties in a love affair, it is reasonable to assume that initial rebuffs by Cummins depressed him, and even after the establishment of their relationship she often seemed to him emotionally distant and secretive (*Penny*, p.44). Perhaps more catastrophic to Clarke's mental health, however, was the unexpected death of his father in November 1918. The mixture of affection and contempt Clarke felt for his open-hearted, unpretentious father, given the young man's propensity for guilt, makes it unlikely that he coped well with the bereavement. His subsequent depression occasioned near-catatonic lethargy, amnesia and loss of appetite. At first his family attempted to treat him at home, and in January and February 1919 he visited George Sigerson for electric shock therapy. The polymathic Sigerson (1836–1925) was even then better known for his achievements as a scholar and translator of Gaelic literature (his *Bards*

of *the Gael and Gall* appeared in the first of many editions in 1897) than for his medical work, political activism and career as an academic zoologist and botanist (*Penny*, p.42). He discussed the forms and prosody of classical Irish poetry with his depressed patient, but the neurological treatment failed. ‘Dangerously ill in body and mind’ (*Penny*, p.43), Clarke entered St Patrick’s Hospital, the Dublin institution for the care of the mentally ill founded in the eighteenth century by Jonathan Swift’s legacy.

Clarke’s published memoirs allude to his mental illness, but do not mention his hospitalisation. The main resource for this period of his biography is a substantial autobiographical fragment entitled ‘The House of Terror’, written in 1920 shortly after the poet’s release.<sup>9</sup> He seems to have used ‘The House of Terror’ during the composition in the 1960s of *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, a long poem about his stay in St Patrick’s. The early prose memoir reveals that many details of that poem – for example, the mythopoeic status afforded hospital gates and gardens – were evident in Clarke’s earliest reflections upon his experience. The treatment he received was crude and rough, though considering the conditions that obtained in all but the most enlightened facilities at this time, not exceptionally so. His anorexia caused him to be force-fed; he was strait-jacketed and spent periods in solitary confinement, once in a padded cell. Physical abuse of inmates by warders seems to have been ignored if not officially tolerated; both ‘The House of Terror’ and *Mnemosyne* describe a porter striking patients with a bunch of keys for soiling their bedclothes: ‘I was nothing more than an animal, living in perpetual terror of the nightmen, great men chosen for their strength, terrible as executioners, yet as later I knew them kindly good-hearted fellow, [*sic*] the argument of blows seems necessary. [*sic*] At night, being controless [*sic*] of the kidneys, the débâcle of the body, I was often summoned up by been [*sic*] flicked on the bare toes by the wardless [*sic*] steel keys.’<sup>10</sup> Despite Clarke’s later recognition of the night-warders’ capacity for good-nature, the neologistic, ungrammatical prose registers continued fear and trauma.

Outside the asylum Gate was a country in increasingly violent upheaval. Clarke writes of his hallucinatory identification with a Republican guerrilla in *Twice Round* (p.7) and *Mnemosyne*,<sup>11</sup> but he is largely silent about the political

<sup>9</sup> Part of the text was published as ‘The Gate (from *The House of Terror*)’, in *The Prison of His Days: A Miscellany for Nelson Mandela, on his 70th Birthday*, ed. W. J. McCormack (Gigginstown: Lilliput, 1988), pp. 72–5.

<sup>10</sup> ‘The House of Terror,’ Austin Clarke Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 38,701/7, p.29.

<sup>11</sup> Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p.332



and military activity of that period. Most of his direct reminiscences of the War of Independence refer to the Black and Tans and can thus be dated to the second half of 1920 and 1921. He was harassed several times, never coming to any harm, though *A Penny in the Clouds* recalls one near-disaster involving a pistol bullet that the poet had obtained when ‘stirred by patriotic impulse’ (pp. 45–6). Clarke frequently attests to an ardent nationalism which was without doubt sincere, but his early work tends to resist or deflect politics. The ‘literalism’ Harmon identifies – ‘he did not trust the power of imagination to construct a world’<sup>12</sup> – is evident in his lack of political vision, though the reader might feel ‘literalism’ is the wrong word. His ‘indoctrination’ rendered objective analysis of politics and history difficult: ‘certain names and words I cannot hear without an involuntary shudder: Henry VIII, Darwin, evolution. Socialism, also, is a word which almost makes me murmur a protective aspiration despite my interest in Irish reform’ (*Twice Round*, p. 170). Most of Clarke’s writing is about Ireland, but it contrives to suggest that the country is almost anything but a polity: it is a mood, an hallucination, and – when the poet is in poor humour – a set of hypocritical moral postures. One feels that Clarke would be sympathetic to Declan Kiberd’s celebrated suggestion that Ireland is primarily a psychological formation, but such an insight is nearly useless as a starting-point for *engagé* poetry.<sup>13</sup> It can only helplessly reflect the mystified, mythicised condition into which an independent Ireland betrayed itself by placing power in the hands of those who murmured prophylactic prayers at the mention of the Reformation or the welfare state.

Clarke also attributed his mental illness to Catholic indoctrination – in this case the Church’s teaching on sexuality: ‘there is no cure for the folly of youth or the dire consequences of overindulgence in continence.’ (*Penny*, p. 43). On the last day of 1920 he sought to obviate indulgence in continence by marrying Lia Cummins. The couple intended to keep their marriage a secret, but the registry office ceremony they chose involved the publication of banns, and ‘in a few days anxious clergymen were hurrying to the flat in which Margaret was living’ (*Twice Round*, p. 88). The marriage lasted ten days. *Twice Round* calls it ‘only a marriage in name’ (p. 88); in *A Penny in the Clouds*, however, Clarke comments that ‘there was no chance of a nullity suit’

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Harmon, *Austin Clarke: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound), p. 252.

<sup>13</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995, repr. 1996), pp. 29–32 and *passim*.

(p. 115), which suggests that the earlier remark does not necessarily indicate non-consummation.

The short-lived marital adventure had extensive consequences. Clarke's contract with UCD was terminated at the close of the academic year in 1921, a circumstance the poet attributed to ecclesiastical disapproval of his civil marriage. It is likely also that his ability to perform his duties was affected by his illness. *The Fires of Baal* was published in March of that year, *The Sword of the West* in December. Neither was a critical success. *The Vengeance of Fionn* had been overpraised; the critical reaction against the subsequent narrative works bewildered their author, but he recognised its justice when even his loyal supporter Æ told him his 'technique was going to pieces'.<sup>14</sup>

Later in 1921, Clarke left Ireland to seek employment as a literary journalist in London. Despite initial mishaps owing to his naïveté, he obtained reviewing work and began to make acquaintances in literary circles. These encounters are detailed exhaustively and sometimes eccentrically in *A Penny in the Clouds*. His reviews appeared in the *TLS*, the *Nation*, the *Spectator* and the *New Statesman*; in the later 1920s he worked in an editorial capacity for *T.P.'s Weekly*, the paper owned by the journalist and parliamentarian T.P. O'Connor, and the *Argosy*, a periodical which published popular fiction. In the 1930s he also wrote for the *Observer* and *London Mercury*. He spent most of the next 16 years, until 1937, in southern England, living first in London, and then in St Albans in Hertfordshire. In 1923 he travelled both to Florence, to meet Herbert Trench, and to Paris, where he met Joyce. He returned frequently to Ireland, staying with family or friends and touring the countryside. Explorations of the western counties and islands inform his first substantially lyrical collection, *The Cattle-drive in Connaught* (1925); a particular journey to Co. Clare in 1924 inspired the medievalism of *Pilgrimage and Other Poems* (1929). In their oblique way, these collections reflect developments in Ireland during the 1920s. The most fully-achieved lyric of the first, 'The Lost Heifer', is an allegorical response to the disillusionment engendered by the bloody Civil War of 1922–1923, representing the beloved Dark Cow of Jacobite tradition lost in error ('she wandered again') in a landscape growing bleaker and more inhospitable (*Collected*, p. 120). Maurice Harmon draws attention to the poem's allusions to Francis Ledwidge's elegy for Thomas MacDonagh, commenting, 'Ledwidge writes an elegy for a lost patriot whose cause lives

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<sup>14</sup> 'Poetry and Contemporary Facts' [rev. of poems by Donagh MacDonagh], *The Irish Times* (19 April 1941), p.3.

on, Clarke writes an elegy for a lost ideal.' (Harmon, p.44) *Pilgrimage* is an accomplished attempt to find a symbolic mode adequate to the hopes and disappointments attendant on the new Free State, using early medieval Ireland as a model of a literate, enlightened Christian culture while suggesting the repressive dangers posed by its asceticism and misogyny. But this is largely a poetry of reaction and representation, not of political engagement. Clarke's inactive support for the Republican cause in the Civil War is similarly reflexive. He tended to make political judgements on irrational, associative and emotional grounds and held positions without exploring their origins or consequences.

In the mid-1920s Clarke began to expand his generic range. His reading of medieval Irish prose issued in a lively farce, *The Son of Learning*, which was rejected by Yeats for the Abbey Theatre but received a successful production in Cambridge in 1927 and a revival at the Gate Theatre as *The Hunger Demon* in 1930. That year also saw the publication of a serious one-act play, *The Flame*, which was performed in Edinburgh in 1932 and at the British Drama League Festival in London in 1936. Clarke's 1932 novel *The Bright Temptation*, a picaresque historical romance, was banned in Ireland, though not before the first run had sold out. The same official fate befell *The Singing-Men at Cashel* (1936), while this second novel's solemn subject matter and confused plotting denied it both commercial and critical success. Though Clarke was never financially secure, his professional reputation grew steadily. He became a member of the newly-established Irish Academy of Letters in 1932; he exercised his interest in verse speaking as a judge for the Oxford Festival of Spoken Poetry between 1933 and 1937; his poetic work was considered significant enough to warrant a *Collected Poems*, published on his fortieth birthday in 1936, the last of these achievements marred somewhat by Yeats's omission of his work from the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in the same year.

The injustice of Yeats's treatment of Clarke has perhaps been exaggerated by critics sympathetic to the younger poet. Their misunderstanding was mutual – sect, class and politics all militated against a supportive friendship – and neither emerges well from his behaviour towards the other: Yeats's condescending certainty that he was dealing with a creature of his own 'propaganda' provoked in Clarke a vulgarity that seems truculent and deliberate.<sup>15</sup> But the hierarchies of poetic reputation are no more democratic

<sup>15</sup> Yeats, writing to Olivia Shakespear in 1932, praised *The Bright Temptation* for its 'charming [...] defiance of the censorship and its ideals', then spoiled the generous effect by adding, 'Read it and tell me should I make him an Academician. I find it very difficult

than Yeats himself. The latter's dismissal of Clarke is a small lapse of judgement (among many larger ones) by a major poet, while Clarke's unwillingness to accommodate or acknowledge Yeats disfigures what is ultimately a minor though by no means insignificant achievement. In the mid-1930s Clarke was approached to write a biography of Yeats, but he proved uncooperative in correspondence and rather factitiously offended the older man during an interview at the Savile Club when he clumsily raised the subject of Maud Gonne (*Penny*, p.206). The two poets' 'enmity'<sup>16</sup> suggests that the biographical project was incapable of completion, despite the perverse fascination to be derived from imagining such a book.

During his years of voluntary exile, Clarke achieved a measure of liberation from the sexual guilt of his adolescence and young manhood, though he still suffered from depression. On his journeys to the west of Ireland he found that the social customs of rural working people differed from those of lower middle-class Dublin; in Florence and London he had amorous affairs. In 1926 Clarke took legal action in London to obtain a divorce from Cummins – the details are sparse, but the parties clearly disagreed about the validity of the marriage: 'Margaret was unwilling to release me', he claims in *A Penny in the Clouds* (p.115). His case came before Lord Merrivale, whom he erroneously believed to have been 'a high official in Dublin Castle during the Black-and-Tan regime' (Merrivale was Chief Secretary for Ireland, but resigned in May 1918). It failed; 'the Judge looked down at me with distaste from the bench and I knew my case was lost' (*Penny*, p.115). If anti-Irish prejudice played a part in the failure of Clarke's action, however, it was probably on the grounds – apparently exploited by Cummins's lawyer (*Penny*, p.115) – that his residency in England was suspected of being a convenience.

Ten years after his first marriage, Clarke at last found domestic stability with Nora Walker, whom he met during a visit to Dublin in 1930. Born in 1900, she was the daughter of Frederick Walker, a journalist, and Ann ('Nannie') Harris. Her maternal grandfather was Matthew Harris, nationalist activist and Irish Parliamentary Party MP for Galway East until his death in 1890, and Nora maintained her family's traditionally republican politics. She was educated and intelligent, unambitious on her own account, but supportive of Clarke's work. In 1932 the poet moved from London to Hertfordshire with Nora and their baby son Donald; their younger sons Aidan and Robert

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to see with impartial eyes these Irish writers who are as it were part of my propaganda' (*The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allen Wade (London: Rupert Hart Davies, 1954), p.795.

<sup>16</sup> Clarke's word, from 'The Abbey Theatre Fire', *Collected*, pp. 253–5, at p.255.

Dardis were born in 1936 and 1939 respectively. The couple married in January 1945, after Lia Cummins' death in 1943.

Despite the unpropitious circumstances of his departure and his feelings of isolation and rejection by Ireland, Clarke's English years were successful in terms of literary production and reputation. It could be argued (somewhat contentiously) that his most achieved poetic and dramatic work dates from that period – though certainly more prolific and, arguably, more open to experiment in his later career, he was never again to produce as consistent a collection as *Pilgrimage and Other Poems*, nor as entertaining a play as *The Son of Learning*, nor as exquisite a lyric as 'The Planter's Daughter'. Clarke was nostalgic for Ireland, but like Guinness, it was bad for him (*Collected*, pp. 281–284). His permanent return to Ireland in 1937 lost him a potential audience, which might have been substantial and international had he developed the strengths suggested by his best work. Irish isolationism and introspection in the mid-twentieth-century was extreme, a challenge to the talents of more imaginative and robust artistic personalities than Clarke, who hastened into the role of local complainer. He was – as far as temperament and circumstances allowed – a dissident, but too vulnerable to establish himself as a truly oppositional figure in a society characterised by political conservatism and cultural parochialism. The society to which Clarke returned, as Terence Brown writes in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, was developing into 'a stable, deeply conservative parliamentary democracy, where change, if it was to occur, would occur slowly within the framework that the Constitution provided', a country in which 'even [...] outspoken critics, young short-story writers and novelists who experienced a deep post-revolutionary disillusionment, felt little need for literary experiment, preferring to explore the new Irish world through [...] traditional forms'.<sup>17</sup> Brown cites as exemplary of Dublin's isolation from literary innovation the *Dublin Magazine*, edited by Clarke's friend Seumas O'Sullivan: 'notable for its sense of an insecure, self-regarding coterie remembering past glories and its academic tone' and concludes that for writers, 'Once more Dublin was a place to leave'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–1985* (London: Fontana, 1985), pp. 166–7.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, p. 167. Patrick Crotty, conversely, has drawn attention to the strong interest of the *Dublin Magazine* in contemporary developments in poetry beyond Ireland, particularly in Scotland and Wales, and to its key role in nurturing the talent of Wales's most eminent late twentieth century poet R.S. Thomas (1913–2000). See Crotty, 'The Irish Renaissance, 1890–1940: poetry in English', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge

When so many were leaving, why did Clarke come back? In 1923, he had been able to refuse his mother's offer of accommodation and a small allowance, should he return to pursue his career in Dublin. Though he appreciated her move to 'reconciliation' after his first marriage, which scandalised her because of its secular nature and precipitous disintegration, the conditions of acceptance – 'celibacy', daily proximity to his mother's strong 'will' – were too restrictive (*Twice Round*, p. 93). Like many women of her generation, Ellen Clarke took widowhood as an opportunity to exercise the business sense developed over many years' struggle to better the condition of a lower-middle-class family. She now proposed to oversee the purchase of a house for her son and his family, and eventually selected Bridge House in Templeogue. The house was bought in her name; Clarke had only a life interest in it. Persistent feelings of impermanence attended Clarke's residence in a house that he did not own and could not inherit, since it had been willed by his mother to a Catholic missionary society. Twenty years after he moved in, and thirteen after his mother's death, he wrote of being 'ready to flit [...] not at ease' ('Usufruct', *Collected*, p. 209). But Bridge House remained his home until his death in 1974. A group of Clarke's friends and admirers subsequently suggested the property be purchased and converted into a reading room housing the poet's library, but their campaign failed and Bridge House was eventually demolished to make way for a wider, more modern bridge over the river Dodder in 1984.

Clarke had never broken his connections with Dublin's literary life, and he settled into a routine of reviewing for the British and Irish press (until the outbreak of war, he made quarterly trips to London to collect his review copies; thereafter his lifeline was the literary pages of the *Irish Times*), broadcasting a poetry programme for Radio Éireann, working for the Irish branch of the international writers' organisation P.E.N. and holding a regular Sunday evening *salon*. But the emotional cost of his repatriation was great and his mental health fragile during the late 1930s. In 1938 he published *Night and Morning*, a volume suggestive of his struggles with authority and conscience at this period. Although the strikingly short collection – scarcely more than a pamphlet – aspires to a kind of grandeur of abjection, its most successful poems are its least confessionally daring. 'Penal Law' is notable for its semantic richness and overflow, 'Martha Blake' for its compassionate insight, and,

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University Press, 2006), 2 Vols., Vol. 2, pp. 50–112, pp. 77–8. See also R. S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, translated from the Welsh with an introduction and notes by Jason Walford Davies (London: J. M. Dent, 1997), p. 45.

above all, 'The Straying Student' for lyricism. All three poems can be read as varying oblique protests against the oppression of sexuality by clerisy. 'Summer Lightning', which Clarke later incorporated in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* and which remains rather fragmentary in this first version, was his most candid poem to date about his mental illness.

1938 also saw the publication of a novel in which Clarke appears in hurtful caricature: Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*. Beckett's characterisation of Austin Ticklepenny, 'pot-poet' and mental hospital warder falls some way short of libel, if only by a series of minute deflections.<sup>19</sup> (Clarke, having already been involved in litigation against the estate of Arnold Bennett in 1934, wisely decided not to sue.) Beckett seems to have known a few of the details of Clarke's illness, since Ticklepenny in his capacity as a nurse in the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat is involved in force-feeding patients and cleaning their cells – starvation and incontinence would be crucial motifs in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*. A little later in the novel, Ticklepenny compares Murphy to a catatonic patient named Clarke, and the orderly himself is prone to fits of abstraction which parody Clarke's 'visional' states. Other apparent anticipations of Clarke's 1966 poetic sequence – Ticklepenny's garter's evocation of Clarke's metaphor for the mind, and leering references to masturbation – may be coincidental. W. J. McCormack, in his essay 'Austin Clarke: The Poet as Scapegoat of Modernism', attempts a reconstruction of the process by which Beckett's disdain for literary antiquarianism and apparent personal antipathy to Clarke came to be embodied in the grotesque sot Ticklepenny. (McCormack's essay contains factual inaccuracies, and sometimes loses sight of the literary nature of its subject matter.) The facetious comedy of Beckett's early *roman-à-clef* may not be to everyone's taste, but it is generically characteristic rather than indicative of pathology or an unspoken political programme. The caricature nonetheless raises pertinent questions about Clarke's literary-historical profile.

Beckett's hostility to Clarke first became apparent in a brief survey, 'Recent Irish Poetry', published in the *Bookman*, in 1934. The essay characterises the majority of Beckett's Irish contemporaries as 'antiquarians delivering with altitudinous complacency the Ossianic goods', 'twilighters' in a 'flight from self-awareness'.<sup>20</sup> Its tone is in some ways similar to that of *Murphy*:

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Routledge, 1938, repr. London: Picador, 1973), pp. 51–6, at p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry', *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), pp. 70–6, at pp. 70–1.

arch, self-conscious, deliberately awkward. Beckett in all likelihood intended the piece as a polemic against a poetic establishment he viewed, with some justification, as stuffily preoccupied with the Gaelic past to the exclusion of developments in contemporary life and literature. Though the piece's triumphant pessimism and proud assertions of ignorance make it of dubious value as literary criticism and near-worthless as scholarship, these deficiencies have not prevented its subsequent elevation to a 'watershed for 1930s poetic modernism'<sup>21</sup> or the 'launch' of a 'literary movement'.<sup>22</sup> Beckett dispatches Clarke in a few lofty sentences:

Mr Austin Clarke, having declared himself, in his 'Cattle-drive in Connaught' (1925) a follower of 'that most famous juggler, Mannanaun', continues in 'The Pilgrimage' (1929) to display the 'trick of tongue or two' and remove, by means of ingenious metrical operations, 'the clapper from the bell of rhyme'. The fully licensed stock-in-trade from Aisling to Red Branch Bundling, is his to command. Here the need for formal justifications, more acute in Mr Clarke than in Mr Higgins, serves to screen the deeper need that must not be avowed. (Beckett, pp. 72-3)

Here, innuendo fails to screen inattention to the radical changes Clarke made to his technique and subject matter in *Pilgrimage*. The reader might suspect that Beckett cared to know little more of the collection than its note about assonance 'taking the clapper from the bell of rhyme'; that he parodies the same sentence in *Murphy* rather suggests its currency as a catchphrase.<sup>23</sup> But Beckett's implication that both Clarke's carnivalesque pose as a votary of Mannanaun and his explanation of assonantal effects are ponderously handled is justifiable, and he is right to find sexuality a troubling element in Clarke's poetry. Ticklepenny represents a deeply unsympathetic extension of the same insight. 'Recent Irish Poetry', with its division of Beckett's contemporaries into 'twilighters' and 'modernists', anticipates some of the impatience with antiquarianism and nationalism that characterised literary discourse in the 1940s and after, though rather than recommend as Beckett

<sup>21</sup> John Goodby, "'Current, historical, mythical or spook?": Irish modernist and experimental poetry', *Angel Exhaust / Siúitear Na n-Aingeal*, 17, ed. Maurice Scully and John Goodby (Spring 1999), pp. 51–60, at p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> David Wheatley, 'Irish poetry into the twenty-first century', *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 250–67, at p. 250.

<sup>23</sup> It appears in a passage unrelated to Ticklepenny.



does poetic investigation of subjectivity, much of this commentary is content with realism as a corrective.

*Night and Morning* represents, if not always self-awareness, then as much agonised self-consciousness as a booklet of eleven lyrics might be expected to bear. After its publication, Clarke directed most of his poetic energies towards the theatre for a period of nearly two decades. In 1940, with Robert Farren (1909–85), he founded the Dublin Verse-Speaking Society, and in 1944 the Lyric Theatre Company (in practice, these were run as a single organisation). Farren, a poet, radio broadcaster and literary critic, espoused the ‘Gaelic mode’ in a more doctrinaire and mechanical fashion than Clarke: he appears caricatured, not altogether inaccurately, as ‘Paddy Frog’ in Patrick Kavanagh’s doggerel satire ‘The Paddiad’, pompous and discriminating absurdly over matters of precise local colour.<sup>24</sup> Both Farren and Clarke were excited by the growing popularity of poetic drama in the 1940s; if their enthusiasm now seems quaint, and its associated plays all but unperformable, it is worth noting that drama by amateur and semi-professional small companies was one of the few signs of Irish cultural energy in the bleak climate of the ‘Emergency’. The Dublin Verse Speaking Society made its first broadcast on Radio Éireann in the year of its foundation and the following year began a partnership with the Abbey Theatre, producing a biannual programme of Revivalist and contemporary verse drama, which continued until a fire in 1951 destroyed the Abbey building. Efforts such as those of the Lyric Theatre company to revive and renovate a Yeatsian tradition of non-naturalistic theatre offered a partially successful corrective to the artistic decline of the Abbey Theatre into vulgar formula. Clarke used literary journalism and radio broadcasts to educate his audience in the conventions of verse-speaking and drama; Radio Éireann also broadcast most of his plays from this period. Modern verse drama has proved itself better suited to radio than any other medium; the best of Clarke’s 1940s plays, *As The Crow Flies*, was written ‘for the air’. It does not quite achieve the standard for vividness set by such contemporary work as Louis MacNeice’s *The Dark Tower* (1942) or Auden’s 1930s radio plays, let alone the brilliance of Dylan Thomas, but its appeal remains comprehensible where Clarke’s Pierrot sketches and farces, for example, have little claim on the attention of a twenty-first-century audience.

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<sup>24</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, ‘The Paddiad’, *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 150–6, at pp. 153–4.

During the late 1940s Clarke worked on two novels, another romance of early medieval Ireland, *The Sun Dances at Easter* (1952), and a work set in post-Independence Dublin, *The Lattice*. *The Sun Dances at Easter* is his most coherent prose fiction; though its winsome tone can sometimes cloy, it is learned as well as entertaining in its delineation of the relationship between Christian and pagan legend. Like Clarke's other novels, it was banned in Ireland, and as so often, the reader of the twenty-first century struggles to imagine what could have attracted the censors' disapproval: its parodies of the paternalistic sermons of the notoriously conservative Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid (1895–1973) and its benign attitude towards a sexual relationship between a married woman and a clerical student seem likely candidates.

*The Lattice* remained unfinished; twelve of a planned twenty chapters survive among the Clarke papers in the National Library of Ireland. Its matter is literally confessional – the title refers to the grille separating priest and penitent – and extensively autobiographical. One of the main characters is named Maurice Devane – the name that Clarke sometimes used in newspaper correspondence and would employ in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* – while a chapter describing the Dublin custom of visiting seven churches or chapels on the Thursday before Easter is reproduced with hardly a change in *Twice Round the Black Church*. It is difficult, however, to lament the novel's lack of completion: the last thing Irish literature needed at mid-century was another realist novel about the deleterious effects of theocracy on young minds. Owing to Clarke's habit of recycling material that passionately exercised or affected him, anything of worth in it can be found also in his published work. The fragmentary manuscript nevertheless demonstrates the extent to which his emotional and creative life – more than a decade after the publication of *Night and Morning*, and towards the end of his period of lyric 'silence' – was positively sustained by theological and even dogmatic concerns.

If Clarke found himself unable to complete a prose work set in modern Ireland, by the early 1950s he was writing poems that engage directly with contemporary concerns. The extent to which the three short collections of 'Poems and Satires' published under the poet's own Bridge Press imprint between 1955 and 1960 mark a break with his earlier matter and style can be exaggerated. After all, Clarke's need to comment on twentieth-century Ireland underlay his deployment of the country's medieval history as early as *The Cattle-drive in Connought*, while the clotted syntax of *Night and Morning* anticipates the movement of much his work after 1955. The propensity to

pursue wordplay at the expense of figural logic is equally evident, for example, in these passages from 'Tenebrae' (1938) and 'The Hippophagi' (1960):

I hammer on that common door  
Too frantic in my superstition,  
Transfix with nails that I have broken,  
The angry notice of the mind. (*Collected*, p.183)

Up-to-date infant, rubbered, wheeled out,  
I kicked up heels, soon took to them,  
Learned the first premise of a race  
Now lost in space. I was immortal,  
Yea so important that monks pursued me,  
Similitudes of bygone ages. (*Collected*, p.233)

The later poems are frequently topical and rarely less than partisan. Sometimes powerfully humane, their emotive appeals can also seem disproportionate and unreasoned. Clarke's anger at executions of members of the IRA during the 1930s and 1940s, expressed for example in 'The Last Republicans' (*Collected*, p.260), seems rather to result from a sense that the Free State had betrayed former comrades than from any principled objection to capital punishment or even from an irredentist republicanism of his own; nowhere does he mention the thoroughgoing corruption of the IRA's remnants, nor their sympathy with Nazism. Clarke's critics have been slow to remark his naïveté on such questions, hampered perhaps by his reputation as a champion of liberalism. W.J. McCormack draws attention to some of the less amenable aspects of Clarke's politics before himself succumbing to sentimentality, arguing that 'The Last Republicans' upholds (because the members of the IRA are in more need of forgiveness than most) the 'universalist eschatology made explicit in the final lines of "A Sermon on Swift", where Jove's condemnation of all mankind is followed by his Jovial forgiveness of all'.<sup>25</sup>

The 'Poems and Satires' appeared at a time of extensive and irrevocable but slow change in Irish society. The most substantial alterations were economic, though adjustment away from protectionism and an ideal of self-sufficiency did not fully get underway until the end of the 1950s.

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<sup>25</sup> Austin Clarke, *Selected Poems*, ed. W. J. McCormack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p.17.

Growth remained low and emigration high until the implementation of the Programme for Economic Development under the Fianna Fáil administration headed by Éamon de Valera's successor Seán Lemass. Social policy lagged behind even this leisurely rate of change. Moves towards welfare provision during the 1950s, for example, were stifled by a culture of legislative conservatism; the Irish education and health systems largely retained forms established before independence. A scheme providing free medical care for children under 16 and pregnant women, proposed by the minister Noel Browne to a coalition government in 1950, and rejected once the opposition of the Catholic Church and some medical professionals became apparent, eventually caused the fall of that inter-party government in 1951. Although the failure of the 'Mother and Child' scheme was perhaps attributable as much to conflict between Browne and his colleagues in the inter-party government as to ideology, the controversy became emblematic of the state's lack of power in matters of public welfare relative to the powers assumed by the Church. In 1954, the Roman Catholic 'Marian year', Clarke reflected on the hypocritical coincidence of Mariolatry with absence of care for mothers and infants, but also on the amnesiac futility of political life: a limited version of Browne's bill had been enacted, with some self-congratulation, by the succeeding Fianna Fáil government. 'Mother and Child' (*Collected*, p.202), despite its mood of retrospection, is one of the more up-to-date of Clarke's satirical offerings in *Ancient Lights* (1955). Others include a squib on the Ecumenical Congress of 1932, and an elegy for the trade unionist James Larkin (1876–1947). The apparent generic distinction between 'poems' and 'satires' in this and the two subsequent 'series', *Too Great a Vine* (1957) and *The Hippophagi* (1960), should not detain the reader. Most of the poems contain elements of lyric and satire; moreover, a new mood of autobiographical candour, and a willingness to link personal material to opinion and protest become evident in these publications.

Clarke emerges from his topical poems as a social liberal with little interest in economics or party politics, at odds with a culture of public life that made much of these while holding to a zealous and self-righteous conservatism in matters pertaining to sexual morality, artistic freedom and care for the vulnerable. His views were shared by a younger generation of writers, to whom he became a moral authority, if less often an artistic influence. Clarke's poetic procedures are not conducive to rewarding imitation. (He described them to Robert Frost, in a perhaps over-quoted anecdote, in terms of penance and escapology: 'I load myself with chains and try to get out

of them<sup>26</sup>). Traces of Clarke's practice nonetheless appear in unexpected locations, and tributes in more predictable ones. John Montague co-edited a *Festschrift* pamphlet for Clarke in 1966<sup>27</sup>; Thomas Kinsella composed a recognisable sketch in 'Thinking of Mr D.'<sup>28</sup>; more fugitive but also perhaps of more lasting interest is the Clarkean note sounded in the muted but sustained assonances of Seamus Heaney's 'Gifts of Rain'.<sup>29</sup>

Listeners often remember with affection Clarke's regular Radio Éireann programmes, which for many offered a welcome introduction and guide to modern poetry, though surviving recordings serve mainly to emphasise changes in the norms of broadcast manner since they were made. Denis Donoghue's assessment is unforgiving: 'Clarke's sepulchral manner was tedious, and gave people the impression that poetry, high-mindedness and low spirits were connected somehow by nature.'<sup>30</sup> The 1960s marked a growth in Clarke's public profile, beginning with the publication of *Later Poems* by Dolmen Press in 1961. Recognition in Ireland and financial support largely from British and American sources led to increased productivity and confidence, but also to a relaxation in quality: the lyric collections of this period are bloated by slack verse. Despite relatively precarious physical health after heart attacks in 1956 and 1958, Clarke pursued the life of an active member of the literary establishment more assiduously in the 1960s than before: travelling in Europe and America, reviewing regularly for newspapers and journals, lecturing at UCD, attending and contributing to commemorative events.

*Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, the poem for which Clarke is best remembered by an international readership, appeared in 1966. The resonant dates of the poem's setting and publication – Maurice Devane is committed to hospital as hostilities begin in the War of Independence, while 1966 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising – prompt speculation on it as political commentary. But *Mnemosyne* deflects such a reading even where it seems irresistible; passages such as Maurice's delusional identification with a Republican

<sup>26</sup> *Collected*, p. 541

<sup>27</sup> Liam Miller and John Montague (eds), *A Tribute to Austin Clarke on his Seventieth Birthday* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1966).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *Collected Poems 1956–2001* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Gifts of Rain', *Wintering Out* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), pp. 23–5, at p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Denis Donoghue, 'Austin Clarke', *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, repr 1992), pp. 242–52, at p. 245.

fighter, or his force-feeding after a long period of anorexia, serve ultimately to emphasise his remoteness from activism. Nor can his provisional and uncertain recovery be seen as an allegory for the establishment of new politics: Clarke refuses to tinker with autobiography to nationalist ends. In its determination to eschew politics, *Mnemosyne* invites comparison with another poem of similar length, and similar exemplary status in Irish literary history: Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1942). But Kavanagh's poem is more thoroughgoing in its occlusion of recent history even than *Mnemosyne*. Clarke deflects and dodges whereas Kavanagh audaciously ignores. Moreover, *The Great Hunger* is Kavanagh's supreme achievement, and one of the most notable of twentieth-century Irish poems. Its structure, drawn from documentary film-making, is genuinely innovative, while its flexible vernacular forms a new, liberating kind of Hiberno-English poetic speech, riposte and alternative to Yeatsian high talk. For all the power of its most disconsolate passages, *Mnemosyne* seems something of a failed experiment – its structural incoherence and tonal instability might be said to enact resistance to authoritarianism, but they are incapable of suggesting a more humane or flexible mode of communicating experience.

Such a mode is, however, supplied by the late narrative *Tiresias* (1971). Clarke writes in a note that he intended the poem as a corrective to the prophet's appropriation as a glum avatar of Eliotian disgust for the body; witty and erotic, Clarke's poem is almost inevitably, though perhaps mistakenly, read as a belated release from the sexual inhibitions that troubled the poet throughout his life. None of his other late poems of sexuality and the body is as successful; the most interesting of them, 'The Healing of Mis', which describes a mythological figure's recovery from madness through erotic experience, falters as do the more explicitly autobiographical works through the poet's reluctance to shape its materials towards artistic ends. Clarke's late re-engagement with longer forms also included revision of his early poems, many of which attain enhanced readability in *Collected Poems* (1974), a volume Clarke had just completed work on at the time of his death from prostate cancer in March 1974.

Publications in the years immediately following Clarke's death suggest his impact on a succeeding generation: the *Irish University Review and Poetry Ireland Review* brought out special issues on his work in 1974 and 1981 respectively. A *Selected Poems* edited by Thomas Kinsella was produced by Dolmen in association with Wake Forest University Press in 1976. Four scholarly monographs on his work appeared between 1974 and 1989. In 1990 Lilliput

Press published another *Selected Poems*, edited by W. J. McCormack. This was reprinted by Penguin the following year, but its esoteric introduction and rebarbative and at times baffling thematic re-arrangement of the poems squandered the opportunity to bring Clarke to a wider audience. In 1995 Gregory Schirmer edited a collection of Clarke's *Essays and Reviews*, even the best of which betray their origins as workaday journalism. The poet's centenary in 1996 was marked in publication terms only by a booklet arising from a small commemorative conference. By then Clarke's poems had been out of print for some years; they would remain so until Carcanet published a revised *Collected Poems*, restoring the author's notes to individual collections, in 2008. A new edition of his plays, including previously unpublished work, preceded the poems by two years; the novels remain out of print.

Such trajectories of posthumous reception are familiar – a flurry of exaggerated praise followed by the sharp silence of overcorrection is the fate of many poets who do not achieve at the highest level. In this case, however, the recalibration of critical interest has been unnecessarily violent. For all the eccentricity and strain of his less disciplined work, Clarke is capable both of luminously lyrical and of variously searing and joyful narrative poetry. His verse may not reward reading in bulk but the best of it creates a distinctive music that extends lyric idiom as only the most accomplished of his immediate contemporaries in the English-speaking world – Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Graves, Hart Crane – have done. Welcome as it is to see the poems in print once more, a rational and stringent *Selected* might serve his reputation better than the nearly 600-page *Collected*. The problem of over-representation similarly afflicts critical work on Clarke: his attention to Irish social affairs and his in some respects coagulated poetic demand annotation and commentary, but many of the more exhaustively explicated poems offer few rewards to the general reader. The present study is intended as a corrective, and as something unattempted since the poet's death: a short book about Austin Clarke, with its focus on the most durably interesting areas of his work.

## Chapter 2

### “No Dues to the Parish”: 1916–1935

Excepting a few juvenile lyrics, exercises which do not suggest the strength of his 1920s and 30s work, Clarke’s earliest published poem is the narrative *The Vengeance of Fionn* (1917), based on the Fenian tale *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*. Clarke’s source tells the story of Grainne’s betrothal to an ageing Fionn and her infatuation with his comrade Diarmuid. The young man is the foster-son of the love-god Aengus Óg and in some versions bearer of a ‘love-spot’ which makes him sexually irresistible. Grainne threatens him with *geis* – a quasi-magical word-bond – to impel him to run away with her; Fionn pursues them. Aengus eventually brokers peace between Diarmuid and Fionn, and the young couple make their home beneath Ben Bulbin. The older man achieves the ‘vengeance’ of Clarke’s title when Diarmuid is injured by an enchanted boar; Fionn has the power to heal him but prevaricates until his former companion’s wounds become mortal. Clarke’s poem recasts the episodic legend as a melancholy reflection on temporality. It begins with Fionn’s invitation to the hunt in which Diarmuid receives his fatal injury, tells the pursuit story in flashback, and concludes with a glimpse of Grainne, ‘wrinkled and ugly’, after Diarmuid’s death.<sup>1</sup>

It is usual for commentaries to note the positive contemporary reception of Clarke’s version, exemplified by Stephen MacKenna’s friendly review in *Studies*,<sup>2</sup> before regretting that changing taste has rendered it all but unreadable.<sup>3</sup> Critics who try to make of it more than ‘an apprentice’s revel’<sup>4</sup> must engage in strenuous special pleading. Thomas Dillon Redshaw contends that

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p. 38

<sup>2</sup> Stephen MacKenna, ‘Some Recent Irish Books’, *Studies* 7: 25 (1918), pp.179–180.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gregory A. Schirmer, *The Poetry of Austin Clarke* (Mountrath: Dolmen, 1983), pp. 12–13.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Dillon Redshaw, ‘The “Dominant” of Memory in Austin Clarke’s *The Vengeance of Fionn* (1917)’, *Études Irlandaises* 10 (December 1985), pp. 77–92, at p. 89.



the poem constitutes not only the beginning of Clarke’s ‘long “drama of conscience and inner conflict” so clearly displayed in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, but also a response to the 1916 Rising (Redshaw, p.88). While the Rising was personally significant for Clarke, its trace in *The Vengeance of Fionn* is evanescent. Redshaw’s argument turns on identifying Grainne with ‘the *Sean Bhean Bocht* of 1798 balladry, [...] the unrequited *spéir-bhean* of the *aisling*, into Ériu and all the grieving goddesses of the nation’ (Redshaw, p.84), Diarmuid with either the executed insurgents or the poet suffering a form of survivor’s guilt, and Fionn with ‘the ageing weight of Edwardian West Britishness’ (Redshaw, p.85). Clarke’s poems, fiction and plays of course report a substantial population of hags, sky-maidens and goddesses, and Grainne shares characteristics with many of these. But in every case Clarke writes against the allegory of nation, preferring to explore the figure’s appeal to the sexual and mystical imagination. Redshaw’s charming but bizarre interpretation of the leader of the Fianna as a paunchy West Brit seems to derive from Clarke’s much later account of the poem as expressive of a generation in flight from elders exacting a blood sacrifice:

Youth itself, though a transitory possession, seemed as valuable for the Great Powers of the militant world demand it from the new generation everywhere. In the *Tornigheacht Dhiarmuda agus Gbrainne* I found what I wanted, for this Gaelic pursuit-tale is about two young lovers who fled from violence [...] wishing only to be happy and left alone.<sup>5</sup>

Clarke’s emphasis is again apolitical, even anti-political: the attraction of the pursuit-tale is its escapism.

Redshaw’s allegorising impulse, however unconvincing its results, is understandable. *The Vengeance of Fionn* makes no case for its own inevitability as a work of art. Structurally ambitious, and possessed of a certain callow lyricism, it fails because of inertia diversified by outbreaks of silliness:

Lazily she lingered  
 Gazing so,  
 As the slender osiers  
 Where the waters flow,  
 As green twigs of sally

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<sup>5</sup> Austin Clarke, *Poetry in Modern Ireland*, 2nd edn (Cork: Mercier Press, 1961), p.42

Swaying to and fro.  
 Sleepy moths fluttered in her dark eyes,  
 And her lips grew quieter  
 Than lullabies. (Collected, p. 25)

Clarke usually denied that his early poems imitated Yeats, and indeed, though *The Vengeance of Fionn* shares a mood of eroticised melancholy with the narratives that Yeats wrote in the first years of the twentieth century, there is little else on which to base a comparison, which would at any rate be considerably to Clarke's detriment. Yeats's mythological poems, even at their most underpowered, adopt a hermeneutic attitude to their material which finds no equivalent in the early Clarke. In avoiding Yeatsian influence he avoids self-awareness, and opens the poem to redundancy and clutter. *The Vengeance of Fionn* suffers from a lack rather than an excess of those qualities which Yeats brought to Irish poetry; its cadences are more like Samuel Ferguson's epics or the precursor poem Clarke nominated for himself, Herbert Trench's *Deirdre Wed* (1901), than anything by Yeats. There is nothing in Clarke's first book remotely equal to the prosodic ambition or accomplishment of, for example, the hexameters of the third book of *The Wanderings of Oisín*.

Fled foam underneath us, and round us, a wandering and milky smoke,  
 High as the saddle-girth, covering away from our glances the tide;  
 And those that fled, and that followed, from the foam-pale  
 distance broke;  
 The immortal desire of Immortals we saw in their faces, and sighed.<sup>6</sup>

Clarke's later assessments of nineteenth-century Irish poetry have thus a curiously self-reflexive quality: in a late lecture he finds Ferguson sometimes 'dull' but fascinated by 'grim mythological figures such as the Great Herdsman of the Glens, the Washer of the Ford, and Mananaun'; William Larminie is 'humdrum' but commended for his use of assonance and a 'new and subtle modulation'.<sup>7</sup>

In itself, *The Vengeance of Fionn* has little purchase on the reader's attention, but it introduces motifs and tendencies that would stay with Clarke throughout his career. Grainne's intuitive intelligence, sensuality and bravery

<sup>6</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J. M. Dent, 1990), p. 19

<sup>7</sup> Austin Clarke, 'Gaelic Ireland Rediscovered: The Early Period', *Irish Poets in English*, ed. Seán Lucy (Cork: Mercier Press, 1972), pp. 30–43, at p. 34, p. 38.

reappear and develop in many of Clarke's female characters. He gradually abandons the self-imposed obligation to insist on their modesty and girlishness, and becomes franker about his concern with specifically sexual experience, but the template for the appealing and unusual Clarkean heroine is evident in 1917. Although the poem is spendthrift of words, it contains intimations of the verbal effects – vowel music, internal and light rhymes – over which Clarke gained mastery during the following decade:

By aged rocks, and tussocks of sunbrowned grass,  
 Still gleams of curlew pools, red-purple heath  
 Bedimmed, she hurried through a sombre pass  
 Of cloud-grey cromlechs. [...]  
     In black larches the rock snows  
 Of cataracts, violet misted as rainbows,  
 Gleamed. (Collected, p. 34)

The reader of *The Vengeance of Fionn* also senses that Clarke struggles to make consistent decisions about his handling of source material and allows himself structural aspirations that outstrip his ability to fulfil them. These wrangles with subject matter and form eventually become his method and his trademark, though it might be argued that his escapological aesthetic is *faute de mieux*.

Clarke's long poems of the early 1920s have all the faults and none of the charm of *The Vengeance of Fionn*. *The Fires of Baal*, completed in 1917, but not published until 1921, marks both an early attempt to find a subject outside Irish mythology, and the first appearance in verse of the author's interest in the Old Testament. Critics have noted the poem's possible appeal to a strain of Irish exceptionalist thought that identifies with Moses and the Israelites, but the underdeveloped nature of the analogy makes the case for a political reading difficult to argue.<sup>8</sup> The poet's note 'plead[ing] an Eastern tradition from *Lallah Rookh* onward' (*Collected*, p. 54) seems calculated to deflect an interpretation in terms of the uncertainties felt by nationalists after the Easter Rising.

As well as to Thomas Moore's long poem, Clarke's Orientalist enthusiasms

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<sup>8</sup> See G. Craig Tapping, *Austin Clarke: A Study of his Writings* (Dublin: Academy Press, 1983), pp.42–3 and Mary Shine Thompson, 'Austin Clarke and the Experience of Modernity' in *Austin Clarke Remembered* (Dublin: Bridge Press, 1996), pp. 107–25, at p.120.

might be traced to preliterate enjoyment of a pleasure ‘usually reserved for little Protestants’ – looking at picture plates in the family Bible (*Twice Round*, p.10). The little Catholic’s taste in biblical illustration ran to scenes of fighting and dismemberment, but he was shocked most of all by a depiction of naked victims of the Flood. He seems never to have relinquished the association of Old Testament material with physicality. *The Fires of Baal* narrates the decrepitude of Moses, but is also preoccupied with sexual bodies, like the temple women, who, in a triumph of concupiscence over sense, ‘unfasten / The praying robe [...] and lying back with wine-red paps / Fondle the lotus bud in reverence’ (*Collected*, p. 47). Similar descriptions of languorous concubinage appear in *The Sun Dances at Easter* (1952) and in ‘The Hippophagi’; their anomalousness suggests the eruption of the unconscious.

*The Sword of the West* (1921) retells myths from the Ulster cycle. It is really two poems – the first written in 1918, the second in 1921. Book I, ‘Concobar’, offers an account of the events leading to the birth of Cú Chulain; Book II, ‘The Death of Cuchullin’ [*sic*], is made up of impressionistic versions of stories associated with the end of the hero’s life. Clarke’s brief foreword indicates that these tales form part of a larger work ‘embracing the entire Cuchullin saga and the wars of the western and northern kingdoms for supremacy’; but, if attempted at all, the remainder of this project does not survive.<sup>9</sup> Both books of *The Sword of the West* include material very loosely connected to Cú Chulain: in the fifth part of ‘Concobar’ a character narrates a vision of the battle of Moytura, while the second part of ‘The Death of Cuchullin’ is a lyrical passage meant to combine the hero’s love-infatuation with the songs sung to revive him from delirium, but is nonetheless a substantial digression from the plot. It seems likely that Clarke devised the structure of the poems to suit his interests, rather than as ‘the Introduction and Conclusion’ of an epic. These interests seem not initially to have included the exploration of his own nervous breakdown, for all Cuchullin’s hallucinatory fever offering a suitable metaphor. Recognisably autobiographical material appears only in revisions of ‘The Death of Cuchullin’, where the poem is retitled ‘The Music Healers’.

The charitable reader might regard the poems of *The Sword of the West* as very belated examples of a Romantic tradition of strategic fragmentation, but would nonetheless have to own that they are structurally overambitious and verbally slack. Clarke’s extensive revisions for both the 1936 and 1974

<sup>9</sup> *The Sword of the West* (Dublin and London: Maunsel & Roberts, 1921), n.p.

*Collected Poems* reveal the terminal nature of the underachievement: both are attempts to assimilate *The Sword of the West* to the poet's current idiom, but succeed only in replacing portentousness with idiosyncrasy.<sup>10</sup> This catalogue from the battle of Moytura vision in 'Concobar' is typical:

The mighty Kings, Midir the Proud, Iuchar  
 Enthroned in golden flame, great Mannanaun  
 And Aongus burning in a cloud of song  
 Whose voice the eagles follow as the sun  
 And poets in their dreams, great Uala  
 Flaming in gorgets of rich gold, Criedë,  
 Bove Derg, cloaked in thunder, Diancecht  
 And fiery Len. There saw I the proud heroes  
 Of wars too mighty for the harp of men  
 Lean on their swords, their great paps dark as wounds  
 Within their gleaming breasts (Sword of the West, p. 32)

Vision hurried me backward,  
 Vision hurried me onward. [...]  
     Within my vision appeared  
 The demi-gods, Midir the Proud, Iuachar,  
 Bore [*sic*] Derg, clapped in thunder, Diancecht,  
 Erc, Len. I counted the assembly of those heroes  
 In wars, too terrible for the annals of men, as  
 Leaning on sword-hilts, their great paps dark as warts  
 Within the gleam of breast, their scrota bulged  
 In shadow. (Collected, p.75)

The revision at least makes clear the visionary nature of the passage, which is left obscure many lines into the original. Otherwise, it introduces incongruous elements without substantially modifying the inflated tone. Clarke's attempts to imitate the grotesquery of Old Irish sources fail: 'paps dark as warts' is nearly tautologous, while 'scrota' invites bathos as a vernacular equivalent would not. The author's attraction to scenes of exuberance and excess is in general unfortunate, since he is a writer for whom decorum is

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Harmon gives a fuller account of the revisions in his article 'Austin Clarke, *The Sword of the West* (1921, 1936, 1974)', *Études Irlandaises* 10 (December 1985), pp. 93–104, but exaggerates their success.

a source of power. Thus his scholarly manner is shown to disadvantage in the novels and farces, while the lyrics at their best transmute pedantry into poetry.

Clarke's achievement of a distinctive poetic idiom is often aligned, and sometimes confused, with a decision to write poems with medieval and modern, rather than mythic settings. Some of the poet's own statements encourage the conflation of manner and matter. The memoir-essay 'The Black Church' (1939) presents the change in interest as akin to a conversion, which took place during Clarke's tours around the west of Ireland in the early 1920s:

something occurred to my inner eye. I could no longer see the rugged landscape of Ferguson and Herbert Trench, another landscape, a medieval landscape, was everywhere I looked [...] I could not understand this intrusiveness until, suddenly, in Clare, turning the corner of a market place, I saw Scatterry across an inlet of the Shannon [...] I saw because of that light and in their own newness the jewelled reliquaries, the bell shrines, the chalices and guessed at all the elaborate exactness of a lost art.<sup>11</sup>

A comment in a 1941 review suggests a more deliberate (and perhaps earlier) reorientation. Clarke attempted to withdraw *The Sword of the West*, 'burned' another poem based on myths of the Ulaid, and 'started out to learn again'.<sup>12</sup> However, Clarke's medievalism can be seen as a continuation of rather than a break with his myth-based early work, as he implies in 'The Black Church'. A journey 'on the track of the lost southern mythic cycle of Curoi Mac Dara' facilitated the discovery of his 'mediaeval landscape' (*Reviews and Essays*, p.226), but more than that, the 'hagiology' which Clarke defends against depreciation and claims as inspiration often precedes or is contemporaneous with the earliest known redactions of the ancient narratives. Clarke acknowledges that the Irish mythological corpus is in the deepest sense a Christian one, and in 'The Black Church' and elsewhere he makes a case for recognising the

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<sup>11</sup> 'The Black Church' in *Reviews and Essays of Austin Clarke*, ed. Gregory Schirmer (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), pp. 224–8, p. 226.

<sup>12</sup> 'Poetry and Contemporary Facts' [rev. of poems by Donagh MacDonagh] *The Irish Times* (19 April 1941), p. 3. Manuscript fragments of the Ulster Cycle versions survive; see Austin Clarke Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 38,679/6.

fantastic tales of early Irish Christianity as products of the same culture as the pagan legends.

*The Cattle-drive in Connaught* (1925) has been seen as a 'farewell',<sup>13</sup> before the poet 'turns away from the "mad discordancy" of pagan Ireland to explore the more ordered [...] quiet of medieval, monastic Ireland' (Schirmer, p.22). But like the play *The Son of Learning* (1927), written at roughly the same time, it suggests that heathen and Christian myth cannot be easily or hygienically separated. Two of the poems collected in *The Cattle-drive at Connaught*, including its 'Induction', are also part of the dramatic work; two more of the play's lyrics are reproduced in *Pilgrimage and Other Poems* (1929). In *The Son of Learning*, these poems are all spoken or sung by Anier MacConglinne, the goliardic hero of the twelfth-century *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, of which Clarke's drama is a loose and abridged version. MacConglinne, who also appears in the novel *The Singing Men at Cashel* (1936), is an important figure for this period of the poet's career, a persona which conveniently integrates a number of Clarke's preoccupations and also encourages a tendency to self-conscious exuberance.

*Aislinge Meic Conglinne* is a complex, hybrid narrative, 'betray[ing] elements of *immram*, *echtrae*, *aisling*, heroic, satiric and goliardic literature'.<sup>14</sup> Its example may have encouraged Clarke away from the Fergusonian epic towards a greater eclecticism, though its usefulness for him is not primarily formal. Instead, the medieval prose tale offers both a lively *alter ego* and a way of addressing anxieties about the body. Though Clarke is on the whole not successful when he assumes an antic persona, a refined version of MacConglinne governs some of his most outstanding lyrics. Given that the 'Induction' to *The Cattle-drive in Connaught* is a poem by 'Anier', the reader can see the whole collection as influenced if not quite authored by the wandering clerk. (Clarke's reordering of the poems for the 1936 *Collected* suggests a less important role for Anier, but since that volume includes *The Son of Learning*, the redistribution of certain lyrics may simply reflect the need to avoid duplication.) The Anier of Clarke's play offers to entertain with a variety of recitals: genealogical, mythological or hagiographic;<sup>15</sup> a similar heterogeneity is claimed by the speaker of 'Induction', who is inspired by the sea-god Mannanaun, 'the

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Harmon, 'Towards a Biography', *Irish University Review* (Austin Clarke Special Issue) 4:1 (Spring 1974), pp. 13–25, at p. 16

<sup>14</sup> Scott James Gowra, 'Gluttony, Lust and Penance in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*' *Celtica* 20 (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), pp. 53–72, at p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> *The Son of Learning, Selected Plays of Austin Clarke*, ed. Mary Shine Thompson (Gerrard's Cross: Colin Smythe, 2005), pp. 3–42, at p. 23.

patron saint / Of merry rogues and fiddlers' (*Collected*, p.111). Boasting of the god's sleight-of-hand magic, but turning to melancholy at the close, this figure is unavoidably inflected by Yeats's Red Hanrahan. Clarke's trickster 'looks on until the sun is red/ The tide and the horses are gone' (*Collected*, p.111), which might be seen as a less florid version of the elegiac endings of the Red Hanrahan tales, of which the close of 'The Twisting of the Rope' is typical:

And then it seemed to him as if the rope had changed in his dream into a great waterworm that came out of the sea, and that twisted itself about him, and held him closer and closer, and grew from big to bigger till the whole of the earth and skies were wound up in it, and the stars themselves were but the shining of the ridges of its skin. And then he got free of it, and went on, shaking and unsteady, along the edge of the strand, and the grey shapes were flying here and there around him. And this is what they were saying, 'It is a pity for him that refuses the call of the daughters of the Sidhe, for he will find no comfort in the love of the women of the earth to the end of life and time, and the cold of the grave is in his heart for ever. It is death he has chosen; let him die, let him die, let him die, let him die.'<sup>16</sup>

The two poets' uneasy meeting is mentioned in 'The Itinerary of Ua Clerigh', in which Yeats is presented as patronising and parsimonious. Yeats' condescension cannot have been easy to bear, but the hierarchy of poetic reputation makes Clarke's unwillingness to acknowledge his debt to the older man seem ungracious.

The poems which follow 'Induction' are arranged to suggest a bardic repertoire. There are poems of blessing and praise, a curse, love poems ('If there was Nothing Noble', 'Secrecy', 'Silver and Gold'), a nationalist allegory ('The Lost Heifer'), poems of travel in which the speaker experiences visionary connection to the history of the places he visits ('The Itinerary of Ua Clerigh', 'The Pedlar', 'The Fair at Windgap'), lyrics on mythological subjects ('The Lad Made King', 'The Son of Lir', 'The House in the West', 'The Musician's Wife'), narratives with both pre- and post-Christian settings ('The Circuit of Cuchullin', 'The Cattle-Drive in Connaught', 'The Frenzy

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<sup>16</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Stories of Red Hanrahan, The Secret Rose, Rosa Alchemica* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), p. 34.



of Suibhne'). The poems range in historical setting from the legendary past of the Ulster cycle to Clarke's own lifetime, but the figure of the medieval poet-scholar acts as a kind of anchor, relevant to the ancient material because such people preserved it and to the modern poet seeking to imitate 'mediaeval forms which expressed the natural man as well as his sublimated self of romantic and classic convention'.<sup>17</sup> It is an organisational technique which Clarke refines into elegance in *Pilgrimage*.

If *The Cattle-drive in Connaught* is structurally scattered, several of its individual poems have something of the quality of a journeyman's masterpiece. Many of the shorter lyrics are a single sentence; the stanzaic poems use largely or exclusively stanzas composed of single sentences. Clarke's syntax and lineation evoke 'the flow of endless line' associated alike with early medieval Irish and European Romanesque ornament.<sup>18</sup> 'Secrecy', a love-poem which takes manuscript illumination as a metaphor for the beloved's beauty and the lover's desire to conceal it in symbol (*Collected*, p.113), achieves its effects self-reflexively. But Clarke also applies exhaustive syntax to nineteenth-century material in 'The Fair at Windgap', suggesting riot and clamour, and to his own restless tours in 'The Itinerary of Ua Clerigh'. The mythological figures in *The Cattle-drive in Connaught* are similarly mobile, sometimes to little discernible purpose. The narratives that close the volume, 'The Circuit of Cuchullin' and 'The Cattle-drive in Connaught', may be survivals from the poet's attempt at a version of the Ulster cycle. 'The Circuit of Cuchullin' experiments with anapaestic blank verse to rather Victorian effect; 'The Cattle-drive in Connaught', overpraised by critics inclined to mistake a smattering of bawdy jokes for characterisation, incorporates much trenchant clutter reminiscent of Clarke's first long poems:

Fair of all fairings, sound the horn  
 In the delaying air and when the fires  
 Of branding scatter from the driven hoofs  
 Of war, praise then the happy, forest-belted,  
 The meadow-sunned and cattle-pasturing, plains  
 Of Cruachan; as ripe barley to the hook  
 My singing falls (*Collected*, p.139)

<sup>17</sup> 'Irish Poetry Today' (1935), *Reviews and Essays*, pp. 56–62, at p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation* (London: John Murray, 1969; repr. 2005), p. 27.

Among the lyrics with mythic subjects, the scurrying to-and-fro of ‘The Lad Made King’ and ‘The Son of Lir’ lacks context and rationale, and their assertions of protean plurality seem self-conscious rather than self-delighting:

I sprawl in blue rags and bad shoes  
 By the fire of a small king in Leinster,  
 I will play for his ease or I won’t,  
 I will do what I will as my mind is pleasing  
 And if I am gone, I am here  
 But when the tide whitens, I flame upon the seas  
 For I am the Son of Lir. (Collected, p. 121)

The faery propulsion of ‘The Musician’s Wife’ is more languorous in tempo but similarly ineffectual, though most readers would choose its forty lines over the hundreds expended on the same tale in *The Sword of the West*:

they

have no rest from the fluting  
 And though they are shadows,  
 He dreams of strange beauty  
 And she weeps to herself  
 As they fade in the dew. (Collected, p. 124)

In both cases, the problem is an unfortunate coincidence of antiquarianism with Clarke’s evolving technique; his interest in off-rhyme and assonantal patterning is evident, but he has not yet fully developed the allegorical resources or mastery of vowel-music displayed in *Pilgrimage*. However, one poem, ‘The Lost Heifer’, suggests the direction taken in the later collection. ‘Written during a period when our national idealism suffered eclipse’ (Clarke’s note, *Collected*, p.543) – that is, during the Civil War – this Jacobite pastiche alternates full and assonantal chimes to express both an exile’s melancholy and guarded hope. Its delicate final lines bring a shock of familiarity, since, as Patrick Crotty points out, they are very probably Philip Larkin’s source for the ‘majestic conclusion’ of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’.<sup>19</sup> Larkin’s borrowing, moreover, serves to illustrate Clarke’s limitations: the somnolence of the early

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Crotty, ‘The Irish Renaissance, 1890–1940: poetry in English’, *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, eds Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Vol. 2, pp. 50–112, at p. 102.

narratives reveals how very alien to his talents is majesty. Perhaps not coincidentally, the most interesting, though certainly not the most accomplished poem in *The Cattle-drive in Connaught* shows a royal figure in derangement and abjection.

The medieval narrative *Buile Suibhne*, preserved in a seventeenth-century manuscript, may date from as early as the thirteenth century in its present form, though allusions to the legend of the king cursed to madness are extant from the tenth century onwards. Robert Graves' commentary on it in *The White Goddess* (1948) and Seamus Heaney's treatment *Sweeney Astray* (1983), among others, have made the story familiar to modern readers. When Clarke wrote his 'glimpse' of it, 'The Frenzy of Suibhne', it was little known. It had, however, been edited and translated by J.G. O'Keeffe in 1913, and George Moore – Clarke tells us – admired the story (*Collected*, p. 543). *Buile Suibhne* is temporally closer to *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* than any other source for *The Cattle-drive in Connaught*, but temperamentally it is remote from it. *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* is worldly and satirical, preoccupied to the point of absurdism with the body; Suibhne's story, though it is possible to make inflated claims for it, is archetypal and tragic, concerned ultimately – since Suibhne in his madness adopts the characteristics of a bird, that medieval emblem for the soul – with things of the spirit. *Buile Suibhne* is a prose narrative diversified by many verse passages, mostly spoken by Suibhne; Clarke's choice of a dramatic monologue adequately represents this form. But 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' includes few of the events of the Middle Irish text, though some of the details are authentic, such as Suibhne's pursuit by disembodied dog- and goat-heads, and the drowning of the mill-hag (*Collected*, pp. 126–7). Clarke also adds material which seems drawn from his own experience of mental disturbance:

And bound to the rafters  
 May three naked women drip  
 Blood; in their hearing  
 Strange laughter and rapine

Of phantoms that tumble  
 From nothing, till fear  
 Empty the bladder

(*Collected*, pp. 124–5)

The naked women bound to the rafters are the Furies – the hallucination is

similar to one which afflicts Cuchullin in ‘The Music Healers’ (*Collected*, p. 95), with which this poem has a number of other similarities. Moreover, it has personal resonance for Clarke:

Was I the last poet to lie under such heaviness of hair, while I clasped her in my arms? Dimly I suspected her secret, when in her passionate self-struggle, like Telisiphe, Attilis or Mergara, she forgot long after midnight that I was with her. (*Penny*, p. 44)

This allusion is obscure, since Clarke misspells the names of the Erinyes – their names in Virgil are Tisiphone, Allecto and Megaera – but W.J. McCormack makes a case for identifying these characters as the Furies and the misspelling as a deliberate deflection of the guilt provoked by his consideration of his relationship with Lia Cummins.<sup>20</sup> Clarke’s Erinyes are less vengeful guardians of familial propriety than personifications of the mental pressures caused by sexual frustration. They are cousins, perhaps, to the harpies which inhabit the asylum Gate in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, and that institution is defined by its inculcation of incontinent terror.

We can infer that some kind of sexual guilt replaces Ronan’s curse (never mentioned by Clarke) as the cause of Sweeny’s madness. The king’s flight brings him to the site of a symbolic marriage:

A juggler cried. Light  
Rushed from doors and men singing:  
‘O she has been wedded  
To-night, the true wife of Sweeny,  
Of Sweeny the King!’  
I saw a pale woman  
Half clad for the new bed  
I fought them with talons, I ran  
On the oak-wood – O Horsemen,  
Dark Horsemen, I tell ye  
That Sweeny is dead! (*Collected*, p.125)

This passage has no equivalent in *Buile Suibhne*: Eorann, Suibhne’s wife, is a character in the text, who touchingly wishes that she too might grow

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<sup>20</sup> *Selected Poems*, ed. W. J. McCormack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp.4–5.

feathers and join him in the trees, but she predeceases him. The lineaments of Clarke's own marital difficulties are present here, in deranged form: Clarke married the wrong woman, and wanted the union dissolved; Sweeny sees his 'true wife' go to another man's bed, and tries to dissolve himself. The passage also alludes to the ancient Irish notion that a king derives authority from marriage to a territorial goddess. Her remarriage signifies Sweeny's loss of sovereignty and justifies his belief that he is dead. He visits the site of what he believes to be his own grave and excavates his grave-goods: 'Nailing, I dug up / The gold cup and collar' (*Collected*, p.127). The idea of the madman's body as corpse is revisited in *The Bright Temptation* and more graphically in *Mnemosyne*. 'Summer Lightning', included in both *Night and Morning* (1938) and *Mnemosyne*, similarly makes the mad body the site of an act of blasphemy and desecration. When Clarke's work is considered overall, we find more Suibhne in it than MacConglinne: the crazy poet-king remained the poet's avatar when he had long abandoned the worldly trickster. A version of *Buile Suibhne's* best-known poem, the king's address to the trees, was published in his last collection of lyrics, *Orphide and Other Poems* (1970). A four-act play, also called *The Frenzy of Suibhne*, was being prepared for publication at the time of Clarke's death.

In the 1920s and 30s, however, MacConglinne was the more useful figure. Suibhne's mad aerial motility was not a suitable metaphor for a subject Clarke urgently wished – needed indeed – to address: the life of the body. *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* is an unpromising text from a playwright's viewpoint, combining the difficulties of representing supernatural figures on stage with a high proportion of reported incident. Anier's mock-Passion, meanwhile, might be distasteful to both British censors and Irish audiences of the 1920s. Clarke's attraction alike to hero and theme overcame these problems, which he solved, in any case, by radical omission. Neither MacConglinne's vision of a land made of food, nor the 'fable' of his cure by the wizard doctor are part of Clarke's play; though Anier is threatened by monks and their abbot, their persecution is mild compared to the source, in which he is beaten, half-drowned, exposed and nearly crucified. Conversely, where the Anier of the medieval text is rewarded for his exorcism of the King, Clarke's scholar is cheated and must resort to trickery to get his desserts, allowing the play to conclude with a commentary on social injustice from the beggars' chorus. Clarke modernises too in introducing as a romantic lead the king's lover Ligach, who functions in the prose tale as merely the cause of his possession by the hungry demon.

Despite many changes, the reader senses a continuity between Clarke's

play and its original. Both use the notion of gluttony to comment on lust, and in both the commentary has metaphoric and metonymic currency – the two sins of the flesh sometimes stand for one another, but are also seen as contiguous cause and effect. This was for Clarke more than a matter of literary stylistics: the mental illness that he saw as caused by sexual dysfunction had as one of its symptoms dangerous anorexia. In *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, Cathal MacFinguine is in love with his rival Fergal's sister, Ligach. Fergal employs a 'scholar' to put 'charms and heathen spells' into the pips of an apple, which Ligach then sends as a token to her lover.<sup>21</sup> Once eaten, the enchanted fruit releases a demon of gluttony, which possesses the king and threatens to ruin his kingdom. Ligach's betrayal clearly resonates with the story of man's Fall, and Cathal's infatuation is described in a phrase which might suggest 'primal transgression' as well as calf-love (Gowra, p.59). The author is less interested in Ligach as an Eve-figure, however, than in pursuing a series of typological parallels which link gluttony with original sin, the afflicted king with the rogue scholar who cures him.

In Act One of *The Son of Learning* the audience is told by the beggars that Cathal's possession happened on the day of his marriage to Ligach, preventing and parodying consummation. She comes in disguise to the Abbey to cure him: restoring a normal appetite for food signifies the establishment of a happy married sexuality. Anier has arrived with the same aim in mind, but his hopes are for food and gold. Clarke preserves the magical parallel whereby the king is cured of a scholar's curse by a scholar, of gluttony by a glutton, and may even amplify it: one of the Red Beggar's remarks might be interpreted in performance as implying that Anier was the malign scholar employed by Fergal.

In Act Two, Anier has overcome the abbot's objections to seek an audience with the king. He tries to tempt the demon out of Cathal's stomach with accounts of delicious meals – the sort of thing that magazine picture editors call 'food porn':

SCHOLAR: [...] choice mutton that was suckled  
 Upon green tits of grass, [...]  
 Fat puddings with their little puddings, sweet litter  
 O'the pig [...]

<sup>21</sup> *The Vision of MacConglinne*, trans. Kuno Meyer (repr. Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses, 2000), pp. 2–3

Mustard

And red-eyed pepper; from their shaken woods

Ripe hazlenuts to waken teeth

Big steamy dumplings.

(*Selected Plays*, p.24)

Failing to attract the demon with mere description, Anier binds the king and brings before him a real feast. The sexual implications of this scene are homoerotic, sado-masochistic and masturbatory. The attempted cure fails. Ligach's intervention, in Act Three, represents sexual health – she unbinds Cathal, and it is she, not Anier, who holds a ladle of food to the king's mouth, successfully tempting forth the demon. Before she does so, though, she and Anier enact a little pantomime of cuckoldry which suggests that the royal marriage will not be an entirely vanilla affair. Flirtation (or in the later work, rather more than flirtation) between ladies of rank and handsome clerical students is a recurrent trope in Clarke's novels and plays; this is its earliest explicit expression, though the fact that many Clarkean clerics are said to have 'love-spots', like Diarmuid, suggests that this model of masculine beauty was formed as early as *The Vengeance of Fionn*.

*The Son of Learning* is lively, and does not suffer, as do some of the more psychologically inward plays, from ambiguity. Anier is essentially tame and containable; the anarchic mood and verbal exuberance that Clarke admired in the work of George Fitzmaurice (1877-1933) remained beyond his powers. Nonetheless, *The Son of Learning* is the strongest piece Clarke ever produced for the stage – only his radio play *As the Crow Flies* (1941) compares with it for dramatic and thematic coherence. The poems it shares with the collection *Pilgrimage*, however, have the effect of emphasising Clarke's skill as a lyric poet rather than increasing the interest of the drama.

*Pilgrimage*, a pamphlet in comparison to Clarke's overweight later collections, is nonetheless his most sustained achievement. He would write perhaps half a dozen individual poems that surpass any one piece in the 1929 collection, but he never again produced a whole book of such scope, concentration and balance. The volume constitutes a small history of Christian Gaelic Ireland, impressionistic in detail but exquisite in form and rich in political implication, that proceeds chronologically from a poem set in the eighth-century golden age of Irish learning to an imitation of eighteenth-century *aisling*, while glancing forward to twentieth-century concerns. The poems are beautifully crafted, showing Clarke's mastery of short-line metrics and assonantal rhyme at this period in his career. In *The Cattle-drive in Connaught*,

Clarke's main ornamental resource had been syntactic, 'Secrecy' creating an impression of intricacy in its conditional appeal to a 'Sun-woman'; poems as different in mood as 'The Fair at Windgap' and 'The Itinerary of Ua Clerigh' exploiting the curious fascination of catalogue. The poems of *Pilgrimage* add dense sound-patterning and neologistic energy to that complexity of sentence structure. Clarke approaches Gaelic verse forms as an imaginative rather than merely scholarly translator: seeking neither to reproduce nor directly imitate the intricate structures of medieval verse in Irish, he creates in English an ornate economy reminiscent of it. That his poetic procedure is evocative and associative rather than strictly imitative is demonstrated by the most successful lyrics in the volume, 'The Scholar' and 'The Planter's Daughter'. These unite profound courtesy with unfastidious intimacy – qualities which are definitive of a certain conception of Gaelic society. He works the same seam in his later translations of Turlough O'Carolan's harp songs, particularly 'Mabel Kelly' (*Collected*, pp. 295–6). It is not so much that Clarke's rendering sounds like the Irish, but that the mood is one which we are predisposed to think of as typical of pre-Famine Irish culture: erotic without innuendo, unsentimental yet polite, faintly archaic. When it lacks this radical innocence Clarke's decorum can seem mannered, as in the second-order poems in *Pilgrimage*, of which the title poem is probably the strongest.

'Pilgrimage' evokes the social, intellectual and artistic accomplishments of Irish monasticism from the point of view of a pilgrim from, perhaps, a less enlightened part of Europe. Clarke literalises the metaphor of enlightenment with a vocabulary suggestive of dazzle and emphasises it with an ornate verbal music. 'Celibacy', the second poem, offers a glimpse of the psychological pressures underlying such communal achievement: the speaker is an ascetic who has not managed to sublimate his sexual energy into devotion. His anguish, figured in impossible inwardness, satirises a culture which requires constant examination of conscience and yet punishes even thought-crime. The third poem, 'The Confession of Queen Gormlai', treats sexual prohibition from a woman's perspective. Gormlai was the daughter of the ninth-century High King Flann Sinna.<sup>22</sup> She is thought to have married twice: her first husband was probably Cearball mac Muirecáin, king of Leinster (whose name Clarke anglicises to Carrol), and her second Niall Glúndub ('Nial' in Clarke's spelling), who succeeded his father-in-law to the high

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<sup>22</sup> She is not to be confused with the tenth-century noblewoman of the same name who was mistress, then third wife of Brian Boru.



kingship. Late, fabricated accounts, which Clarke accepts, claim that before either of these marriages she was betrothed or married to Cormac mac Cuilleanáin, bishop-king of Cashel, who annulled their union to take major orders. Literary tradition has Gormlai wandering Ireland as an outcast after Niall's death in battle in 919, and attributes to her a small corpus of elegiac lyrics, though these in their surviving Middle Irish forms postdate her by hundreds of years.<sup>23</sup> She is the main character of *The Singing Men at Cashel* (1936), Clarke's serious but problematic second novel, where she is presented as a typically sympathetic, intelligent and courageous Clarkean heroine. The poem sees her in ascetic decrepitude, ironically castigating even the permitted sexuality of the marriage bed. In terms of the historical progression of *Pilgrimage*, Gormlai marks a transition from early medieval monasticism to the bardic era: the poets who flourished during Gormlai's old age were beginning to compose in forms which would characterise the subsequent period, and later texts of that poetic culture are attributed to her.

'The Scholar' and 'The Cardplayer' are the lyrics spoken by Anier in *The Son of Learning*. The first of them (*Collected*, p.544) is Clarke's 'free paraphrase' of a medieval lyric, 'An Mac Leighinn', the extreme conservatism of classical Irish verse licensing what might in other languages seem egregious anachronism. The two short lyrics interpose rakish masculine voices between two longer confessional poems with female personae. 'The Scholar' is the subtler of the two. Its close assonantal scheme creates an elegant cadence just as the protagonist's life of winter duty to patrons underwrites his tax-dodging, work-shy summer existence. The cardplayer seems a lumpen creature by comparison, like the speaker of 'Induction' a sort of subfusc Red Hanrahan:

Patric came, without harm, out of cold Hell  
 A beggar nailed the black ace on the board.  
 I flung the game to the floor, I rose from their cursing;  
 And paler than a sword, I saw before me  
 The face for which a kingdom fell. (*Collected*, p. 160)

These unfortunate lines, with their suspicion of a dangling participle, draw attention to themselves because they mark a thematic progression towards late medieval Ireland. The face may be Devorgilla's; or perhaps that of the

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<sup>23</sup> Osborn Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, eds David Grene and Fergus Kelly (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970, repr. 1984), pp. 202–15.

Young Woman of Beare, who speaks the next poem; but it also returns us to the shadowy temptress of ‘Celibacy’, whose face bars an agonised monk from the Kingdom of Heaven. In the 1936 *Collected Poems*, Clarke replaced these Anier poems with ‘Wandering Men’, which deals – as does the play *The Flame* (1930) – with legends of St Brigid. The substitution alters the chronological progression of the collection and tilts its balance of sexual energy towards the feminine, though we might hesitate to call it feminist.

‘The Young Woman of Beare’ is the longest of *Pilgrimage’s* poems, and acts as a referential centre. Although its aesthetic effect is uneven, it is structurally important, since the other pieces in the collection are all related to it thematically or contextually. The title alludes to an Old Irish poem usually known in English as ‘The Old Woman of Beare’ or ‘The Hag of Beare’ in which the speaker, once the companion of powerful men, laments the passing of her beauty and influence. Some of this poem’s stanzas, in which the *caillech* compares her ageing features to unchanging landmarks, imply that she is a manifestation of the sovereignty goddess, though more recent interpretations (which Clarke partially anticipates) have emphasised the possibly autobiographical nature of the text.<sup>24</sup> The hag of Beare is also a figure in folklore, where she is depicted as a semi-immortal, who has ‘seven periods of youth’ before she declines into lonely old age (*Collected*, p.545). Clarke’s ‘fanciful’ poem is indebted to both tenth-century text and oral tradition: the Young Woman’s allusions to persons and places might equally be the pronouncements of a tutelary deity or the breathless narrative of a picaresque heroine. Her specific references to knights of the Clanricarde, the decline of the Ormonds, and Sir John Perrot’s suppression of the Desmond rebellion span the fourteenth to late sixteenth centuries, but the sexual mores she flouts are those of post-Famine Ireland.

Clarke calls ‘The Young Woman of Beare’ an ‘allegory’ (*Collected*, p.545), a description that makes possible allegorical readings of other poems in *Pilgrimage*. Having read the Young Woman’s advice on maidenly chastity, parodying the idiom of ‘virile pastorals’ issued to Free State Catholic congregations (*Collected*, p.545), we are the likelier to see that the frustration expressed in ‘Celibacy’ is the lot of Clarke’s contemporaries as well as of medieval ascetics. Given that the Hag of Beare is in some narratives the consort of the sea-god Mannanaun, the Young Woman can perhaps be seen as

<sup>24</sup> See Mairín Ní Dhonnachada’s headnote to the poem in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women’s Writing and Traditions*, Vol. IV (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), p. 111.

MacConglinne's counterpart, like him engaged in sexual dalliance and political machination, yet held to a standard of feminine behaviour which does not allow her jesters' licence. Read as a variation on the symbolic marriage between mortal ruler and divine tutelar, the Young Woman's courtesanly behaviour with successive generations of invaders represents Irish history as a matter of shifting allegiance and self-interested pragmatism, modifying the idealistic, sexist articulations of the trope in, for example, 'The Marriage Night'.

In some ways, the latter poem and 'South-Westerly Gale' are *Pilgrimage's* more muted achievements. Both consider the links between early modern Ireland and European Catholic powers: 'South Westerly Gale' with apparent dispassion describes the scattering of the Armada; much more fervently, 'The Marriage Night' proposes a symbolic wedding of personified sovereignty to the Irish nobility on the eve of the battle of Kinsale. Clarke is alert to the appeal to the romantic imagination made by Gaelic civilisation in its splendid defiance and inevitable dissolution, but read as individual lyrics, these poems amount to little more than exercises in nationalist mythology. Placed between 'The Young Woman of Beare' and 'The Planter's Daughter', however, they serve to remind the reader of the traditional material that Clarke manipulates in the subtler, more irreverent poems and emphasise further the allegorical quality of the whole collection.

Although critics have tended exaggerate Clarke's anger at the provincial and philistine Irish church into anti-clericalism proper, there is little doubt that the poet of *Pilgrimage* regards with dismay the rapid capitulation of post-independence Ireland to unreflective Catholic militancy. His choice of allegory as a mode of protest is less than promising, but most uncommonly successful. Allegory is inhospitable to liberatory aspiration, perhaps never more so than when the liberation desired is sexual. The mode co-opts matter to meaning, and when it takes the form of personification, that matter is the human body (owing to accident of grammar, very often the female body) whose integrity and worth is replaced by semantic significance. The transfer of meaning in analogy demands the preservation of stable orders of power: as a pilot to his ship, so a ruler to his kingdom, so Christ to the Church, so a man to his wife, so the soul to the body, so form to matter, and so on. If allegory tends to defer to power, however, it shows no similar respect to tradition: cultural and historical distinctions are erased in the assertion that *this* means *that*. Metaphoric equivalence, meanwhile, creates an aggregative ambition to incorporate the world of nature into a system of meaning. Of course, allegories may be aimed

against the *status quo* and allegorists intend to disturb it, but the structures of allegory militate against recognition and tolerance of difference: as Joel Fineman writes, ‘allegory is always a hierarchizing mode, indicative of timeless order, however subversively intended its contents may be’.<sup>25</sup>

Clarke’s allegories suffer from some of the limitations of the ‘hierarchizing mode’. Its capacity to co-opt dissidence to authoritarian modes of thought is amply illustrated by ‘The Marriage Night’, whose persona treats as identical Gaelic sovereignty and Catholic devotion: ‘Confessions were devout; / Murmuring, as religion / Flamed by, men saw her brow’ (*Collected*, p.168) and ends in misogynistic equation of sexual and political betrayal:

O she has curbed her bright head  
 Upon the chancel rail  
 With shame, and by her side  
 Those heretics have lain. (*Collected*, p.169)

Though Clarke’s parallels between medieval and modern Ireland serve a satirical purpose, their articulation in ‘Celibacy’, ‘The Confession of Queen Gormlai’ and ‘The Young Woman of Beare’ makes the historically contingent preoccupation of twentieth-century Irish Catholicism with sexual purity into an absolute and sempiternal principle, since Clarke nowhere suggests the tolerance of divorce, remarriage, illegitimacy and clerical concubinage which (admittedly, alongside ascetic gynophobia) characterized medieval Irish sexual mores. They rob the poems of a sense of historical difference, of the liberating notion that social custom had once been otherwise, and might be so again.

On the whole, however, the symbolic persons of *Pilgrimage* have a physical autonomy stubborn enough at least to raise questions about what allegory does to bodies. An aggravated metaphor often indicates critique; so, for example, the anchorite of ‘Celibacy’ conflates the myth of Eve’s creation with Jacob’s vision of angels ascending ladders to heaven:

I fell, I groaned  
 On the flagstone of help

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<sup>25</sup> Joel Fineman, ‘The Structure of Allegorical Desire’, in Stephen J. Greenblatt (ed.), *Allegory and Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1981), pp. 26–60, at p. 32

To pluck her from my body;  
For servant ribbed with hunger  
May climb his rungs to God.

(*Collected*, p. 153)

Typological interpretation is indicted as mental illness, hallucination induced by starvation. The Young Woman of Beare is also alienated from her body by allegorical significance:

See! see as from a lathe  
My polished body turning!  
He bares me at the waist  
And now blue clothes uncurl  
Upon white haunch.

(*Collected*, p.162)

This reflects the preoccupation of the tenth-century poem with textiles and clothing, a self-reflexive concern, since *caillech* is etymologically related to Latin *pallium*, veil. Clarke's pun on 'bare' has an analogous effect. The comparison of her body to worked timber, like the facetious ascription of Marian colours to her, emphasises that the Young Woman is an artefact, an icon. Personification, usually understood to embody abstractions, also disembodies persons.

The last two poems of *Pilgrimage* suggest ways in which allegory might be turned to more liberal purpose. The less successful, 'Aisling', establishes and then inverts expectation: the poet meets his bright *spéir-bhean* at dawn and asks her ritual questions about her identity. Her response is initially within the tradition: ' "Black and fair strangers leave upon the oar / And there is peace" ' (*Collected Poems*, p.171); but she disappears 'with a smile' when the poet asks what place the newly independent nation will find for civilisation and art. The Jacobite poets could at least imagine that bardic privilege and political sovereignty were analogous, but in the twentieth century such a hope is as flimsy as a *spéir-bhean*'s negligée. 'Aisling' delivers a rebuke to the philistine Free State, and in doing so inadvertently demonstrates the political impotence of allegory: figurally coding a reproof makes it all the easier for the powerful to ignore it. But it also implies an unspeakable anxiety – that the partial dismantling of the Union might cause as precipitous a decline in Irish culture as did its institution.

'The Planter's Daughter' also achieves its (more memorable) effect with an evanescent symbolic female. It is a study in non-committal utterance,

which rises to something like illogic at a moment of political tension:

When night stirred at sea  
 And the fire brought a crowd in  
 They say that her beauty  
 Was music in mouth  
 And few in the candlelight  
 Thought her too proud,  
 For the house of the planter  
 Is known by the trees.

(*Collected*, p. 169)

‘When night stirred [...] They say’, which appears to be – but is not quite – a change in tense, leaves the reader uncertain about the temporal perspective of the poem. ‘Music in mouth’, meanwhile, ambivalently muffles the implication of extravagant praise. The sense usually and reasonably taken from this stanza’s last four lines is that this woman did not draw attention to her own social privilege, but the *non sequitur* has nonetheless the air of deliberate discretion. Instrumental meaning, withheld from the woman herself, is enacted upon and by the trees that surround her home. Her behaviour may be egalitarian, but the poem, and the community for which it speaks, remark the ethnic and religious difference signified by the trees. The longevity of such notice is suggested by Clarke’s punning annotation, which claims ‘In barren Donegal trees around a farmstead still denote an owner of Planter stock, for in the past no native could afford to improve his stone’s-throw of land.’ (*Collected*, p. 545).

The second stanza, with its alternations of masculine silence and feminine speech, announcement (‘bell that is rung’) and confidence (‘wonder told shyly’) comments rather on the strategic enigma of its own saying than the subject of the poem, while even its charming final exclamation registers the differences in Sunday observance between Christian denominations – for a Catholic the holy day might legitimately be one of relaxation as well as worship, while non-conformist Protestants in particular insist on solemnity of conduct. Despite or perhaps because of its slightness, ‘The Planter’s Daughter’ typifies the qualities that attract readers to *Pilgrimage*: freshness, musicality, potentially weighty subjects delicately and delightfully mediated.

Clarke published little verse in the early 1930s; his major publication of this period is *The Bright Temptation* (1932), a historical fantasy novel. ‘Wandering Men’, attached to the American edition of *Pilgrimage*, reflects his interest in

the traditions surrounding St Brigid, subject of biographies in Latin and Old Irish and of an early hymn in Irish. Clarke was among the many twentieth-century writers who represented the cult of Brigid as a Christianization of pagan practice, though his note to 'Wandering Men' suggests that unlike the critics who have commented on his poem, he was aware that identification of the saint with the fire-goddess of the same name was mere 'confusion'.<sup>26</sup> 'Wandering Men' is primarily concerned with the texture of visionary experience, which acts as counterweight and complement to his preoccupation with the body. *The Flame* is an attempt to transfer this Brigidine material to the stage. The play fails to make clear exactly the nature and dramatic interest of the psychological disturbances it presents, so their ambiguous resolution cannot hold the audience's attention. Clarke calls it 'casuistical' in terms of its attitude towards the orthodoxy of the vestal flame at Kildare, but the casuistry is in fact so pervasive as to obscure the play's rationale.

The title *The Bright Temptation* is a quotation from 'The Young Woman of Beare'; otherwise the novel and poem have only a broad concurrence of theme. Like all Clarke's novels (and to some extent his memoirs) it documents struggles with the denigration of physicality attendant on dualistic understandings of selfhood. In his attempts to understand and represent sympathetically attitudes to sex and the body which he has come to reject, he risks the dilution of satirical intent and ironic tone.

Clarke seems to have been at least partially aware of these possibilities. The epigraph to *The Bright Temptation* is an extract from *Silva Gadelica* (1892), Standish Hayes O'Grady's collection of stories translated from medieval Irish manuscripts, in which a traveller named Teigue meets in Tir na nOg an immortal couple sustained by a golden apple which renews itself when they take a bite. The lady explains that they are entirely chaste, to which Teigue replies, 'That [...] is a beautiful and at the same time a comical thing.' (*Bright Temptation*, p.7) This curious episode inverts the myth of the Fall in its detail but retains the idea that immortality is conditional upon sexual continence. Teigue's distinctly human response guides or represents the reader's reaction to the novel: the charm of the main characters' extreme sexual innocence is substantially admixed with silliness.

Awareness of a problem is not, however, a solution to it, and the *The Bright Temptation* presents a number of difficulties to anyone who would like to see it as a straightforward celebration of sexuality. In his various addresses to the

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<sup>26</sup> *The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), p. 313

reader, the narrator is anxious above all to expose the prurience that motivates the Church's proscriptive attitude to sex and the psychological damage caused by it, but this preoccupation overwhelms our sense of a coherent narrative voice. Nor are Clarke's characterization and plotting always adequate to the task of supporting his narrator's statements.

*The Bright Temptation* tells the story of Aidan, a clerical student, and Ethna, a young noblewoman, who undergo together a series of adventures which reveal their semi-conscious desires to escape the futures ordained for them by Church or family. Aidan leaves the monastic settlement of Cluanmore after the upheaval caused by an earthquake and a flood; Ethna is running away from an arranged marriage. They meet after Aidan has been captured by mercenaries associated with Ethna's father and embark on a picaresque journey to a 'holy glen' where they believe that Aidan may find sanctuary and a way back to his community. They find the holy glen abandoned to nature, and in that bucolic setting are about to make love when Aidan is kidnapped by the gigantic Prumpolaun, who carries him to Glen Bolcan, where the madmen of Ireland congregate. Aidan is rescued from the madmen's glen by a stern monk, Bec-mac-De, who in an episode reminiscent of one from Clarke's own biography, bullies him into a false confession of sexual impurity before directing him back to Cluanmore. He finds the monastery overrun by the Danes, flees again, and is reunited with Ethna. The novel concludes with their impending restoration 'to Irish virtue by holy matrimony.' (*Bright Temptation*, p.312) Its thematic structure is dualistic: innocent young love opposed to unhealthy ecclesiastical prohibition; a chaotic lay world set in contrast with the order of the cloister; poetry, legend and imagination against scholarship and prayer. The novel attempts reconciliation of these oppositions in its final, sardonic capitulation to 'Irish virtue' and 'holy matrimony'. Aidan often longs for clerical calm, but is unconsciously drawn towards the turbulence of the secular; he is fascinated by Ethna's knowledge of poetry and myth, and she shows a reciprocal enthusiasm for holy learning. An intelligent young woman with an instinctive love for poetry and strong attraction to scholarship appears in each of Clarke's novels. She is a character with whom he seems personally to identify, and he is at his most incisive when he writes from her viewpoint, which he does too rarely in *The Bright Temptation*.

Clarke's impulse to reconciliation of opposites is not necessarily liberating. The reader often feels that authorial tolerance of Ethna and Aidan's sexuality depends on their innocence and beauty; perhaps also on their education and relatively high social rank. In his concern to include mythological material,



Clarke sometimes dissolves Ethna's individuality into the matitutinal glamour of the *spéir-bhean* or Ossianic twilight. Aidan, with the narrator's apparent endorsement, foists upon her that most disagreeable of an Irishwoman's labours, the guardianship of male chastity: 'only she could save him from that evil which was in him. He was not worthy of her, but he would fight that evil and never again [...] would it conquer him.' (*Bright Temptation*, p. 203) Sometimes the laborious praise of Ethna's beauty achieves a studious charm, and occasionally rises to allusive satire. Ethna's face reminds Aidan of a carving by a Byzantine sculptor, and he is led to wonder:

Was she not one of those self-delighting creatures of whom the wandering scholars were to dream, so that, failing in all their examinations, they would forget the doctrine of the fall and search for that Eden which poetry alone remembers? But how could Aidan know that it was life itself delighting, that in the reality or her voice and eager limbs beauty had become its own wondering? (*Bright Temptation*, p. 131)

This passage combines Yeatsian vocabulary and Clarke's preoccupation with original sin (with perhaps a fling at Yeats's academic underachievement) in one of the younger poet's many uneasy negotiations with his precursor. Later in the novel Aidan sees Ethna naked and is startled by her beauty, for he had hitherto only seen 'the human figure in the art of the schools [...] patiently copied by example from gold apse and Byzantine screen, hieratic figures in red-bright robes [...] enthroned in a chastened world of geometrical pattern.' (*Bright Temptation*, p.214) If this in some sense argues for a more naturalistic Irish poetry than is found in the 'hieratic' poses of Yeats, then we must conclude that Clarke has rather missed the point of the older poet's Byzantium. Nonetheless, the reference offers some relief from *The Bright Temptation's* exhaustive commentary on Catholic sexual morality.

Other bodies than those of the juvenile romantic leads are a matter for at best laughter; at worst fastidious disgust. The novel begins with a description of a lanky monk; before the reader has read a dozen pages the fat bursar of Cluanmore has got himself stuck in the narrow entrance to a round tower. Later in his journey Aidan stumbles upon a newly-married couple making love in a bothy, who stone him for a voyeur. These two are allowed their pleasure, though as they 'tickle and thump their way into' marital 'virtue' (*Bright Temptation*, p. 166) we are given to understand it is definitely of a lower order than Aidan and Ethna's; their mere existence, the reader might suspect,

is a pretext for a disquisition on severe Irish sexual morality. In this and other episodes, Clarke imitates the lugubrious vocabulary of Irish ‘moral training’ (*Bright Temptation*, p. 165) which Aidan has absorbed, but does not have the linguistic resources to make that internalization seem vivid and likely. This main character often seems a prig and a bore where Clarke intends he should have the reader’s empathy, less because attitudes to sex and the body have changed since the novel’s publication than because Clarke’s prose is not flexible enough to permit ironic treatment of the character whose viewpoint the reader shares almost throughout.

Aidan’s capture by the Prumpolaun reveals the novel’s unease with bodies that are not smooth, youthful and beautiful. The Prumpolaun, who as Harmon notes, has some of the traditional attributes of Mannanaun (Harmon, pp. 30–1), is a messenger of monstrous size and appearance: he ‘might have been a Firbolg, the last of that ancient clan’ (*Bright Temptation*, p. 226). The ‘bagman’ – the term is one of a number of possible translations of ‘Firbolg’ – is obscurely sexualised. His messenger’s bag is linguistically cognate in Irish with his belly, but perhaps also hints at the scrotum. Some of the Prumpolaun’s first words to Aidan refer to a ‘sinning couple’ in a hedgerow, and he addresses the student in ways that suggest a possessive lover: ‘Many are the stray, the lost that come with me when I want company and when I talk they never want to leave me again [...] Nobody leaves me that I take a liking to.’ (*Bright Temptation*, p. 227–9) Insofar as he represents the life of the body, it is characterised as puerile, compulsive and repulsively gamesome. The Prumpolaun has become the ‘journeyman of Ireland’ (*Bright Temptation*, p. 227) as the result of a saint’s curse of perpetual physicality and poor memory (*Bright Temptation*, p. 240). Though this episode is played for comic pathos, loss of memory is always a serious matter in Clarke’s work, because it indicates madness and, finally, the loss of the soul:

“Think!” cried Aidan [...]. “Try to think.”

“I can’t!” bawled the Prumpolaun. [...] Terrible as the strivings of theologians to distinguish the Trinity, or the anguish of students wrestling with memory at an examination, was the plight of the Prumpolaun.

“If I run fast enough I’ll remember it.” (*Bright Temptation*, p. 241)

Aidan uses the same encouraging injunction as the doctors of *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*. It is apt, given that the Prumpolaun is shadowed by Clarke’s own amnesiac depression, that he should carry Aidan to Glen Bolcan, where the

student meets characters based on patients whom Clarke knew during his stay in St Patrick's Hospital in 1919.

Glen Bolcan is associated with Suibhne, whose story of a saint's curse is the original of the Prumpolaun's. As well as conventional attributes of madness – twitching, maniacal laughter and dancing – the inhabitants of Glen Bolcan exhibit some of the same behaviour as the patients in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*: apparently aimless searching, blasphemy, and, of course, 'the solitary sin, ever with insane hands that they cannot keep from themselves, wasting their pale watery substance' (*Bright Temptation*, p.264). Aidan has some experiences comparable to Maurice Devane's: he sees disembodied faces, is terrified by a 'reed gatherer' who also appears as the leader of a nightly 'masquerade' in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* (*Bright Temptation* p.261, *Collected*, p. 327–8) and finally realizes, like Maurice 'laugh[ing]/ To find he was an imbecile' (*Collected*, p. 343), that the madmen have 'faces like his own' (*Bright Temptation*, p.264). In Glen Bolcan Aidan meets a character protoypical of Mr Prunty in *Mnemosyne*, who is so paralysed by the fear of death that he believes that he is already a corpse; some of Aidan's thoughts on madness and salvation anticipate in their unexpected harshness 'Summer Lightning' (*Collected*, pp. 190–1).

As this account might suggest, *The Bright Temptation* is of interest mainly for its early iterations of themes and episodes that recur in many of Clarke's subsequent prose and verse works. Its banning illustrates (were illustration necessary) the absurdities into which the Irish Censorship Board was betrayed in basing its decisions on excerpts submitted by zealots. Nothing could be less likely to deprave than this gentle picaresque fable, yet its slightly musty tone and laborious humour disrecommends it to most readers. Clarke never quite evolved a prose style to match the nimble movement of his best poems.

*The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke* (1936) is often considered a kind of triangulation point for the poet's career, and it is assessed, with Clarke's other publication of that year, *The Singing-Men at Cashel*, in the next chapter. Clarke's early career, not overwhelmingly productive, intermittently and equivocally successful, heavily shadowed by personal crisis, is exemplary of how very little – and how very much – a poet must do to achieve high distinction. Enumerated, the achievement can seem slight: by 1936, Clarke had completed three epic poems whose manner was obsolescent before they were written; a mass of pot-boiling journalism; two plays (one lively, one baffling); two novels (one charming, one serious but hampered by pedantry and an unwieldy structure); a collection of lyrics that can still be read with

considerable pleasure, and *Pilgrimage and Other Poems*. Without the last, I think, his reputation could not have survived; with it, it is assured, for the poems of *Pilgrimage* do something that in 1929 was yet undone, and make a sound that was yet unmade. Clarke believed that his poems articulated ‘the drama of racial conscience, as strange to the previous Celtic school as Gaelic art’ (*Collected*, p. 545). No Irish poet before Clarke brought such detailed and scholarly attention to the extended Middle Ages of his country: its asceticism and conservatism, its courtesy and barbarism, its ambivalent sexual politics. More importantly, no poet had found a form in which to convey that attentive scholarship: allegorical in mode, decorative in texture. Reading early Clarke, we might well wish that he had written nothing but *Pilgrimage*; none could wish it unwritten. Slender as it is, it is his necessary contribution to the narrative of modern Irish poetry.

## Chapter 3

### ‘Sods of Dry Turf and a Story’: 1936–1954

Clarke’s first *Collected Poems* (1936) might surprise even readers substantially familiar with his work and the shape of his career. It contains fewer lyric poems – just 31 in all, nine of which are single-sentence works arranged in two miniature sequences – than appear in most modern slim collections. It is bulked with a pair of verse plays too dependent upon staging to be considered among Clarke’s ‘poems’. The rest of the 300-page volume is devoted to Clarke’s narrative poems, beginning with ‘The Cattle-drive in Connaught’ and ending with *The Vengeance of Fionn*, while the *Sword of the West* is substantially cut and redistributed. *The Fires of Baal* is also represented, but even in his introduction Padraic Colum can find nothing to say about it, for all his graceful negotiation of the conflicting claims of sympathy and insight. If *Collected Poems* includes lyrics of a quality that Clarke was only once or twice to surpass, it also demonstrates the sporadic nature of his achievement in the first twenty years of his career, and his concentration upon narrative and dramatic forms that often sorted ill with his talents. Some of the epigrammatic poems on literary subjects, previously uncollected, suggest a confluence between personal creative crises and a more pervasive cultural malaise. ‘The Tales of Ireland’, regretting work pursued too zealously in ‘youthful frenzy’ and left unfinished, implies links between mental illness and a mind attracted to mythological modes. ‘No Recompense’ finds the poet silenced, incapable of taking comfort from the speech of ‘mortal mouth’ that is both an individual lover’s and the collective voice of critical recognition (*Collected*, p. 117).

Though the poems are arranged without regard to chronology of composition, the mood is one of retrospection and reorganisation. The lyrics of *The Cattle-drive in Connaught* are divided definitively between those with historical or current settings, and those which are based on myth, with ‘The Music Healers’, the plays, and an abbreviated *Pilgrimage* interposed. Lyrics originally forming part of the plays have been reabsorbed into their dramatic sources,

leaving *Pilgrimage* shorn of ‘The Scholar’. ‘The Music Healers’ is revised to emphasise a situation which would continue to interest Clarke until the end of his career and ‘The Healing of Mis’: the coaxing of a frenzied individual into clarity of mind through patient persistence and – often – the development of a sexual bond. Direct autobiographical resonances, as I noted in the last chapter, however, are fewer in this mid-length tale than in the lyric ‘The Frenzy of Suibhne’. Some remaining fragments of *The Sword of the West* are presented under the subtitle ‘Gods and Men’, but these sacrifice their slender claim on narrative coherence without proposing linguistic or thematic interest in its place. They have been revised to employ a rather less ethereal idiom than their 1921 equivalents, though the sub-Yeatsian ‘O Love There is No Beauty’ remains largely untouched. *The Fires of Baal* and *The Vengeance of Fionn* appear without significant revision at the end of the book. The reader of *Collected Poems* may reflect that it constitutes a basis rather slight for Clarke’s moderately substantial reputation in the 1930s. While Yeats mistook the nature of Clarke’s historical interests and verbal techniques when he called him a creature of Revivalist ‘propaganda’, he accurately identified in Clarke a muted mood that might share much with derivativeness, and a failure of the imaginative ambition that licensed his own lofty discourtesy. Colum’s praise prompts a similarly equivocal response:

Meantime we can say of Austin Clarke that in a period of literary innovation he is one of the very few poets whose innovations have gone beyond the blurred and the experimental and that he has made poetry which comes fresh, clear and lovely through the use of newly-moulded verse structure.<sup>1</sup>

Well, up to a point. ‘Blurred and experimental’ (or just ‘blurred’) describes three-quarters of the book Colum introduces, and indeed, a similar proportion of Clarke’s later work, right through to his last published poem, ‘The Wooing of Becfolá’. But ‘fresh, clear and lovely’ Clarke’s best poems surely are: not self-consciously or assertively ‘innovative’ – indeed, their achievement questions implicitly the validity of ‘innovation’ as category and judgement of value – but confidently producing sounds and structures not to be found elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Padraic Colum, ‘Introduction’ to Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), pp. 11–18, at p. 11.

In his other publication of 1936, *The Singing-Men at Cashel*, experiment blurs almost entirely a very promising subject for a historical romance: the life of the tenth-century queen Gormlai, in whose voice Clarke had composed one of the poems collected in *Pilgrimage*. 'Romances are complicated affairs', notes its epigraph, a remark attributed to St Patrick in *Acallam na Senórach*, a Middle Irish text in which the saint is told stories of the pagan past by surviving members of the Fianna. The complications of Clarke's text are nonetheless somewhat in advance of generic requirement. The reasoning behind its structure is obscure: divided into three books of respectively fourteen, twelve and three chapters, it narrates the early life of Gormlai mostly from her own viewpoint, with frequent authorial comment, while a sub-plot follows the adventures of Anier MacConglinne. Though Anier's experiences at St Patrick's Purgatory are thematically related to the main plot – they recast Gormlai's metaphysical uncertainties as farce – it is difficult to see the rationale for introducing him in the first few pages of the novel, picking up his story towards the end of the first book, and then devoting most of the short last book to him. It is probably this combination of philosophical sophistication and narrative ineptitude that led one of Allen & Unwin's readers to comment on the manuscript: 'I am inclined to think it is distinguished enough to risk a small loss over it – I say distinguished enough, rare enough, not good.'<sup>2</sup>

The strength of *The Singing-Men at Cashel* is its characterisation of Gormlai; its weakness the instability of the narrator's persona. Clarke's interest in and sympathy with the lives of women serves him in the creation of a main character who is engaging even when her circumstances are tedious. Gormlai is romanticized: she is beautiful, quick-witted and naturally modest, but she is no cipher. Her sexual scruples, always anachronistic, have now become old-fashioned as well, but her psychodrama deserves to be taken seriously: it is often a version of Clarke's own. Gormlai's situation after her second marriage, alternating between denial of responsibility for the choices she has made and self-reproach for her excuse-making, has considerable autobiographical resonance, while the novel's happy ending is perhaps a tribute to its dedicatee, Nora. The work fails ultimately not because it is outdated in its expectations of behaviour and feeling, but because the fastidious and

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<sup>2</sup> Reader's report on *Singing-Men at Cashel*, Austin Clarke Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 38 705/3.

unreliable authorial persona is irreconcilable with a compassionate account of Gormlai's emotional life.

Clarke recognised Gormlai's semi-legendary story as a useful vehicle for exploring the soul-body dualism that legitimates the attitudes to sexuality that troubled his own life. Her first marriage to the king-bishop Cormac founders because he is all soul and pious study: Gormlai accepts a *mariage blanc* as a condition of access to the scholarly life she loves, but recoils when she finds her husband is a secret self-flagellant. She can tolerate the suppression of physical life, but not hatred of the body. Her second marriage, to the rough, brutish Carrol, is carnal, but excludes intellect – it issues in his violence, for which she divorces him. Her third marriage, to Nial, reconciles the dualistic opposition, and the novel concludes: 'So far, then, the love-story of Nial and Gormlai, set down by a poor clerk to keep body and soul together.'<sup>3</sup> It is rather an exaggeration to call it their 'love-story' – their relationship occupies a relatively small part of the novel and when Clarke finally gives them a love-scene, it is almost absurdly preoccupied with his own theological concerns. Gormlai's marriage to Cormac and scholarly life in Cashel occupy most of the text; her life with Carrol is treated briefly, while the story of her flight from him under Nial's protection is barely mentioned. Clarke's gift for conveying the delights of learning is much in evidence in *The Singing Men at Cashel*, to the exclusion of the kinetic and suspenseful material characteristic of romance. The punning signature of the 'poor clerk' draws attention, not perhaps easily or felicitously, to differences between narratorial and authorial attitudes as well as to a broadly anti-dualistic message. Clarke was fond of plays on his name, which in part accounts for his choice of a clerical student as the speaker of many early poems and as the heroes of his first and third novels.

The origins of the 'poor clerk' persona, as well as the germ of Clarke's interest in Gormlai, are further suggested by a curious chapter towards the close of the second book of *The Singing-Men at Cashel*. This chapter is told from the point of view of Ceallachan, a scribe of the early eleventh century. Against a background of events recognizable as those leading to the battle of Clontarf, Ceallachan is copying a chronicle detailing the tenth-century battle of Bealach Mugna, at which Flann Sinna and Cearball faced Gormlai's first husband, Cormac. The eleventh-century monk works within sight of the summer residence of Brian Boru, and is distracted by the evidence of

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<sup>3</sup> Austin Clarke, *The Singing-Men at Cashel* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1936), p. 382.



gathering war in his own time. In his agitation he picks up a 'lay romance' which Clarke calls *Searc Nial do Gormflaith*, (correctly, *Serc Gormlathie do Niall*). Now lost, this is the story from which the group of Middle Irish poems attributed to Gormlaith may ultimately derive. Ceallachan grows fascinated by this secular text, and as he reads it verse and prose passages are presented as quotation. The verse is from Clarke's 'Confession of Queen Gormlai' and the prose appears to be Clarke's own invention, based on the supposed contents of the lost text. Ceallachan is again interrupted, this time by the noise of women – the entourage of the Gormflaith (or Kormloða) of *his* era – travelling downriver to court. Ceallachan reapplies himself to the love-story, and another prose passage is 'quoted', alongside, bafflingly, a verse extract from Clarke's *Sword of the West* (1921). The chapter concludes with Ceallachan's self-reproach for his beguilement by 'one of those secular tales which are designed, under a pretended moral concern, to incite passion in the mind.' (*Singing Men*, p.322)

Ceallachan's closing judgement on *Serc Gormlathie do Niall* is an apt description of Clarke's novel, but it is clear also that *The Singing-Men at Cashel* is not an attempted reconstruction of the lost tale. Ceallachan's 'lay romance' describes Gormlai's situation

at Cashel with considerable brevity, but the circumstances which led to her desertion of Carroll were enumerated in great detail. [...] the main interest of the story was concentrated on her flight with Nial which was described at great length. It was clear the storyteller had taken the old Elopement Tales for his model [...] (*Singing Men*, p. 316)

Clarke's novel of course inverts this structure, with no very happy result. Nor does this interpolation resolve the problem of narrative voice in *The Singing-Men at Cashel*. The 'poor clerk' is not Ceallachan, and he is not Clarke himself, though he has affinities with both. This failure to develop a consistent authorial persona characterizes (and mars) this novel as it does *The Bright Temptation*.

The structure of *The Singing-Men at Cashel* seems, like that of *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, to be a failed experiment, and we might look to the novel's odd configuration for signs of liberating potential. Clarke attempts in both novel and later poem to defy readers' expectations of a certain narrative shape, with comparably cluttered and unpolished results. Gormlai's rebellion against Catholic sexual morality is confined to her thoughts – her behaviour

throughout conforms to traditional notions of feminine respectability and modesty. Insofar as she is an allegorical protagonist, however, she inverts conventional gender decorum, which posits a male agent among static female figures and feminised places. Such an inversion is not in itself evidence of feminist intent, though the unusual gender polarity may highlight allegory's propensity to ignore the body's integrity and treat it as a container for meaning, a literary effect analogous to philosophical dualism.

Although the sub-plot involving Anier MacConglinne is imperfectly worked out, it too suggests something of Clarke's liberating intentions for the novel, and how they are stymied by an innate conservatism. As *The Son of Learning* also shows, Clarke had no great gift for farce: would-be riotousness slips easily into fustian verbosity. Anier's visit to St Patrick's Purgatory, which occupies most of the last book, offers an opportunity for satire at the expense of the bureaucracy surrounding the pilgrimage. (Complaints about administrative procedure restricting access to the holy site feature in many medieval accounts – making this one of the few places in *The Singing-Men at Casbel* where Clarke attempts some historical realism.) As Anier begins the ritual, the mood rapidly becomes sinister and frightening. The monks tell him that the vigil has induced madness in previous penitents, using Clarke's characteristic formulation for insanity: 'His memory was completely gone.' In the cave itself Anier undergoes a dualistic struggle: his soul, corrupted by years of sin, becomes a 'dreadful watcher' which he can neither control nor separate from: 'That was why it stirred when he stirred, why it waited so slyly, brooding to itself. It had not entirely freed itself from his body. He could feel its roots below his mind.' (*Singing Men*, p.368). His soul conceives a lust for perdition, while his body fights for self-preservation, suggesting Clarke's reversal of the usual dualistic hierarchy of esteem: it is the body that will preserve Anier for possible repentance and salvation. He sees himself as a laid-out corpse, a delusion which also afflicts Maurice Devane in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*:

They were stripping the corpse of its single penance-robe and Anier could see the wax-pale feet [...] he saw the slender limbs of the dead, saw his own loins reveal plainly all their secret sins of abuse. The four mutes were about to lift the corpse and place it in the coffin, when Anier felt agonizing pains pass through him. He wanted to shriek, to gasp that they were making a terrible mistake. He was not dead! He was not dead! (*Singing Men*, p. 371)

His recovery in a bright room similarly recalls Maurice's recuperation after forced feeding: 'Anier awakened with a feeble cry and looked around him in bewilderment. He was lying in bed in a sunny guest-room with linen-white walls and the stone floor was neatly strewn with fresh green reeds.' (*Singing Men*, p.375) Upon his waking, Anier comes to much the same conclusion as the young Jane Eyre before Mr Brocklehurst – the best way to avoid damnation is not to die: 'all his young life was before him and he would have plenty of time later on to face those latent fears. Meanwhile he would be cautious, he would take no risks, he would guard his skin as precious as if it were gold-leaf' (*Singing Men*, p.376). Anier's imagination immediately starts converting his experience of metaphysical terror into a good yarn: 'he began to invent the horrible dragons, gridirons and toothed instruments of torture [...] He would go far and wide, so that all would praise his great exploits and courage in the other world.' (*Singing Men*, p.377) Clarke handles Anier's implied recidivism lightly; there is a liberating suggestion in the trickster's ontological struggle that it is the body, not the soul, in which primal wisdom resides. However, Anier's adventure in St Patrick's Purgatory, in its uneasy negotiation between philosophical (and autobiographical) seriousness and absurdity, anticipates Clarke's version of Calderón's *El Purgatorio de San Patricio*, completed in 1968. Clarke's sense of humour is piqued by the baroque excess of the 17<sup>th</sup> century *comedia devota*, and in the characterisation of the egregious villain Luis Enius, we see him toying with farce. The overall faithfulness of Clarke's version to Calderón's pious tone, however, suggests that the author's sympathies, in early novel as well as late play, may not be as distant from Catholic orthodoxy as some critics have supposed.

It was entirely possible for a contemporary reader with no particular knowledge of Clarke's work or background to find, as did the less astute of Allen & Unwin's readers, that 'the whole thing reeks of and is conditioned by the Catholic faith in its bluntest and most uncompromising form', conceding that 'there may be a public for it in Ireland [...]' The other reader points out that his descriptions of 'the physical sensations of a male virgin about to get into bed with a woman' and of the culdee Malachi exposing himself to Gormlai are likely to offend British censors (they in fact did not), not to mention even more rigorous authorities across the Irish Sea: 'Mr Clarke has presumably abandoned all idea of writing for the Irish public. But he can't because he defies the Index and the Irish censorship, say "just anything".'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Austin Clarke Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 38705/3.

If nothing else, the readers between them accurately summarize the likely market for this novel.

*Night and Morning*, which collects poems from the same period, is to an even greater extent, and more than any other of Clarke's publications, 'conditioned by the Catholic faith in its bluntest and most uncompromising form.' Conditioned by biographical knowledge and familiarity with subsequent publications, readers approach this booklet as the poet's protest against a tyrannous Catholicism that emphasised continual self-scrutiny for signs of deviance at the expense of positive attempts at right action. Lyric verse allows Clarke to express dissent more directly than the contemporaneous novel's multiple and confused perspectives, but in a majority of these poems it must still be inferred from anguish. In the eponymous poem, Clarke praises 'the voice of logic', but the mood of the collection is of contorted demurral rather than 'the holy rage of argument' (*Collected*, p. 182).

The critical response to *Night and Morning* stresses its 'struggle between reason and faith' (Harmon, p.77), 'the conflict between man's reason and religious doctrines that would repress it'.<sup>5</sup> But this is an approach which confuses as much as it illuminates, and the fault lies with the poems' scholastic diction as well as the critics who have taken it at face value. The conflict animating these poems is primarily not between rational enquiry and religious belief, but between sanity and madness. 'Reason', 'thought' and 'mind', much-repeated in these poems, are words signifying mental health (or its absence) rather than theological terms of art. In that Clarke attributed his breakdown to habits of self-suppression inculcated by Catholic teaching, these notions are of course not entirely separable. But the poems are comprehensible as explorations of mania and delirium as they largely are not as meditations on intellectual freedom. 'Summer Lightning' is paradigmatic as 'Penal Law', for all that the quatrain is the better poem, is not.

The title-poem sets the tone for the collection:

I know the injured pride of sleep  
 The strippers at the mocking post,  
 The insult in the house of Caesar  
 And every moment that can hold  
 In brief the miserable act

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory A. Schirmer, *The Poetry of Austin Clarke* (Notre Dame and Dublin: Notre Dame University Press and Dolmen, 1983), p. 44.

Of centuries. Though can but share  
Belief – and the tormented soul,  
Changing confession to despair,  
Must wear a borrowed robe. (*Collected*, p. 181)

Physical degradation creates contrary effects in rhetoric, an ambitious but empty abstraction which works to collapse and derange signification. 'The strippers at the mocking-post' conflates three events of the Passion: the scourging at the pillar, the crowd's mockery and the removal of Christ's outer garment by his executioners, but the economy of the phrase is shadowed by meaninglessness – 'mocking-post' is unidiomatic, understandable only by analogy with 'whipping-post'. The speaker's identification with Christ is itself equivocal: it might be a near-blasphemous delusion, or an entirely orthodox instance of affective contemplation. Temporal contraction 'every moment [...] hold [...] centuries' and the subsuming of individual 'Thought' into collective 'Belief' produce an agonised dualism, which nonetheless reclothes the stripped speaker in a 'borrowed robe' of flesh. The language of mental distress also inflects Clarke's allusions to conciliar condemnations of Johannes Scotus Eriugena and the legend of his murder by students wielding sharpened pens:

How many councils and decrees  
Have perished in the simple prayer  
That gave obedience to the knee;  
Trampling of rostrum, feathering  
Of pens at cock-rise, sum of reason  
To elevate a common soul:  
Forgotten as the minds that bled  
For us (*Collected*, p. 181)

The ambivalence which creates convincingly abject utterance continues to possess the poem at every stage of its movement, ultimately, perhaps, to its detriment. The final stanza conjures an intellectual climate more forgiving than that of the speaker's present:

O when all Europe was astir  
With echo of learned controversy,  
The voice of logic led the choir

Such quality was in all being,  
 The forks of heaven and earth  
 Had met, town-walled, in mortal view  
 And in the pride that we ignore  
 The holy rage of argument,  
 God was made man once more. (*Collected* p. 182)

So ahistorical is this evocation that Schirmer can assert that it refers to the Reformation (Schirmer, p. 50). He is mistaken, but the oblique inflection of ‘forks’ by King Lear’s absolute abjection and ‘town-walled’ by the showier variety of the condition delineated by John Donne in the fourteenth Holy Sonnet probably explains the misprision. Luther is, however, a presence in ‘Tenebrae’, and that poem also attempts the ‘tortuous thought’ that would meet with demurrals from the later Clarke (*Reviews and Essays*, p. 129). Harmon contents himself with paraphrase, remarking that Clarke ‘commemorates a period when God’s humanity was proudly and passionately realised through argument’ (p.80). It is likely that Clarke means his readers to think of a Church which could accommodate Eriugena and his philosophical successors up to and including Aquinas, but the previous stanza’s references to the suppression of Eriugena’s thought and his death complicate this conclusion, reminding us that Eriugena worked at the margins of orthodoxy even in his own tolerant period. And it is again coloured by self-abasement and a sense of last things: if the ‘forks of heaven and this earth’ suggest, as Harmon comments (p.80), attempts by medieval town planners to imitate the Heavenly Jerusalem, they also imply apocalyptic lightning, and the confluence of worlds at the end of time. The last line carries connotations of the Second Coming as well as claiming that the divine spark in humanity is fulfilled only in freedom of thought; despite the past tense, a heavenly Church, not just a medieval one, is adumbrated here. Readers who recognise a variation on the play of tense employed by Donne at the close of Holy Sonnet VII (there, conditionality is made more emphatic than outright statement – ‘that’s as good / As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood’) might suspect that Clarke took rather more seriously than he often admitted Yeats’s injunction to follow the ‘austere example’ of early modern lyric.<sup>6</sup> ‘Mortal Pride’ retains a trace of the same meeting, often relayed in anecdote by Clarke, in which Yeats suggested he found a ‘neo-Catholic’ poetic school.

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<sup>6</sup> See ‘Glimpses of W. B. Yeats’, *Reviews and Essays*, pp. 30–40, at p. 35.

Otherwise undistinguished, it offers glum answer to the defence Clarke then tried to mount against Yeats's strictures: 'How could we learn to write the traditional songs of repentance before we had known those "merry sins" of which Synge had spoken?': 'Thought is older than the years: / Before our doom, it came and went.' (*Collected*, p. 182)

'Tenebrae' brings metaphysical wit to matter familiar from earlier poems such as 'Celibacy', but it does so at the cost of obscuring their stark, dualistic physicality. Titled 'Song in Lent' on first publication in the *London Mercury*, it refers to the sombre rite which before reforms to the Catholic liturgy in the mid-twentieth century took place on the last three days in Holy Week. During Tenebrae, fifteen candles mounted on a triangular 'hearse' were extinguished one at a time after the recital of each of the psalms which structure Matins and Lauds, gradually darkening the church; the six altar candles were then put out in turn. A last remaining candle was removed behind the altar, leaving the church in darkness. The conclusion of Tenebrae was signalled by a 'great noise' made by the celebrant stamping or slamming shut his breviary and the single light was restored to the altar to symbolise hope of the Resurrection as the congregation departed in silence. These holy theatricals all have a place in Clarke's poem, though they are deflected in ways which do not entirely serve their lyric potential.

As in 'Night and Morning', the speaker engages in affective contemplation, reflecting on Christ's prayer in Gethsemane (which leaves, surely inadvertently, a ghostly trace of Jonson's Celia: 'Night has a napkin deep in fold / To keep the cup') and the stations of the Cross. Reason and faith, the pair which replace the soul and body of *Pilgrimage* and the early novels, both hold terror:

who dare pray  
If all in reason should be lost,  
The agony of man betrayed  
At every station of the cross?

'Who dare pray / If all in reason should be lost' can be read ambivalently, meaning either 'what is the purpose of prayer if reason might absorb and dissolve faith?' or 'all that is in and constitutes reason might be lost in prayer, and madness ensue'. But though these readings are incompatible, they lead

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<sup>7</sup> *The Yeats We Knew* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1969) p. 93.

to the same materialistic conclusion. Viewed by a rational unbeliever or by a madman, the Passion is painfully revealed ('betrayed' returning us briefly to Gethsemane) as mere torture and judicial murder.

The subject indoctrinated in childhood cannot abandon emotional response to that in which he no longer believes, so it is unsurprising that Clarke then deliberates on the effects of guilt upon the young mind. He turns back from Holy Week to the beginning of Lent: the Ash Wednesday Mass at which members of the congregation receive the sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads. The juvenile congregant is touched by a Church presiding over 'centuries of mortal anguish' and an ancient custom; the priest's thumb 'crumbles into dust' as he performs it. (As the ash is applied the priest tells each recipient: 'Remember, man, that dust thou art and into dust thou shalt return'.) The embodiment of institutional morbidity in individual mortality makes this a relatively anti-clerical moment for Clarke: he tends more often to think platonically of a Church let down by the zealousness or prurience of its ministers. The wit of this play on 'touch' is not maintained in the syntax of the second stanza or its abstract talk of 'despair' and 'innocence' (*Collected*, p.183), but tactility recurs, in violent and deranged form, in the third:

I hammer on that common door  
 Too frantic in my superstition  
 Transfix with nails that I have broken,  
 The angry notice of the mind. (*Collected*, p. 183)

Meditation on the instruments of the Passion becomes Luther's posting of the 95 Theses as the speaker grows impatient with the 'superstition' of affective Catholic practice. Protest and Protestantism are rational, 'of the mind', where orthodox Catholicism, with its cults of martyrdom, hammering hands and broken nails, is of the body. But the vocabulary of frenzy is pervasive enough to implicate the act of resistance also: here is a mind crucified by the body that dualism demands it master. In fact, orthodoxy might absorb even radical cacophony: the hammering of the speaker for admittance or egress is echoed in the 'great noise' which marks the close of *Tenebrae*.

'*Tenebrae*' ends by rejecting reason as it is understood by Christian and secularist alike, separating 'mind' from 'soul': 'an open mind disturbs the soul'. The speaker refuses catharsis, turning away from 'the sun that makes a show / Of half the world.' The pun seems to have 'The Sunne Rising' as its source; though limp by Donne's bravura standard, it also turns on hyperbole.



Donne's speaker, by repeated inversion, turns absurd self-centredness into good grace; Clarke's hysterically insists on morbid contemplation of 'darkness' even after the conclusion of the rite, making a show of himself even as he claims others are shown up. 'Tenebrae' is noisy with paradox and polysemy, but it illustrates the redundancy of these when a strong argument is missing: the poem sinks into unreason as the 'flame [...] upon the spike' in its penultimate line.

With three exceptions, the poems of *Night and Morning* replicate the difficulties of the opening lyrics. 'The Lucky Coin' anticipates Clarke's dissenting later voice in its acknowledgment that Irish nationalism's alliance with Catholicism had a retrogressive effect on personal freedom, but the governing metaphor of 'a coin of different shape' (*Collected*, p.187) implies a historical argument about post-Emancipation mercantilism which never appears. 'The Jewels' manifests an aggravated form of the same tendency. It is never made quite clear how the eponymous 'carbons of the consciousness' are related to the poem's concern with the insupportable pressure of immemorial tradition. The speaker of 'Repentance' harbours notions of eluding divine justice comparable to those voiced by Anier MacConglinne in *The Singing-Men at Cashel*: 'Could I unbutton mad thought, quick-save / My skin, if I were caught at last / Without my soul and dragged to torment' (*Collected*, p.187), but these simply replicate rather than develop the uncertain tone of the novel, poised as it is between farce and solemnity. 'Summer Lightning', Clarke's most candid poem about his mental illness to be published before *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* (into which it was incorporated), is notable also for the articulation of harsher views about madness and salvation than even contemporary Catholicism. Using the figures of sudden illumination and photographic negativity to create a world of moral black and white, it begins with a cataclysmic flash of lightning, related to and perhaps precipitated by blasphemy: 'The heavens opened. With a scream / The blackman at his night prayers / Had disappeared in blasphemy' (*Collected* p. 190, p. 338). The lightning acts on the patients in their beds, stripping them of their humanity, their resemblance to God: 'Ashing the faces of madmen / Until God's likeness died'. The speaker of 'Summer Lightning' claims that the mad are totally excluded from salvation, 'sinning without end / [...] in their pride / And agony of wrong' (p. 191), where orthodoxy permits them baptism and confirmation, though not communion. Unable to partake of the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, these inmates become the location of God's death, the lightning the negative image of the darkness that fell at the sixth hour. The

speaker pities the patients, but is ultimately merciless – God can die *in* the mad, but not *for* them. Readings of this poem depend on an understanding of who speaks – a mad persona, the poet remembering his own insanity or an excessively rigid onlooker – and Clarke withholds or obscures this information with the unfortunate result that the poem’s ambivalence tends toward inconsequentiality rather than significance.

Of the three exceptional poems in *Night and Morning*, two are of such a high order as to seem out of place in this problematic and at times bewildering collection. The other, ‘Martha Blake’, is one of a number of attempts by Clarke to view sympathetically uncerebral religious devotion. Martha Blake, often identified with Clarke’s sister Eileen, who is a central figure in the vividly-realised fifth chapter of *Twice Round the Black Church*, is also cognate with Agnes Gerrard, the heroine of the fragmentary novel *The Lattice* – indeed in some drafts the character there is called Martha Blake. The vowel-patterning of ‘Martha Blake’ is less subtle than the best in *Pilgrimage* and ‘The Straying Student’, and Clarke’s attempts at intimate simplicity of diction can descend towards banality: ‘the priest is murmuring / What she can scarcely tell, her heart / Is making such a stir’ (*Collected* p.184) ‘she turns / To multiply her praise / Goes over all the foolish words / And finds they are all the same’ (p.185). But just as Agnes is a more engaging character than Maurice Devane, Martha holds our interest as most of the self-dramatising *alter egos* who populate *Night and Morning* do not. It would hardly be exaggeration to say Clarke is unique among his Irish poetic contemporaries in his genuine interest in women’s inner lives. If his equation of unthinking faith with femininity and tortured intellectual doubt with masculine speakers might be read as sexist, it is also true that assuming a woman’s viewpoint brought out something like the best in him. The ambiguities of ‘Martha Blake’ emerge from the poem’s double perspective, which treats Martha’s innocence respectfully as well as sceptically, and consequently they have an artistic rationale lacking elsewhere.

In ‘Penal Law’ multiple meaning serves argument, rather than overwhelming it, and the result is a near-perfect satire, one of Clarke’s most memorable poems. Its premise is similar to that of ‘The Lucky Coin’ – clerical power in Ireland since Catholic Emancipation, and particularly since Independence, has grown more oppressive than the Penal Laws – but its tone is defiant:

Burn Ovid with the rest. Lovers will find  
A hedge-school for themselves and learn by heart

All that the clergy banish from the mind  
When hands are joined and head bows in the dark. (*Collected*, p. 189)

Hedge-schools, the informal institutions where many Irish Catholics received education before Emancipation, were in some cases remarkable for the sophistication of their curricula, whereas the Irish Free State censored even canonical writings in the name of morality. The phrase has a homelier connotation too: in the Ireland in which Clarke wrote, rural lovers seeking privacy in hedges ran the risk of being beaten from them by a patrolling parish priest. Ovid is invoked as amatory tutelar but also as a celebrated exile. The Irish poet may not be banished to the shores of the Black Sea, but inner emigration has deleterious consequences: 'banish from the mind' reminds the reader of Clarke's own amnesiac breakdowns. To learn 'by heart' that which the clergy would rather were not even thought quietly suggests a rejection of dualism, a reconciliation of body with rational soul. 'When hands are joined and head bows in the dark' might on its own signify prayer, but placed in syntactic context its erotic associations are given priority. Multiple meaning in the longer lyrics creates confusion because no such decision about a primary connotation has been made; 'Penal Law' maintains ambiguity but keeps it subordinate to satirical purpose.

'The Straying Student', the *Night and Morning* poem with by far the firmest historical setting, belongs more to the world of *Pilgrimage* than any piece in the later collection. Its vowel-music is extraordinarily fine, the subtlest Clarke ever made: 'On a holy day when sails were blowing southward / A bishop sang the Mass in Inishmore' (*Collected*, p.188).<sup>8</sup> The open vowels of the first line modulate into alternation between closed and open in the second, indicating a move from nature to culture, from the free sound of wind in sails to the changes of pitch and tension in a human voice. The varying tones of a celebrant singing Mass moves into an antithetical description of the sex-segregated congregations common in the west of Ireland until Clarke's own time: 'Men took one side, their wives were on the other' (p.188). The clerical student who speaks the poem is enticed from this solemn service and from the religious life in general by a woman who personifies sensual pleasure, high culture and learning. A type of the *spéir-bean*, she symbolises

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<sup>8</sup> For readings of assonantal patterning in 'The Straying Student', see Gregory Schirmer, *The Poetry of Austin Clarke* (Notre Dame and Mountrath: The University of Notre Dame Press and Dolmen, 1983), p. 58 and Augustine Martin, 'The Rediscovery of Austin Clarke', *Studies*, 54: 216 (1965), pp. 417–18.

not Ireland but Renaissance Europe, ‘when Popes were bad’ (p.188). The moment of his seduction is brilliantly conjured in sound: ‘wild in despair my parents cried aloud / For they saw the vision draw me to the doorway’, the first of these lines creating, with slightly less pronounced open and closed vowels, counterpoint to the bishop’s singing. Given that the congregation has been split by sex, the parents’ lamentation must also be heard stereophonically. Meanwhile, ‘draw me’/‘doorway’ suggests the student’s almost somnambulant movement towards liberation.

The visionary woman is a fantasy of simultaneous dominance and complaisance: she assumes ‘the wealth of every age [...] makes it her own’ and teaches the student ‘all I know’, yet looks on him ‘in eager admiration’ (p.188). The assonantal play in these endwords, ‘own’/ ‘admiration’ / ‘know’, anticipates her echoing ‘great laugh’, which unlike the singing of the bishop or the wails of the student’s parents is a single, full sound: ‘as if a pillar caught it back alone’ (p.188). These rich, fulfilling measures are reiterated in the first line of the next stanza: ‘I learned the prouder counsel of her throat’ (p.189). She takes on aspects of giantess and goddess – ‘the mountain was her throne’ – but is mischievous and mocking of the student’s attempts at her apotheosis. The temporal uncertainties of this passage – she taught him ‘for a summer’, was enthroned ‘for an hour’ – offer a sense of great energy barely contained in fragile idyll.

The fourth stanza confirms the poem’s historical setting in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, when the Penal Laws forced seminarians to travel to continental Europe for their training: ‘They say I was sent back from Salamanca / And failed in logic, but I wrote her praise / Nine times upon a college wall in France’. *Non sequitur* combines with graceful cadence to assert that poetic logic supersedes the scholastic kind. The final stanza manipulates *aisling* conventions – instead of being inspired to Jacobite fervour on behalf of Ireland, or accompanying the *spéir-bhean* to an otherworld, the student fears he may be abandoned in a priest-ridden nation:

lest she may deceive me  
And leave me in this land, where every woman’s son  
Must carry his own coffin and believe,  
In dread, all that the clergy teach the young. (*Collected*, p. 189)

The *aisling* typically moves from despair to defiance. Without sacrificing the intricacy typical of the form, ‘The Straying Student’ inverts that movement,

the suspensive line break 'believe, / In dread' conveying the anxiety that plagues the dissident in a society which exacts conformity at all costs.

*Night and Morning* is helpful to the reader seeking to understand Clarke's work and profile to a degree disproportionate to either its size or success. Illustrative rather than argumentative, its clotted ambiguity demonstrates the damage faith inflicts upon reason without, for the most part, being able to mount a case against it. 'Penal Law' constitutes the only real exception here; 'The Straying Student', while beautiful, deflects its argument with semi-mythical setting and the reification attendant on allegory. If ever there were a collection of poems to prove wrong the maxim that literature should show, not tell, *Night and Morning* is it.

Clarke suffered further mental health problems in the late 1930s, and it would be perverse to argue that these, alongside the creative impasse represented by *Night and Morning*, did not affect his decision to refrain from publishing collections of lyric verse until 1955. Before speaking of a 'silence', however, or ascribing too much to the effects of trauma, it is worth reflecting that the structure of the 1936 *Collected* suggests that Clarke saw no very clear distinction between his poetry for the stage and his lyrics, and that his output until 1938 had been principally narrative and dramatic. He remained active in Irish literary life through the insular, stagnant 1940s and early 50s through his theatre work, his broadcasting and involvement with PEN. The volume and character of his post-1955 work must – not without justification – suggest return and rejuvenation, but discontinuous though it is, Clarke's career is scarcely more so than those of his poetic contemporaries who remained resident in Ireland. Prevailing cultural conditions, as much as personal or creative difficulty, deflected Clarke's energies away from his lyric strengths.

Between 1938 and 1955 nine of Clarke's plays were produced on stage or in radio versions; from 1943 he published his plays in private limited editions from his own Bridge Press; some were made available in trade editions by London publishers. He promoted verse speaking on his radio programme, devoting twelve minutes each week to the broadcast of poems performed by the Dublin Verse Speaking Society, and wrote articles explaining and defending the dramatic and choral practice of the art. These essays emphasise the need for training in the art of speaking verse, for actors thoroughly to understand their texts, and Clarke's hopes to foster a renewed interest in a form which he acknowledges audiences may find difficult or rebarbative. He returns often to analogies with music, seeing the verse text as a 'score', and to

his belief that poetry is ‘primarily an oral art’.<sup>9</sup> He is dismissive of the careless speech of the popular stage, and sceptical of hieratic Yeatsian ritualism, blaming the latter for separating verse from not just a broad audience, but from public and political life:

the failure of verse drama [in Ireland] is linked with the failure of poetry itself to establish contact. The deliberate removal of poetry from the political and moral sphere during the Parnell split undoubtedly improved our art but [...] in destroying the tradition of popular political poetry, a tradition which carried on, however inadequately, the Gaelic practice of the eighteenth century, we narrowed the function of poetry and banished the great ugly emotions which have shaped our national life. (‘Verse Speaking and Verse Drama’, p. 307).

As this critical writing suggests, Clarke was well-informed about the techniques and curious about the possibilities of spoken verse. His plays use intricate but naturalistic verse forms which demand alert, sophisticated interpretation. *As The Crow Flies*, produced by Radio Eireann in 1942, based on a Middle Irish tale translated by Douglas Hyde as ‘The Adventures of Léithin’, uses different verse forms for different speakers.<sup>10</sup> The storm-marooned monks who provide the frame-story speak blank heroic verse; the tragic heroine, the maternal eagle Léithin and the villainous Crow of Achill in full-rhyming tetrameter couplets; the Stag of Leiterlone in tetrameter couplets rhyming on unstressed or penultimate syllables, while the ancient Salmon of Knowledge deploys a variety of effects, including medial and leonine rhyme, assonance, even anagrams unlikely to be perceived by the listener: ‘the shapeless maw / Swam’ (*Selected Plays*, p. 119). Clarke introduces to the play ‘The Blackbird of Derrycairn’, his loose translation of an early modern Irish song, ‘Lon doire an chairn’ (the original narrative features a blackbird, but not such a lyrical one). The first stanza of this translation contains some of the loveliest vowel-music Clarke ever composed: ‘Stop, stop and listen for the bough top / Is whistling and the sun is brighter / Than God’s own shadow in the cup now!’ (*Selected Plays*, p.113); patterns of acceleration and delay ‘Stop / stop / top / God’, ‘bough / now’, ‘own shadow’ ‘listen / Is whistling’ evoke

<sup>9</sup> ‘Verse Speaking and Verse Drama’, (1937) *Selected Plays of Austin Clarke*, ed. Mary Shine Thompson (Gerard’s Cross: Colin Smythe, 2006), pp. 307–16, at p. 309.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Hyde, ‘The Adventures of Léithin’, *Legends of Saints and Sinners* (London and Leipzig: T. Fisher Unwin, 1915), pp. 40–55.

birdsong's seemingly random variations in pitch and rhythm. When Clarke tackles his original's Fenian lore the effects are variable: 'He found the forest track, he brought back / This beak to gild the branch and tell, there, / Why men must welcome in the daylight.' The leonine 'track / back' is crude, and 'there' apparently redundant. The dialogue of *As The Crow Flies*, while often artful, has in greater measure still this careless, unfinished quality:

I saw a deluge  
Destroy in rage the ancient world  
And millions perish in the surge  
Hugeing above another's refuge,  
I could not keep by subterfuge  
My mortal shape. Yet I escaped  
Into another consciousness  
That did not know me. I lived on.  
Men called me blessed. In the west  
I prophesied to Partholan,  
Divined the arts but knew no rest.

(*Selected Plays*, 120)

'Deluge / rage / surge / hugeing / refuge / subterfuge', with an echo in the 'sh' of 'perish', suggest the roar of waters in spate; the uneuphonious neologism 'hugeing' and the abundance of soft g sounds are appropriate to the theme of overwhelm but variation in vowel sounds, delayed and off-stress rhyme prevent monotony. The second half of the passage, though it indicates purpose clearly enough – sibilants succeed soft g as the flood recedes – admits banality and predictable full rhyme.

Technique in itself, however, cannot substitute the eerie energy provided by strong source material, such as that of *As The Crow Flies*. *The Plot Succeeds*, first performed in 1950, uses with far more polished effect, a similar form to the Stag's speeches from the earlier play: it is written in pentameter couplets alternating feminine and masculine endings; the first syllable of each di- or polysyllabic endword rhymes with the monosyllable which completes the following line. The rippling effect thus created is appropriate to the play's main character – Mannanaun MacLir, the Irish iteration of Proteus – and suggests, even to audiences unfamiliar with Gaelic verse, the non-anglophone presence which shapes Hiberno-English. The requirements of rhyme sometimes introduce strenuousness where there should be levity; conversely, the themes of derangement and metamorphosis are too lightly handled – even in a farce,

the audience should feel something at stake, and here, resolution feels too easy, too near at hand.

A similar difficulty attends *The Viscount of Blarney* (1944), a homage to George Fitzmaurice, whose neglected plays at the same period Clarke was producing for the stage and promoting in print. In such works as *The Magic Glasses* and *The Dandy Dolls* (1914), Fitzmaurice 'brought the figures of folklore into the lives and houses of the folk' (*Penny*, p. 185) and his 'dramatic fantasies', though intermittently, convey the threat to humans represented by a conscienceless, sometimes actively malign otherworld. *The Dandy Dolls*, for example, though perhaps overlong and coyly slangy in idiom (despite Clarke's comparison of the playwrights, not in the least Syngean) demonstrates a relationship between folk-belief and the defamiliarising experience theorisable as the Freudian *unheimlich* (*Reviews and Essays*, pp. 94–8, at p. 94). Mary Shine Thompson is generous to *The Viscount of Blarney* in calling it 'a psychological drama' (*Selected Plays*, p. xii), but Clarke seems reluctant to admit the anarchic mood at work in Fitzmaurice's most 'precarious, difficult artform' (*Reviews and Essays*, p. 98).

A single-sentence summary of *Black Fast* (1941) might suggest that Clarke's preference for recondite, antiquarian subject-matter here reaches an extreme: it is a farce based on the medieval controversy between the Roman and Irish churches over the date of Easter. A king who holds with the monastic Irish Church thus finds himself eating luxuries while his queen, who has adopted the Roman calendar, fasts for Lent; he must then fast while she organizes Easter feasts. Clarke's history of self-starvation and marital discord gives this piece some biographical interest; contemporary audiences ignorant of personal resonance might have perceived in its portrayal of a chilly, authoritarian Roman delegation a lament for Irish religious autonomy lost, and a perspicacious critique of the ways in which the Catholic church harnessed the frustrations of able, intelligent women, allowing them to wield tyrannical influence in its service while reserving true power to itself alone. (In a contemporaneous work otherwise different on every point, *The Great Hunger* (1942), Patrick Kavanagh makes an almost identical observation.)

Clarke's anti-clerical satire grew bolder during the 1940s, though, as the unfinished novel *The Lattice* demonstrates, he maintained considerable sympathy with dogmatic concerns. The most heavily drafted chapter, the failure of which seems to have prompted the abandonment of the project, deals with a priest's farcical attempts to mortify his flesh by jumping naked into a



nettle-bed: Clarke could not find a workable idiom in which to convey the simultaneous absurdity and pathos of the scene.

*The Sun Dances at Easter*, written in the late 1940s and published in 1952, is the only one of Clarke's prose works to achieve a workable compromise between his theological interests and his disgust at the prurience of Church teaching about sexuality. That it is also the only one to have a coherent narrative structure is hardly coincidental. Orla, its heroine, is the young wife of a petty chieftain whose happiness is marred by her inability to conceive a child. She meets a mysterious hermit (in fact the fertility god Aongus) who tells her that those who make a pilgrimage to the well of St Naal on the saint's day and see the well's resident trout leap in the water invariably have their heart's desire. She encounters some opposition to this 'pagan' scheme from her husband, but he relents and allows her to travel with her maid Blanaid. On their way they meet Enda, a handsome clerical student on a pilgrimage to recover his vocation. Orla falls a little in love with him, because he physically resembles her husband, especially in his 'red-gold' hair, but is more thoughtful than unimaginative Flann. After a night spent in a convent, during which Orla sees a vision of angels or fairies, the two women meet Enda again. To pass the time, he tells them a version of the medieval text, *Altram Tige Da Medar* (as Clarke translates it, *The House of the Two Golden Methers*) which Clarke also dramatized for performance in 1958 as *The Moment Next To Nothing*. The First Story concerns a hermit, Ceasan, who instructs a Sidhe-woman, the foster-daughter of Aongus, in Christianity. In the medieval text Eithne is converted and Aongus defeated; in Clarke's versions she disappears, reclaimed by her foster-father, at the moment of her baptism. The prose retelling is more successful than the later dramatic redaction, because it is framed by and echoed in the novel's main narrative and because the introspective emphasis that Clarke places on the story is ill-suited to the stage.

The third part of *The Sun Dances at Easter* returns to Orla's pilgrimage. Having arrived at the pilgrims' hostel, Orla is disconcerted by the vulgar behaviour of some of the women, but soon becomes caught up in the lubricious festivities which are the source of the well's reputation for enhancing fertility. She is about to be overwhelmed (willingly) by a fat bearded reveler when Enda reappears and 'rescues' her. He intends to take her to the home of a distant relative, but seeking shelter in a bothy, they stray into an enchanted house. Here Enda tells the Second Story – again an adaptation of a medieval narrative – *Eachtra Chléirigh na Croiceann* – which Clarke retitles 'The Only Jealousy of Congal More', describing the trick played by Aongus

on a High King of Ireland who boasts of his wife's chastity. Congal is transformed into a goat, witnesses his wife's infidelity, and wanders Ireland until his human consciousness almost evaporates. He is returned to himself when he fights and defeats another goat for possession of a goatling. This fantasia on embodiment is followed by a return to the story of Orla and Enda. They make love in the enchanted house, wake from its spell, and query the reality of their experience. Their talk prompts them to physical and temporal sex. At dawn, Orla creeps away to the well, and sees the trout. She meets Blanaid again and thinks she has caught a glimpse of Enda – but it is her husband, who has followed her. Aongus has protected the lovers, however, and Flann guesses nothing of his wife's adventures: 'Her wish was granted, and in due course she presented her husband with a fine bouncing boy. Little Flann had one red-gold curl, and whenever his mother suckled him, she looked down at it, knowing that he would soon have as many of them as his daddy.' (p. 254) These, the last words of the novel, illustrate succinctly the accommodation of radical notions within a conservative worldview which is characteristic of Clarke's mature work. With authorial connivance, Orla practises upon patriarchy, but does not seek to subvert it.

*The Sun Dances at Easter* is as preoccupied by the relationship between body and soul as either of the early novels, but unlike them, it adopts a coherent authorial viewpoint. The editorial voice is confined mostly to satirical comment, as for example when the travellers arrive to spend the night at a convent and Blanaid is dismissed to eat in the kitchen: 'For centuries in Ireland only those of good birth could enter into holy orders and the grace of a religious vocation was never bestowed by Heaven on the poor or lowly.' (p. 59) Orla is delicate enough to be disgusted by the sight of a sow in farrow which Blanaid thinks 'fine' (p. 32), though this is clearly a function of (rather anachronistically expressed) social class. She is capable, as Gormlai never could be, of amusement at her hungry, rumbling stomach (p. 35) and delight in the 'bob-and-bounce of her warm merry body' (p. 58), which suggests a humane development in Clarke's idea of feminine refinement. Her response to Flann's sexual demands is patronising, but it is strongly suggested that his ineptitude is at fault: 'Men really were ridiculous, all gobbles and grabs one minute, and the minute after that nothing but contented snores.' (p. 19) Sex with Enda, on the other hand, fulfils successively her spiritual and physical needs. Clarke unequivocally prioritises the latter, though on the conservative grounds that spiritual sex cannot be procreative: 'Had Aongus brought them back, knowing that the wish of her life could not be granted while they were

bodiless?' (p. 248). When the couple make love under enchantment, it seems that their clothes undress themselves and that they do not move, 'yet were in each other's arms' (p. 247). Orla emerges dissatisfied and humiliated from the enchantment, concluding that Enda, who has disappeared in pursuit of a vision of angels or fairies similar to hers in the convent, 'was just the same as any other Irishman, anxious always for the sake of his own soul.' (p. 243) Their corporeal love-making, however, is fully conscious and willed, and all the better for that: 'Only of two things was she certain: she had free will and she made her choice in less than a minute.' (p. 248)

Enda is a plausible narrator for the interpolated stories: the persona of disillusioned clerical student suits Clarke's interest in theological minutiae and his charming but sometimes cumbersome sense of humour. That the narrative voice which is so unstable in the earlier novels is lucid here is attributable largely to Clarke's discovery of a more sophisticated textual structure. The relationship of the two retellings to one another and to the framing narrative constitutes Clarke's most sustained and successful prose exploration of duality: the crude oppositions of *The Bright Temptation* have developed into an achieved composition. Maurice Harmon notes many of the doublings in his critical monograph; as many go unremarked.<sup>11</sup> The First Story concentrates on the body of a fairy woman, which dematerialises at the height of emotional tension, the Second on that of an enchanted mortal man who is restored to his proper body when he can demonstrate healthy animal desire; when Enda and Orla make love both male and female bodies are celebrated. The story of Eithne and Ceanan is tragic: Eithne's protestations of sincerity and Ceanan's self-reproach remind the reader of Clarke's early work, not least of the soul-searching of *The Singing-Men of Cashel*, but also of some lyrics of the late 1930s, collected in *Night and Morning*. The tale of Congal More, though it is centrally concerned with selfhood, is an extraverted comedy, dealing in both traditional tropes – the jealous cuckold's comeuppance – and topical satire: the sermon of Macaud, Abbot-bishop of Midhe, parodies the condescending idiom of John Charles McQuaid. The framing story is closer in tone to the second embedded narrative, and they also share a positive sense of the primacy of the physical, but that sense is also present in Ceanan's agonised loss of Eithne at the moment he thinks he has preserved her soul. The personnel of the First Story closely resemble that of the framing narrative: in each case a scholar falls in love with an intelligent but uneducated

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice Harmon, *Austin Clarke: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1991), p. 112.

woman as he tutors her, while the Second Story, with its lack of a central female character, explores not a relationship, but the notion of a unitary self.

The three stories are linked by the presence of Aongus and the fairy otherworld. Aongus assumes a slightly different character in each: in the framing story he is Orla's benign protector, quivering with mirth; in the tale of Congal More he takes on an antic, folkloric disposition, and his glee is tinged by a dangerous hilarity. In the First Story he is a solemn, disembodied presence, seen by Ceasan as a threat not just to Eithne's soul but to nascent Irish Christianity. (In a note to *The Moment Next to Nothing*, Clarke draws attention to Máire MacNeill's conjecture that the 'remote origin of the story may have been a myth of the struggles of two gods for a goddess',<sup>12</sup> suggesting that he may have reinterpreted the medieval text as an allegory of the struggle to possess Ireland's 'soul'.) Clarke, attracted to scholarship, order and discipline as much as to the natural, innocent life of the sexual body, complicates diametric oppositions of paganism to Christianity. Orla's object, the well of St Naal, belongs to Christian as well as pagan tradition: its reputation for enhancing fertility is indicated explicitly in the name of the Christian saint to whom it is dedicated, St Natalis; Orla makes her case to Flann for a pilgrimage to the well only after consulting Christian sources as well as folk tradition. Insofar as he is a poet and storyteller, Enda is enthusiastic for but also sceptical about the far-fetched and bathetic hagiography and miracle lore of the early Irish Church. Clarke gently draws attention to the semi-legendary status of St Patrick: Orla has never heard of the saint, reflecting the late date and derivative nature of the sources related to him (pp. 66–68). Eithne and Ceasan, in their philosophical dialogues, draw out the similarities between the fairy world and Christian heaven. The realm of the de Danaan is susceptible, it seems, to description in the language of medieval metaphysics. Eithne exclaims:

'But he is one of the Tuatha de Danaan.'

'And the Tuatha de Danaan dwell behind—'

'The Faed Fiad.'

'In a place or state of being?'

'Both.'

'And substance is finer there, closer to will mind and body in this world, closer even to thought than mind?'

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<sup>12</sup> Austin Clarke, *Collected Plays* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1963), p. 402

'Yes.'

'That world is like ours in its forms, but bright with an eternal summer?'  
(p. 113–14)

The form and ontological terminology of this dialogue are echoed by Orla and Enda as they try to work out the reality of their sojourn under enchantment (p.248). Congal's story is implicitly Christian in its account of the negotiations between exterior form and inner self, but also contains fascinating moments of synthesis, as when the goat, driven from a monastery by the Abbot-bishop whose aid he sought, is drawn to Aongus's home on the banks of the Boyne. The dream he has at this site is neither Christian nor pagan, but of himself as the Israelites' scapegoat, and then of the promiscuity of Old Testament patriarchs: 'his mind [...] saw by the smokeless lights of cruses the licence of polygamy: women smearing themselves with unguents, laughing and pleasureful' (p.200). The scene is reminiscent of Clarke's early, unsuccessful essay in Orientalism, *The Fires of Baal* (1920), the language of a later poem, 'The Hippophagi' (1960), which attempts an account of the poet's creative hinterland. The vulgar notion that Christian mythology is a mere overlay on autochthonous paganism is not one to which Clarke is prone. He acknowledges that the Irish mythological corpus is in the deepest sense a Christian one, and makes a good case for installing the fantastic tales of early Irish saints alongside the pre-Christian legends that were themselves only preserved because of the efforts of clerical scholars. *The Sun Dances at Easter*, in its unassuming way, suggests that eclecticism is a higher cultural good than authenticity; and that a similar bric-a-brac aesthetic might be brought – in place of the labour of conscience that characterises the 1930s novels – to problems of body and soul.

Clarke's poetry of the 1950s and 1960s reflects this faith in variety. He turns decisively towards documentary and the contemporary, publishing poems that respond to Ireland's economic liberalisation and continued social conservatism. Clarke's political instincts were the reverse of those dominant in 'modernising' Lemassian Ireland: he was an economic protectionist, sceptical of the European Economic Community, outraged by the cruelties free-trade policy imposed upon horses destined for slaughter in Europe. He regarded the shallow bonhomie of diplomats and publicity-seeking politicians with contempt tempered by various levels of amusement. Within certain limits imposed by his native fastidiousness, he was a social liberal and humanitarian: his concerns are for the poor, whose human right to family life

was denied by an authoritarian state, for women whose health was threatened by the ban on contraception, for the mentally ill, whose suffering he shared. Other political poems reveal less sympathetic attitudes, usually attributable to naïveté, but perhaps no less culpable for that.

Given his frequent ill-health, Clarke's productivity during this period is remarkable. Half of the *Collected Poems* dates from the last nineteen years of his life: as well as pamphlets from his own Bridge Press, he published the substantial collections *Flight to Africa* (1963), *Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage* (1967) *The Echo at Coole* (1968) and the long poem *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* (1966) with Dolmen Press. These larger collections display formal resourcefulness alongside an increasing tendency towards poetry that can seem as much encumbered as enabled by form. The effect is often one of lack of finish, as Clarke embarks on an ambitious structure which he seems incapable of completing: *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, with its variable stanza forms and lack of corresponding rationale for them, presents the most extensive example. Patrick Kavanagh, who at the same period wrote of the importance of 'the no-caring jag' in the development of an individual aesthetic managed, as Clarke never did, to make lack of care into an act of defiance.<sup>13</sup> Clarke's adherence to laborious poetic form (which is nonetheless slapdash in effect) might partially account for the popular sense that Kavanagh is the more radical poet, despite the latter's relative quietism and conservatism in political matters.

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Self-Portrait' in *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 2003), pp. 305–16, at p. 313.

## Chapter 4

### “Early Unfinished Sketch”: 1955–1963

Few poetic careers lend themselves as well to the notion of the stylistic and thematic watershed as Clarke’s. The energy and volume of production of his last twenty years makes the reasonably prolific period to 1955 seem leisurely. Conscience-ridden guilt is replaced by social commentary, and infatuation with the Gaelic past by a vociferous engagement with prosaic contemporary Ireland. Thomas Kinsella’s claim is typical: ‘Clarke emerged from his silence in 1955 in sudden, full-fledged humanitarian rage’.<sup>1</sup>

*Ancient Lights*, the pamphlet-length collection which marks this turning point, is nonetheless retrospective in mood. Its title names a right customary under English law, which also applied in Ireland before and after independence – that of the owner of a building to object to new constructions if they block natural light, a right which may only be claimed when the windows of the building have received such light for an uninterrupted period of twenty years. With its use of a legal term of art referring primarily to densely-inhabited areas, the title signals Clarke’s commitment to quotidian and urban subject matter, while the twenty year period specified in ancient lights legislation is perhaps evocative of the poet’s only slightly shorter lyric ‘silence’. But the title also implies his reliance on tradition and custom in mounting his protests against injustice. Clarke’s social vision is humanitarian, but conservative: he locates compassion, decency and dignity in an imagined past, and rarely contemplates a possible future. Though *Ancient Lights* contains topical work, it is framed by poems of recollection, beginning with ‘Celebrations’, which remembers the Catholic Eucharistic Congress of 1932, and ending with a melancholy squib regretting Clarke’s move to Dublin in

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Clarke, *Selected Poems*, ed. Thomas Kinsella (Dublin: Dolmen, 1976), p. xiii.

1937. The title poem, meanwhile, returns to childhood experience to offer a critique of psychologically abusive religious practice.

A number of the shorter poems in *Ancient Lights* address a concern implicit in the earlier 'Aisling' and 'The Lucky Coin': that Irish independence had simply meant a transfer of cultural sovereignty from Westminster to Rome. Clarke's later articulations of this theme are more up-to-date in their frame of reference, but their ambiguities suggest a continuing self-censorship. 'Celebrations', for example, satirises the ostentation with which Dublin hosted the Eucharistic Congress and welcomed the Papal Legate and his entourage, expensive pomp designed to emphasise the distinctively Catholic character of the young state. Though Ireland is 'uncrowned' (and, indeed, by the time of the poem's appearance in a book, a republic) authority asserts itself in forms that have not been changed by political autonomy. The self-congratulatory festivities take place '[i]n the shade of Dublin Castle', the personification of Justice above the Castle gate now condemns diehard Republicans 'for treason', and Papal flags 'fly above the green' (*Collected Poems*, p. 195). A version of the poem published in the *Dublin Magazine* in 1941 tells us that College Green, site of the Irish Parliament of 1782–1800 and of Trinity College, is meant, but Clarke's revision also suggests the contemporary subservience of the green, white and gold Irish tricolour (and of the traditional green of nationalist Ireland, as in Yeats's 'Wherever green is worn') to the Papal yellow and white. The rebels of 1916 were bound by no such servility, Clarke concludes, contrasting the idealism and disorder of that Easter with the timid, materialistic polity that developed in the wake of the Civil War.

Clarke's attack on the mercantilism of Irish Catholic culture might bring to mind 'September 1913' – 'hoardings recount our faith', which was revised from 1941's 'hoardings blacken with faith', perhaps has a distant ancestor in that poem's 'greasy till' – but Clarke is unable to partake of Yeats's Olympian disdain. Honesty and responsibility inhibit him as much as class or sect. Unlike Yeats, he is not prepared to disavow middle-class origins for rhetorical advantage; 'Celebrations' is prickly with first-person plural pronouns, variously ironised. Residual identification with the prosaic society he criticises issues in ambivalence; the need to speak out competes with an equally vociferous impulse to encrypt. Wordplay can diminish satirical impact: 'criss-cross keys, / On yellow and white above the green / Treble the wards of nation.' 'Wards' here might mean authority (OED gives it as an archaic variant of 'warder') or those subject to it; it may signify the institutions where the



latter are kept by the former, or the material means by which incarceration is effected (as in 'wards of a lock'). Such economy of phrase compounds the powerlessness of irony in its confrontations with ignorance and brutality: it is always possible simply to ignore, or take at face value, the ironic comment.

Not all the satires in *Ancient Lights* are muted by density of expression: "Three Poems about Children" is both openly angry and thoughtful. The first two poems in the sequence explore the related habits of mind that permit the lethal neglect attacked in the third. Their multivalence depends on an interplay between material and spiritual understandings of individual words, phrases and concepts. The first poem asserts that the 'roofless faith' of primitive or penal times is to be preferred to institutions that exercise moral judgment over poor or illegitimate children rather than caring for them: 'When the first breath is unforgiven / And charity, to find a home / Redeems the baby from the breast.' (*Collected*, p. 196) Their 'tiny tears', in a Blakean turn of phrase, 'are in the walls we build'. The notion that such children bear a particularly heavy weight of original sin (theologically unsound, but common in folk Catholicism and supported in this case by a Church that treats them as pariahs) is developed in the second poem. These children are compared to infant souls in Limbo: they 'die too quick / for our salvation [...] before they can share the sky / With us.' The play here is on the difference between spiritual and physical understandings of the same concepts: the 'orphans', though baptized, are unsaved from the neglect which has led to their deaths; they may, owing to their baptism, share the rewards of 'the sky' understood as 'heaven', but not enjoy freedom of movement or adult status. Clarke takes aim at a morally unconvincing doctrine concerning the death of unbaptized babies, who are supposed to subsist in subjective happiness outside the sight of God: 'faith allow / Obscurity of being / And clay rejoice' (*Collected*, p. 197), but his anger at seemingly unjust dogma also has concrete relevance.

The relationship of Catholic thought on infant death to institutional lack of care is devastatingly confirmed in the third poem. It deals with the deaths in 1943 of thirty-five girls in a fire at an orphanage run by the Poor Clare order of nuns. Clarke's note on the poem emphasizes the lack of even the most basic safety provision – the children's dormitory had no fire escape and they were placed under the care of one elderly lay sister, who also died. Speaking after the accident, the Bishop of Kilmore claimed that the girls had been spared a life of temptation and sin, or as Clarke mordantly puts it: 'Those children, charred in Cavan / Passed straight through Hell to Heaven' (*Collected*, p. 197). Grotesque rhymes – the poem begins with another: 'Martyr

and heretic / have been the shrieking wick' – prefigure Clarke's later addiction to homonymic rhyme, but here they have an almost philosophical purpose. Death by fire turns the children, anathematized by poverty or lack of parentage, into something like 'martyrs'; to excuse culpable negligence ('hide us from enquiry') the Bishop invokes a dualism that places no value on continued physical existence in 'Cavan' when there is 'Heaven' to aspire to. Their baptism is the limit, it seems, of the Church's duty of care.

In a similar manner, 'Mother and Child' caps punning obliquity with direct final lines: 'Before you damp it with your spit / Respect our newest postage stamp.' (*Collected*, p. 202) Clarke refers to the cognitive disjunction between the Mariolatry of the Marian Year celebrations in 1954, when images of the Madonna appeared on Irish postage stamps, and clerical pressure on government to reject a medical care scheme for mothers and children proposed by the new Republic's Minister of Health Noel Browne in 1950. The healthcare controversy was bitter enough ultimately to break a coalition government, yet the succeeding Fianna Fáil administration enacted a milder version of Browne's proposals with no opposition from the bishops: 'But now our caution has been mended / The side-door opened, bill amended' (*Collected*, p. 202). Clarke tackles the time-wasting compromises attendant on timid leadership as well as the unchristian hostility of the clergy to 'common help' (*Collected*, p. 202), seeing that the former, while not immediately and outrageously hypocritical, can be as damaging to society's welfare as the latter.

Ambiguity, meanwhile, serves Clarke well when his satirical target is the furtiveness enforced on adults pursuing their human right to private life. 'Marriage' attacks the complicated indignities imposed on couples who wished to limit the size of their families when the only birth control permitted by Church and state was the highly unreliable 'rhythm' method. Clarke's euphemism imitates the cryptic, evasive discourse that was his society's only means of discussing sex, which blighted happiness by impeding communication:

Parents are sinful now, for they must whisper  
 Too much in the dark. Aye, there's the rub!  
 [...]
   
 Night-school  
 Of love where all, who learn to cheat, grow pale  
 With guilty hope at every change of moon! (*Collected*, p. 196)

*Double-entendre* here recalls 'Penal Law', though 'Marriage' lacks that poem's concision and compression.

'The Envy of Poor Lovers' comes closer to the sardonic precision of the 1938 quatrain. The poem rebukes those tempted to read the title as a sentimentalisation of love in poverty – these 'poor lovers' are the ones envious, of conditions that are no more than human rights – shelter, family life: 'Her envy is the curtain seen at night time, [...] His envy – clasp of the married / [...] whose nature flows without the blame or shame'. (*Collected*, p.205) The pathos of their aspirations is amplified by other poems in *Ancient Lights*, which imply that marriage and respectability provide no solutions to the problems of unwanted pregnancy and emotional poverty. A mixture of off-stress and full rhymes suggests the lovers' uncertainty and fear of being interrupted, while enjambment offers liberation only to withdraw it: 'Lying in the grass as if it were a sin / To move'. The notion of 'Ireland keeping company with them' is haunting – intangible allegories of Catholic and nationalist history are constant presences, while physical relationships between real people are stymied even in the middle of love-making. The poem ends with a condemnation of the institutions to which the children of such lovers might be consigned, 'State-paid to snatch away the folly of poor lovers / For whom, it seems, the sacraments have failed.' (*Collected*, p.205) Elsewhere, Clarke expresses his anger at the removal of children from poor or unmarried parents to Industrial Schools. As he points out in 'A Simple Tale' (*Collected*, p. 262) and 'Living on Sin', the three pounds a week paid by State to Church for the care of each institutionalized child was unjustifiable in fiscal terms – a smaller amount, given directly to parents, would meet the children's needs. This unwieldy and inhumane system was based, it seemed, on an assumption of the immorality of poverty. 'The Envy of Poor Lovers' is linked to other poems in *Ancient Lights* by its concern with the two sacraments associated with sexuality: the lovers have been 'failed' by matrimony, which even if undergone will not end their anxieties, while their possible offspring run the risk of being 'failed' by the baptism which the Church feels is its only obligation to the children of the poor.

Clarke consistently expresses secularizing ideas that could still be considered radical in 1950s Ireland. His idiom exacts hard work from his readers, however, that some have justifiably felt that the wages are scanty. Adrian Frazier has observed:

[Clarke's] poetry often took the form of writing messages in code

so that ‘the enemy’ would not get the point, as in ‘The Jest’. A reader expects the labor of interpreting a dark maxim, of breaking the code, to yield deep wisdom, unsayable in any other words, but in Clarke’s case such labor is often rewarded with the quotidian and prosaic.<sup>2</sup>

Frazier is wrong about motivation here, if he means by ‘the enemy’ the Church and the Censorship Board. Irish writers, especially poets, whose small-circulation publications held little interest for the censoring authorities, did not for the most part write enigmatically to protect themselves, and Clarke’s recourse to gnomic language is to be understood rather in terms of his characteristically elusive poetics than of self-protection. In any event, most of the sanctions of which a small-minded society was capable had already been visited upon Clarke by the time he took up lyric poetry again – he had lost an academic position, suffered socially and financially for a failed marriage, been obliged to seek employment abroad and then to return home less than willingly and arguably to the detriment of his talent and had novels banned. Frazier’s example of ‘The Jest’, though, is relevant to his second point regarding the reader’s expectation of profundity. In that poem Clarke claims to ‘add for a jest / That you may think, / Not beat your breast, / Invisible ink.’ (*Collected*, p. 317) He does not want contrition of ‘the enemy’, but reflection. Readers who puzzle through his obliquities, ‘The Jest’ implies, will be rewarded not with unsayable profundity, but with a sceptical, independent habit of mind. That the insights thus painstakingly obtained are rather ordinary is part of the jest: the thoughtful sceptic finds little new under the sun. It might still be argued that Clarke is not worth the effort, that younger contemporaries – William Empson and Norman MacCaig come to mind – accomplish comparable acts of poetic estrangement with rather more dash and style. But the poems of this period do, as Kinsella puts it, ‘raise the question of legitimate obscurity in poetry’ – and do so not just in the rhetorical sense Kinsella implies, but quite genuinely.<sup>3</sup>

The longer, eponymous poem of *Ancient Lights* might in this regard be seen as exemplary. In a series of autobiographical incidents, the poem describes aspects of the speaker’s relationship to authoritarian religion. In

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian Frazier, ‘The Cod-Bewildered Schoolboy: Austin Clarke’s Later Poetry’, *Eire Ireland* 14:2 (1979), pp. 52–67, at p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kinsella, ‘The Poetic Career of Austin Clarke’, *Irish University Review*, 4:1 (Spring 1974), 128–36, at p. 136.

the second and third stanzas we encounter what might be termed one of Clarke’s master tropes, the bad confession:

Being sent to penance, come Saturday,  
I shuffled slower than my sins should.  
My fears were candle-spiked at side-shrines,  
Rays lengthened them in stained-glass. Confided  
To night again, my grief bowed down,  
Heard hand on shutter knob. Did I  
Take pleasure, when alone – how much –  
In a bad thought, immodest look  
Or worse, unnecessary touch?

Closeted in the confessional,  
I put on flesh, so many years  
Were added to my own, attempted  
In vain to keep Dominican  
As much i’ the dark as I was, mixing  
Whispered replies with his low words;  
Then shuddered past the crucifix,  
The feet so hammered, daubed-on blood-drip  
Black with lip-scrimmage of the damned. (*Collected*, p. 199)

As noted already, the distressing episode described here is repeated in different contexts, sometimes with different protagonists, over four decades of Clarke’s work. It is the more distressing since in each case the confession is inadequate not because the penitent withholds information or lies about his sins, but because he is bullied by his confessor into admitting a sin he has not committed. An early instance occurs in Clarke’s first novel, *The Bright Temptation*, when Aidan, near the close of his adventures, seeks shelter with a ferocious hermit, who hears his confession:

“And did the Devil cause you to touch yourself? Did you make yourself weak, my child?”

Pious was that question and familiar to Aidan, for he had been asked it in Confession at Cluanmore. Still, still, in the dark confession boxes of Ireland, the good clergy whisper that question to young penitents who admit of faults against the sixth commandment. Stammering, clasping

their sinful hands in shame, the young answer Heaven's representative in a tremble, until the very moment of absolution.<sup>4</sup>

In this example the penitent is adolescent, and the question, though hardly sensitive, might reasonably be expected to be understood. In 'Ancient Lights' the suggestion of the penitent's incomprehension is stronger: 'I put on flesh, so many years/ Were added to my own, attempted/ In vain to keep Dominican/ As much i' the dark as I was, mixing/ Whispered replies with his low words'. In the poem, the compulsive punning and uncertainty of tone take the place of the intrusive prose narrator with his ready historical parallel.

A fuller version of the bad confession trope appears in an unpublished prose narrative, *The Lattice*, which is roughly contemporaneous with 'Ancient Lights'.<sup>5</sup> Here, Maurice Devane, Clarke's alter ego, describes lifelong guilt arising from his first confession:

Was he not trying to recapture the innocence of childhood and yet as this and that detail sprang from his memory wrested from his active and inflamed conscience, was not that innocence only an illusion? Was it not in the darkness of the confession box as a child of seven that he had first lost that innocence? Was it not from that tiny torment at the age of seven that all this mental infection had spread? Quickly the unseen auger revealed the dreadful day of his first confession. He remembered the old white haired priest with his great hooked nose bearing down on him through the grille. He remembered the strange questions which he asked him, to which he kept coming back, probing and asking him so often that the question itself seemed a living thing that burrowed into his brain. After that the old man made him follow him to the vestry and there again kept asking him that strange question. It had seemed hours that inquisition and when he returned home in tears and told his mother, some instinct perhaps some dimly inherited cunning and dim awareness had prevented him from telling her what the question was. Later when he did realise the meaning of that question it seemed that even the grace of the sacrament could not avert the human encounters

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<sup>4</sup> Clarke, *The Bright Temptation: A Romance* (1932; rpt Dublin: Dolmen, 1965), p. 229

<sup>5</sup> Clarke did not date his drafts, and the disorganised state of the papers left to the National Library has resulted in a dearth of reliable internal evidence on dating.

of the confessional, the violation of a growing and personal intensity of his own mind.<sup>6</sup>

This upsetting episode, with its strong suggestion of a kind of psycho-sexual abuse of the seven-year-old Maurice, leaves the boy terrified of confession, to the extent that as a young man he feels ‘for years every confession he made was a bad one’. This account, otherwise remarkable like much of *The Lattice* for its heightened religious emotion, omits to mention what the priest’s question actually was. The memoir *Twice Round the Black Church*, published in 1962, supplies the inevitable answer:

Father O’Callaghan bent towards the grille and asked me a strange question which puzzled me for I could not understand it. He repeated the question and as I was still puzzled he proceeded to explain in detail and I was disturbed by a sense of evil. I denied everything but he did not believe me [...] He sat down [in the vestry], told me to kneel and once more repeated over and over his strange question, asking me if I had ever made myself weak. [...] At last, in fear and desperation, I admitted the unknown sin. I left the church feeling I had told a lie in my first confession and returned home in tears but with the instinct of childhood, said nothing about it to my mother.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the memoir’s first readers saw this episode as one of the most important, and were upset on Clarke’s behalf. Monk Gibbon wrote to him in January 1962, quoting his wife’s opinion that *Twice Round the Black Church* was ‘of course a terrible indictment of a Catholic upbringing’. A little later, having read the book himself, Gibbon nuanced this position considerably, noting that while there may be certain sectarian differences in attitudes to masturbation, his brother-in-law had experienced ‘exactly the same thing [...] at his Protestant preparatory school’, and had reacted in the same way ‘with lies and tears’. Gibbon concludes, ‘It enrages me and I find it hard to mitigate their offence even when I remember that they saw you threatened with mental collapse.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clarke, *The Lattice*, MS 38,705/7, Austin Clarke Papers, National Library of Ireland, 60–61. Typing errors have been silently corrected.

<sup>7</sup> Clarke, *Twice Round The Black Church: Early Memories of Ireland and England* (1962; rpt Dublin: Moytura, 1990), pp. 129–30.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Monk Gibbon, undated, MS 38,670/1, Austin Clarke Papers, National Library of Ireland.

The gradual worsening of its implications over the thirty-year period in which Clarke retold and remade the episode begs an analogy with therapeutic, rather than religious confession. He reveals more as he continues to write about it; he returns to it as a crucial psychological moment in his engagement with the Church. The process culminates in a phantasmagorical moment in *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* (1966). Maurice Devane, a mental patient in St Patrick's Hospital – as Clarke was in 1919 – receives a nocturnal visitation:

Often in priestly robe on a  
 Night of full moon, out of the waste,  
 A solitary figure, self-wasted,  
 Stole from the encampments – Onan,  
 Consoler of the young, the timid,  
 The captive. Administering, he passed down  
 The ward. Balsam was in his hand.  
 The self-sufficer, the anonym. (*Collected*, p. 340)

Clarke links confession with self-reference and a kind of traumatised repetition. It promotes excess and hysteria. The drafts of *The Lattice* stall and eventually peter out as the poet writes and rewrites a chapter in which Father O'Mara seeks to mortify his flesh by leaping naked except for gloves and a scarf into a bed of nettles. In some versions of the chapter he is observed by a horrified Agnes – another trope which Clarke had used before, in the novel *The Singing Men at Casbel*. There, Gormlai recoils from her king-bishop husband Cormac when she sees him practising self-flagellation. In both the published and the unpublished fictions the antidote to the excesses of confession and mortification is compassion: Gormlai and Agnes both feel pity for the hysterical men they observe.

The equally hysterical speaker of 'Ancient Lights' however, is also an observer, and one who turns to allegory for liberation from his terror:

Once as I crept from the church-steps,  
 Beside myself, the air opened  
 On purpose. Nature read in a flutter  
 An evening lesson above my head.  
 Atwirl beyond the headings, corbels,  
 A cage-bird came among sparrows  
 (The moral inescapable)



Plucked, roof-mired, all in mad bits, O  
The pizzicato of its wires!

(*Collected*, pp.199–200)

The moral may be inescapable, but it is also impenetrable. All we can discern for sure is that with this allegorised scene the speaker gains a measure of release. The sparrows seem to stand for nature, in contrast to the neurotic tension of the 'cage-bird', who can be identified with the traumatised penitent. The cage-bird is revealed as a kind of mechanical bird, with 'wires', which links it perhaps to the figure of the transmogrified poet in Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium':

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake,  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.<sup>9</sup>

However, for the speaker of 'Ancient Lights' the consequence of a Yeatsian rejection of nature and devotion to art has been derangement, figured in the dismemberment of the cage-bird. Clarke's clotted diction stands in opposition to Yeats's lucidity; apparently (and oddly) as a token of the speaker's emotional honesty. Yeats's stanza invites a response of disbelief which the reader suspects has been anticipated by the poet, the effect being well summarised by W. H. Auden: 'When Yeats assures me, in a stanza of the utmost magnificence, that after death he wants to become a mechanical bird, I feel that he is telling what my nanny would have called "A story"'.<sup>10</sup> Clarke's stanza, by contrast, trades on its claim to autobiographical truth and faith in the didactic purpose of Nature. Obscurity becomes a paradoxical indication of openness: Yeats's clarity intensifies the effect of his inscrutable irony; Clarke's imprecision signals the absence of same. Readers who, like Donald Davie, are prompted to ask for more detail concerning 'what it is that happens in the crucial fourth and fifth stanzas. Some sort of natural epiphany,

<sup>9</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J. M. Dent, 1990), pp. 239-40; at p. 240.

<sup>10</sup> W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 281.

undoubtedly, but what sort, and just how?<sup>11</sup> are bound to be disappointed, since a general sense of release from constraint is all that it is possible to unravel from Clarke's metaphor.

The fifth stanza continues on a Yeatsian note by examining the interrelation of desire and pity. The speaker is driven by pity to rescue a sparrow dropped by a bird of prey, and as he does so, feels an evaporation of '[a]ppetite':

Goodness of air can be proverbial:  
That day by the kerb at Rutland Square,  
A bronze bird fabled out of trees,  
Mailing the spearheads of the railings,  
Sparrow at nails. I hailed the skies  
To save the tiny dropper, found  
Appetite gone. A child of clay  
Had blustered it away. Pity  
Could raise some littleness from dust. (Collected, p. 200)

Only a re-accession of '[p]ity' might raise the 'littleness' of the sparrow, a 'littleness' of the collapsed appetite. In *A Vision* Yeats writes

the man must free the intellect from all motives founded upon personal desire, by the help of the external world, now for the first time mastered and studied for its own sake [...] Phase 23 receives not desire but pity, and not belief but wisdom. Pity needs wisdom as desire needs belief...<sup>12</sup>

Though it is hard to imagine Clarke himself having much sympathy with the mystical theory of *A Vision* – Davie imagines him saying a 'venomous yes' to suggestions that Yeats's theory of history is 'consolatory and anaesthetic' (Davie, p. 53) – his speaker in 'Ancient Lights' aims towards just such an impersonal study (if not quite mastery) of the external world, and the need for pity in any attempt to know that world.

For all that 'Ancient Lights' seems to be about the achievement of coherent subjectivity and independence, as an epiphanic poem it is less than a

<sup>11</sup> Donald Davie, 'Austin Clarke and Padraic Fallon', *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle Hulme: Carcanet, 1975), pp. 37–58, at p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> W. B. Yeats, *A Vision and Related Writings*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Arena, 1990), pp. 187–9.

triumphant success. At the very moment when Clarke's speaker describes his alleged freedom from ecclesiastical interference, his diction suffers from the same nervous afflatus that plagued him in the confessional:

There, walled by heresy, my fears  
Were solved. I had absolved myself:  
Feast-day effulgence, as though I gained  
For life a plenary indulgence.

The sun came out, new smoke flew up,  
The gutters of the Black Church rang  
With services. Waste water mocked  
The ballcocks: downpipes sparrowing,  
And all around the spires of Dublin  
Such swallowing in the air, such cowling  
To keep high offices pure: I heard  
From s hore to shore, the iron gratings  
Take half our heavens with a roar.

(*Collected*, pp. 200–1)

On a linguistic level, no absolution has occurred at all. The dense coagulation of absolved/solved and effulgence/indulgence works against the words' optimistic meanings, while the nervous three-in-one innuendo of 'ballcocks' returns us to the half-understood questioning in the confessional. 'Sparrowing' parodies the tender scene of the fifth stanza, while 'swallowing' becomes a kind of anti-image in its ambiguity: does it refer to birds leaving the 'spires' for the air, or to the drains gulping down water from the air? 'High offices' makes sense only when it is read architecturally – if the guttering fails the roof may leak foul water into the top floors of the commercial premises that line Mountjoy Street and Dorset Street – but given the poem's discourse of authority we read it first in terms of sacerdotal calling, and wonder what difference the weather outside makes to the prurient priest in his confessional. 'Shore' is a determinedly local pun on the Hiberno-English equivalent of Standard English 'sewer', with perhaps a fling at the closing paragraph of 'The Dead'.

Clarke's trust in his readers' empathetic understanding is in some senses typical of satire: most topical commentators rely on ideas of natural justice in order to demonstrate a society's deviance from them. In the time since the poet's death, such trust has become a marked characteristic of Irish poetry, especially in the consensus-driven culture of the Republic. Clarke can seem

dissident when measured against the conservative norms of the 1950s and 1960s, but received opinion is now largely in line with his mild socialism and opposition to an overweening clerisy. This can make Clarke appear less radical than he was in his own time, and, more significantly perhaps, obscure the stubbornly idiosyncratic nature of his participation in public and political life.

Even when not personal in the biographical sense, Clarke's was an intensely subjective engagement with the world. 'Return from England', the last poem in *Ancient Lights* and the only one apart from the title work to deal directly in autobiography, records the poet's continuing sense of displacement after his move back to Dublin. 'Usufruct', the first poem in *Too Great a Vine* (1957), dealing with his life interest in the home that Ellen Clarke had willed, ultimately, to the Church, makes clear an important cause of that unsettled mood. 'The Loss of Strength', from the same collection, registers another: Clarke's health problems following a severe heart attack in 1956. The latter poem's attempts at geographical panorama and pithy cultural commentary are constantly inflected by nostalgic dismay at urban sprawl and irritation at a nation bent on technological modernisation without a parallel spread of more liberal and compassionate attitudes. The poems of *Too Great a Vine* and *The Horse-Eaters* (1960), like those of their predecessor in the *Poems and Satires* series, almost invariably begin from a point of individual interest or observation. 'Local Complainer' (*Collected*, p. 213) adopts the persona of a Protestant bemused and faintly embittered by ruthlessly conformist Catholic piety, but the distaste for vulgar Mariolatry and bourgeois pomposity – not to mention certain erroneous political and sectarian assumptions, as the speaker grumbles that 'The loyalist become Loyola' – are so much Clarke's own that the poem's title is often used to comment on his penchant for contingent and topical subjects.

Commenting on the personalized nature of Clarke's satire, Denis Donoghue quotes 'The Flock at Dawn' ('Satire owns to pride / And poetry is what we dare express / When its neglect has been personified' and adds: 'Personified, exactly. Everyone who irritated Clarke was treated as the personification of some horrible Law or Principle.' For Donoghue, 'Clarke likes to have his ducks sitting, his targets stationary. He is not good with the process of idiom and change [...] Priests must remain "the punishers in black robes"'.<sup>13</sup> Clarke's satire has proved more durable than Donoghue's

<sup>13</sup> Denis Donoghue, 'Austin Clarke', [Review of *Collected Poems*, (1974)], repr. in *We Irish*:

impatience with it: it is Donoghue's confidence that the Church had modernized and the punishments stopped which now appears unfounded. On the nature of secular political life, too, Clarke might be seen to be more prescient than his critic: 'As for our politicians, Clarke thinks that they have done nothing but tear down old mansions and crawl into the EEC.' (Donoghue, p. 250) Donoghue is right, however, to suggest that Clarke is not a thinker in poetry: 'evasive and insecure in thought [...] could never distinguish between contingency and law, causalities and symptoms.' Like those of many 'a born satirist', his arguments rely on sentiment, a quality amply illustrated by his poems in outraged reaction to Ireland's trade in live horses for the European meat market. In 'Knacker Rhymes', 'The Hippophagi' and, later, *Forget Me Not* (1962) – with more nostalgia, perhaps, than strict reason – he indicts the export of horses as a betrayal of animals once affectionately regarded and indispensable.

Like 'Ancient Lights', 'The Hippophagi' begins with a critique of clerical prurience but moves beyond that to economic and nationalist concerns. As the poem develops, it becomes clear that while the connection of personal to political is immediate, the method of connection is often associative and eccentric:

Can jingle straighten the horse's mouth  
No monthly crowd forestalled this market  
But men in the dark with hand-spit, chink  
And rustle. [...]

Deputies

Call out. 'Feed France.' 'Are we beholden  
To England?' Loaders at the North Wall  
Hurrah for the Hippophagi.

Tots echo: 'Let's hip off a gee.'

(*Collected*, p. 233)

The image of a horse-fair – perhaps the Smithfield market in north Dublin, close to Clarke's birthplace and childhood homes – shifts immediately to one of political corruption, the 'market' in this case, being the European Common Market. The Anglophobic Dáil deputies who can assure themselves of public support for a measure, however brutal, which disadvantages

the British economy, invoke the traditional sympathy of Irish nationalism with Catholic continental nations, particularly with France. Alliance with France, however, has historically been unsuccessful in achieving Irish nationalist aims – Clarke suggests that agreements over the trade in live horses are yet another example of a misalliance, made rather to spite England than to benefit Ireland. The stanza also reminds us that EEC membership, proposed for the first time when Clarke was writing ‘The Hippophagi’, was widely seen a way of liberating Irish commerce from a stifling dependence on Britain. So popular was the severance of these debilitating links, Clarke suggests, that Irish businesspeople and politicians would countenance inhumanity in order to achieve it. So the calls of the deputies devolve into the ‘Hurrah’ of dockyard workers on the North Wall, and then into imitative and largely meaningless baby-talk. The outlandish rhyme emphasises the degeneration of language under such political circumstances at the same time as it returns the stanza to the point of childhood reminiscence with which it began.

This process can also happen in reverse, so that politics connects immediately to the personal:

Horse-eating helps this ill-fare state  
 To Sunday plate, has the same sauce.  
 The worst abroad is now our best.  
 Social unrest can bed in Britain.  
 Sham steed was spirited by dunlop  
 I met with many a stop; what matter  
 If horse-shoe flattened a nail in tyre?                    (*Collected*, p. 234)

Clarke identifies a national preoccupation with measuring Ireland’s progress against that of other nations – understandable and common enough in postcolonial states, but damaging here because productive of complacency. In allowing the horse-trade to continue, Irish people both allow a barely acceptable minimum to constitute their highest standards of morality, and smugly assume that social problems either reside elsewhere or can be exported. ‘Social unrest can bed in Britain’ implies that emigration removed pressures on Irish society that might otherwise have led to civil strife, but it also communicates Irish disapproval of British public morality. Triggered by the words ‘unrest’ and ‘bed’ used in quite different and literal senses, Clarke then recalls the bicycle tours of Ireland he undertook as a young man, when he ‘knew the stone beds of Ireland’ (‘The Loss of Strength’ *Collected* p.212).

'The Hippophagi' refuses to draw distinctions between private and public, and wordplay is Clarke's main resource in effecting that refusal.

The patent need of Clarke's speakers to be seen as truth-tellers, and the way the poet aligns complexity of diction, syntax and sound with emotional honesty, calls into question the standard account of the motives behind his wordplay, summarised here, again by Donoghue: 'Homonyms are crucial in Clarke's poetry because he loves to find one sound releasing two words; all the better if one word stays at home and obeys the rules while the other runs wild and makes love upon whim and desire' (Donoghue, p. 248). 'The Hippophagi' at first seems to confirm Donoghue's point. The poem begins with stanzas of autobiographical reminiscence and critique of the ecclesiastical obsession with sexual sin. Nonetheless, the speaker manages to find sensuous, even sensual, pleasure in the accessories of worship: he values in particular his leather-bound *Key of Heaven*, which provokes an Orientalist hallucination as he puns on 'Morocco-bound':

Fond ones dozed with the patriarchs,  
Afrits, darkening from Syria  
In later myriads, saw dust-men,  
Who rode in rust, guard wormwood, shoe-holes  
Mad for Jerusalem. Sin shrouded  
The plural couch, concubinage.  
There was new vinage awash in ships:  
Love without lips and night prolonged:  
Our pallid Song o' Songs – her Talmud  
In ghetto – rudded in slumber of don,  
Aye, demijohn. Shall no cruse aid her?  
Lickerish echo: "no crusader." (Collected, p. 230)

Donoghue is right in that here (and elsewhere) Clarke links duality of meaning to speculation on sexual licence. But the stanza also engages with the nature of multiple meaning itself. Jerusalem traditionally might signify the historical Jewish city, the Church, the Christian soul, and the 'New Jerusalem', the heavenly Church triumphant. Jerusalem appears as the Jewish nation in the rather puzzling phrase 'her Talmud/ In ghetto' – Clarke seems to be suggesting that Christian typology confines Jewish tradition to a cultural 'ghetto'. The poem's Jerusalem is also the licentious prostitute of the Jewish prophetic tradition in exile, the 'holy land' of the Crusades, and a mixture of both of

these: a generalised location of sexualised exoticism. The ‘patriarchs’ of the first line might refer to the Church Fathers, in their capacity as practitioners of hermeneutics, as well as to the Old Testament patriarchs. That they doze, and that their believers’ trust in them is ‘[f]ond’, suggest unease with allegorical interpretation as much as distrust of ecclesiastical moral authority. The interpretation of the Song of Songs as allegory, initiated and sanctioned by a Church hostile to unruly sexual bodies, has made the biblical poem ‘pal-lid’. Though a combination of dreaming ‘slumber’, aristocratic or academic privilege (‘don’) and drunken licence (‘Aye, demijohn’) might restore the its blush-making eroticism (‘rudded’), Jerusalem – and by extension, the traditions embodied in the Song of Songs and the Talmud – remains captive at the end of the stanza, a widow lacking the benefit of Elijah’s miraculous ‘cruse’ (1 Kings 17:12–16). The crusaders, far from being Jerusalem’s saviours, are at best Quixotic figures: ‘dust-men’ (or ‘sawdust men’) ‘[w]ho rode in rust’ and had holes in their shoes. At worst, they exemplify a Church that has abnegated its moral responsibilities: they are implicitly equated with ‘[a] frits’, evil spirits of Arabian mythology. Characteristically, Clarke makes the same phrases suggest both possibilities: a dust-man empties the rubbish bins, but might also be a terrifying demon concocted of desert sand. ‘Rust’ is the creaky armour of Don Quixote, but also dried blood. ‘Lickerish’ sounds like a sweetmeat, but in Middle English means ‘lecherous’, suggesting the ‘rape’ of Jerusalem by the crusaders.

Free-range homonyms alone, however, can hardly account for the sense of unresolved duality in ‘The Hippophagi’. The poem has a pattern of assonance and internal rhyme intricate even for Clarke, and each twelve-line stanza ends with a rime riche couplet. It is allusive and syntactically dense, packing together saints, theologians, scientists, aviators, patriots and legendary figures. ‘The Hippophagi’ offers a critique of ersatz religious mystique and amoral technophilia, qualities which Clarke felt equally and simultaneously defined the ‘modernising’ Irish state of Seán Lemass’s administration. However, the master figure used to represent this ‘ill-fare state’ is one that opens the poet to charges of a secular sentimentality not that different in degree from the maudlin reverence accorded boy saints and virgin martyrs. The central premise of ‘The Hippophagi’ is that the replacement of horse-power by newer technologies, permitting the live export of surplus horses to mainland Europe for meat, reveals a ghastly moral void in the Irish state. Clarke is not an early representative of the animal-rights movement: his objection is not to the cruelty involved, which is no greater than in the



live export of other animals, in which he shows no interest. His concern is wholly for the symbolic value of the horse as companion and servant.

Critics are troubled by Clarke's apparent abandonment of reason and embrace of anthropomorphic sentiment, and try to explain them in terms of a broader symbolism. John Goodby exemplifies this approach: "The eating of horses thus becomes synonymous with the devouring of our creaturely selves [...] autophagy [...] Far from being peripheral in the modern world, poetry – the horse-play of children and the imagination – is crucial to preventing annihilation."<sup>14</sup> This, though it has appeal for critics – we should like to think we are doing something important as well as reading books – doesn't seem to be quite what Clarke means. 'Rhyme is no comforter', the poet affirms, either to children horsing about or to adults threatened by state-sanctioned barbarism. There is a problem with the first part of Goodby's claim, too. Clarke is fundamentally opposed to the kind of moral hierarchy that condemns the horse trade because it stands for a broader cruelty. Selling horses for meat is wrong to him not because it implies we are insensitive enough also to murder one another. Rather, it is wrong in itself: the absolutism, though it may be regarded as sentimental, is what gives the position moral force. 'The Hippophagi' combines dense, hypotactic syntax and recondite reference with what we might term a parataxis of overall effect. The poem conflates, for example, the melancholy of horseless streets and the devastation of carpet-bombing or even nuclear war:

The streets I roamed in, suddenly horseless,  
 No tenderness in sky: terror  
 Of day was there, ready to strike out  
 A little likeness. [...]  
 The sky our guide-book. Man above  
 His own Jehovah – spreading out  
 Fire-hands on town plan, chartered city:  
 No pore has pity. Quicker ends now  
 For daddies sending up their sons.  
 Death-dealing tons can fly alone;  
 Decimals known. (Collected, pp. 235–6)

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<sup>14</sup> John Goodby, 'The poetry of Austin Clarke', *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 21–41, at pp. 30–31.

Critical unease with this apparent recrudescence of an Irish stereotype of arbitrary nostalgia, and consequent attempts to explain it away as something much more rational, are not difficult to understand. Writers who have attempted to promote universal compassion are rarely received with sympathy, especially where there are grounds for suspecting that a doctrine of sacrificial empathy conceals indifference to fellow humans. Indiscriminate compassion is suggested by the excess of homonymic rhyme, even as its artificiality acts as a restraint on the lachrymose.

This still leaves unanswered the question of where Clarke is speaking from, and for whom, or what. A full account of his political commitment is obstructed by a widely-held view of the poet's moral honesty and his verbal craft as indistinguishable aspects of his achievement. Donoghue is scathing about Clarke's praise of Tito's Yugoslavia, though he fails to mention the poet's (admittedly inadequate) recantation (Donoghue, p. 250). W. J. McCormack also draws attention to critics' tendency to make excuses for Clarke's naïveté, though elsewhere he has recourse to it himself, when he suppresses his unease at 'The Last Republicans' (see above, Chapter 1).<sup>15</sup>

The texture of Clarke's writing also contributes to a sense that it lacks individuated enunciation and reference back to a coherent subjectivity. This may at first seem a perverse claim to make of a poet who has a very recognisable 'voice' and who co-opts techniques such as assonantal patterning, which once belonged to Irish poets collectively, to a personal poetic. But Clarke employs a number of strategies to frustrate his reader's desire to refer his texts back to a unitary subject. The deployment of autobiographically derived tropes such as the bad confession or flagellation in multiple, variously fictionalised contexts is one of these: when we look for the lyric self we find instead 'Maurice Devane', Aidan the novice, or the queen Gormlai. The reaction of all these figures – horrified silence or halting speech – emphasises the lack of a central source of articulation. The sentimentality of premise and ludic absurdity of procedure in 'The Hippophagi' suggest that the problem is ultimately less one of vocalisation and selfhood – there is no reason after all why a poet should not use polyphony or multi-vocalism to question the status of lyric subjectivity, as Clarke's friend and contemporary Hugh MacDiarmid did – than of the lack of a fully worked out moral vision. Whether we agree with the speaker or not, the poem's investment of moral

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<sup>15</sup> Austin Clarke, *Selected Poems*, ed. W. J. McCormack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 17.

worth solely in humans' emotional attachment to horses impels our sympathy. We must, at least temporarily, acquiesce in the text's moral values, since they are absolute. Without a feeling that the export of live horses is entirely wrong, "The Hippophagi" slips into meaninglessness. The poem is not amenable to metaphor: Clarke's point is emphatically not that the betrayal of the horse *represents* larger enormities, up to and including nuclear war. It is rather that there are no gradations between the different evils, no sense that the 'worst' must be approached and tackled first. Clarke's anti-horse-trade poems are among neither his most nor least interesting: what makes them worthy of attention is their revelation of the way his public poetry replaces civic virtues of consensus and rationality with compulsion and sentiment.

A somewhat disregarded poem, 'Early Unfinished Sketch', proves an exception among the *Poems and Satires* in terms alike of aesthetic and intellectual coherence – despite its slightness, it has claims to be seen as the most fully achieved poem of those collections. Not entirely coincidentally perhaps, it is also one of Clarke's first published poems to present an erotic subject without guilt-ridden commentary. The speaker of the poem poses for a nude sketch by his lover Rosalind. She completes the outline quickly except for his erection – and since he is unable to 'wait' for her to complete the sketch, they return to love-making. The rest of the poem, a dialogue, offers the solution to her artistic problem:

'What's wrong?'  
'The problem presses.'  
'I have it! Yes. That group in bronze.'  
'The satyrs?'  
'Herrick would call them fauns.'  
'Stock-still—'  
'in the fountain spray at Florence!'  
'All tourists showing their abhorrence!'  
'But if that sculptor dared to limn it — '  
'The nude, today, must have a limit.'  
'And Rosalind — '  
'obey the laws  
of decency.'  
'In the line she draws?'

(*Collected*, p. 233)

Lighthearted as the poem is, it comments on issues of artistic freedom

significant to any reading of Clarke's work. Encouragingly, it asserts that pleasure and mutuality can solve artistic problems. The couple's equality and compatibility are suggested by their overlapping conversation, which naturalises even the Browningsque rhyme 'Florence/abhorrence', and by the reversal of gender roles – Clarke in fact often places men in passive, stereotypically feminine positions, though they rarely seem as comfortable as the speaker here. His implicit comparison of himself to a satyr, mock-modestly emended to 'faun', demonstrates an ease with overt sexuality, while the suggestion that Rosalind take the sixteenth-century Florentine Fountain of Neptune as her model signals, as well as joking self-conceit, an acceptance of art as productive exemplar. The fretful moralising about issues of nature and constraint that dominates 'Ancient Lights' is absent from this less ambitious but more satisfying poem. Clarke's references to Ancient Greek phallic sculpture, Mannerist bronzes and Robert Herrick emphasise without undue explication his oft-stated conviction of a more sexually liberated past, while the final line engages with notable lightness of touch in questions of censorship. Where is the 'line' to be drawn between the artistic nude and pornography? A line drawing might receive the benefit of the doubt where a photograph of the same subject is liable to censorship; no matter what the medium, however, the censorious eye is likely to withdraw 'respectable' status from a nude subject showing visible signs of sexual excitement. The phallus functions as a border marker, a herm or term indicating the limit of 'decency'. The line drawn by Rosalind is one of many boundary divisions in a poetic career repeatedly interrupted, an emotional life characterized by uncertain triumphs over stringent self-suppression. The poem's joyful connections between sexual fun and artistic breakthrough pleasingly suggest the direction of Clarke's late achievement.

The early 1960s brought wider circulation for both poems and poet. Dolmen published *Later Poems* in 1961 and *Collected Plays* in 1963; the memoir *Twice Round the Black Church* was published in London in the intervening year, in which the University of Texas also bought his manuscripts. The proceeds of that sale brought financial security enough to undertake travel in Europe and America. On his return from a trip to Greece in 1962 Clarke wrote rapidly and prolifically, composing all but three of the poems in *Flight to Africa and Other Poems* (1963). The sense of artistic release intimated in 'Early Unfinished Sketch' became one of full-blown inspiration: 'I experienced for ten weeks a continual, voluptuous state of mind during which the various pieces arrived with such joyful ease that I suspect some to be Greek gifts'

(*Collected*, p. 550). The sly irony of 'Greek gifts' suggests that Clarke was aware of the variable quality of this Parnassian output. The first poem of *Flight to Africa*, 'Mount Parnassus' (*Collected*, p. 251), celebrates the inspiration that produced this long, variable book. Production then slowed, but barely; half of the *Collected Poems* was written in the last twelve years of Clarke's life. This prolific phase produced lyric achievements as different as the supremely empathic 'Martha Blake at Fifty-One' and the gravely sensual translations of Turlough O'Carolan's songs; as *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* (1966), a long poem undoubtedly important for biographical and literary-historical reasons, if characteristically overrated by Clarke's admirers, and *Tiresias* (1971), brilliantly achieved and still under-appreciated. It also produced much work of indifferent and poor quality, to which a short study must necessarily give short shrift.

*Flight to Africa* is a wide-ranging collection, analysing, sometimes idiosyncratically, Ireland's slow emergence from political isolationism. Clarke shows himself typical of his culture in his interest in foreigners' perceptions of Ireland and sense of the country's global importance. His poems about diplomatic matters demonstrate the centrality of the clergy to Irish foreign policy: though 'Ecumenical Council' (*Collected*, p. 252), 'Flight to Africa' (pp. 257–59) and 'Irish-American Visitor' (p. 321) satirize clerical cosmopolitanism, they presuppose the church is the state's equal – indeed often its superior – in the task of representing Ireland abroad. 'Precautions' (pp. 259–60) takes aim at a double standard generated by the status of missionaries – a study by two theologians, publicized in Britain and the United States but suppressed in Ireland, had concluded the moral acceptability of the Pill for use by missionary nuns thought to be at risk of rape – but also inadvertently reveals the efficacy of Irish censorship, since it is embarrassingly clear from the terms of his satire that Clarke didn't know how oral contraception works. In his critique of secular diplomacy Clarke is keen to assert Irish sovereignty. Laconic and classicizing (though it predates the 'Greek gifts'), 'The Stadium' (p. 252) rejects the cult of JFK, while the emblematic 'The Common Market, 1962' puns on the name of then Minister for Agriculture Charles Haughey to figure Ireland as a beast of burden dumbly surrendering freedom to a tyranny which parallels overweening Catholicism ('The latest cross upon your back, / To join that unholy family') or recalls the bad old days of Union ('the lion has been skinned: / War has a new whip for tradelets').

Including poems on sectarian prejudice, urbanization, alcoholism and the defeat of Irish Republicanism, *Flight to Africa* has a wider sociological reach

than its predecessors. Some of its poems return to familiar subject matter – ‘Irish American Visitor’ treats the second visit of the Irish-American Archbishop of Boston Cardinal Richard Cushing to Ireland in 1961; ‘Irish American Dignitary’, from 1958, is about the archbishop’s first trip. The later poem’s monorhyme on ‘-ot’ makes the distinguished visitor’s condescension seem the more absurd, particularly when the device is repeated in its *ubi sunt* companion piece ‘The Plot’ – the reader imagines the patronizing Bostonian waltzed away in a *danse macabre*. ‘The Abbey Theatre Fire’ admits more of Clarke’s mixed, sometimes unworthy, feelings about the destruction of this Yeatsian institution than the earlier ‘Abbey Theatre Fire’, though perhaps at unnecessary length. Clarke’s anger at institutionalized cruelty no longer dominates in this collection, but is perhaps conveyed more pithily by, among others, ‘A Simple Tale’ (p.262), ‘Corporal Punishment’, ‘Living on Sin’, and ‘Unmarried Mothers’ (pp.275–76) than, for example, the theological densities of the first two ‘Poems about Children’. Personal adventures, literal and visionary, open into cultural commentary in ‘Over Wales’ (pp.251–2), ‘A Diary of Dreams’ (pp.263–69) and ‘Beyond the Pale’ (p.291–95); *aisling* tropes in ‘Richmond Hill’ (pp.278–9) and the restless search for allegorical figures for a modernized Ireland in ‘Midnight in Templeogue’ (pp.284–5) complement adaptations of Gaelic poetry and folktale, including versions of two of Aogán Ó Rathaille’s *aislingí*.

Clarke draws on a wider range of literature in Irish than he did in his early career, but where the quality of the source text is high, as with the Ó Rathaille poems, his translation rarely equals it; his translations of less challenging poems, such as ‘The Adventures of the Great Fool’, neither come fully to life nor convey the interest they held for him, which in the case of the latter, is precisely its want of coherence and inexplicable ‘theme’ (*Collected*, p.551). Only his variations on O’Carolan – especially the first, ‘Mabel Kelly’ – find an idiom tonally evocative of their originals. Some of Clarke’s resources here are familiar from his early work: he uses assonantal, off-stress and half-rhyme with less rigour than in the lyrics of thirty years before, but there is a compensatory boldness in rhythmic handling. Clarke adopts the basic tetrameter of his source, but breaks lines into dimeter epigrams, ‘Harp and spinet / Are in her debt’, then extends them to give the effect of grace notes, ‘Foot, hand, eye, mouth, breast, thigh and instep, all that we desire / Tresses that pass small curls as if to touch the ground.’ (*Collected*, p.296). ‘Mabel Kelly’ echoes some of the diction of ‘The Planter’s Daughter’, of which the two-foot lines are also reminiscent:

Music might listen  
To her least whisper  
Learn every note, for all are true.  
While she is speaking,  
Her voice goes sweetly (*Collected*, p. 295)  
[...]  
Her beauty is her own and she is not proud. (*Collected*, p. 296)

It is perhaps not too farfetched to see a version of the earlier poem's oblique political commentary in 'Mabel Kelly'. Larger in tonal range, the later poem suggests similarly delicate and subtle negotiations between the cultures of Ireland:

Gone now are many Irish ladies  
Who kissed and fondled, their very pet-names  
Forgotten, their tibia degraded.  
[...]  
And when she plays or sings, melody is content. (*Collected*, p. 296)

The abrupt change from a register of intimacy ('fondled, pet-names') to one of pedantry – ('tibia degraded') suggests a speaker using a second language, one he knows well, but unidiomatically; the effect is touchingly comic, misplaced gravity haunted by the humiliations and confusions of linguistic error. Clarke's use of 'degraded' in what has become its secondary sense of 'decayed' suggests the lapse of time between original and translation, perhaps also pointing towards the tendency of Hiberno-English to preserve usage obsolete in so-called standard form of the language. The final line of the stanza, by contrast, naturalises its wordplay with native confidence. In its primary sense of 'she is so skilful that she makes melody itself happy' the line is an alexandrine, but in the secondary (though perhaps more Clarkean) sense of 'when she plays and sings, pure melody has meaningful content' it is an altogether more irregular pentameter. Without clamour or pride, the poet asserts possession of two linguistic traditions with a self-assurance as confident as the planter's in setting his ring of trees.

The other outstanding piece in *Flight to Africa*, 'Martha Blake at Fifty-One', is that rare thing, a poem remarkable for content – more precisely, perhaps, for the quality of its moral engagement – rather than primarily for verbal effect. The eight-line stanzas with their trimeter and tetrameter lines

are similar to those used in the earlier 'Martha Blake', as are the off-stress and assonantal rhymes. With middle age Martha has gained a troublesome and disobedient body, which mocks her innocent piety. She endures embarrassing and painful digestive problems and succumbs to a 'fit' which robs her of intellectual capacity before being confined to hospital, where, neglected by the nursing nuns, she ruptures a vein owing to the strain of diarrhoea and colitis. She dies 'anointed / [...] yet knew no peace / Her last breath, disappointed.' (*Collected*, p.274) The rhyme typifies the poem's determination to demystify.

The 1930s poem is not without its own scepticism, implying that Martha's religious dedication is a composite of gullibility – 'She does not see through any saint (*Collected*, p.184) – and hysterical deflection of erotic impulse – 'Sweet tooth grow wise, lip, gum be gentle / I touch a purple hem' (*Collected*, p.185). The speaker there is prone to the same sub-Platonic sentimentality as his subject, figuring Martha as desirable because of her near-bodiless inaccessibility: 'I saw her first in prayer, / But mortal eye had been too late / For all that thought could dare' (*Collected*, p.185). His sympathy is unreflecting and less than intellectual: 'The flame in heart is never grieved / That pride and intellect / Were cast below' (*Collected*, p.185).

Without relinquishing sympathy, 'Martha Blake at Fifty-One' rejects simplism and dualism, though its rhetorical strategies are often straightforward and dependent upon comparison and contrast. We see Martha first at Communion: 'to her pure thought / Body was a distress, / and soul, a sigh. Behind her denture, / Love lay' (*Collected*, p.269). For the fastidious, the mystery of the Eucharist may be incompatible with false teeth, but sound-patterning here is reconciliatory of spirit and flesh: the tongue is in the same place when it articulates the final consonant of 'thought' and the medial one of 'denture', which is also where the God of Love is wedged in Martha's mouth. In the next five stanzas, Clarke describes her routine of shopping for and cooking her small meals, the excruciating digestive eructations that follow them, her pious devotions, the religious paraphernalia that fills her flat. Any authorial comment is implicit: Martha looks up from a spasm of heartburn to see the Sacred Heart 'dagged with flame'; while her belches are 'in vain' and she prays 'vainly' (*Collected*, p.270). If the reader senses bathos, it evaporates almost immediately: kitsch statuary does not offer a height from which to descend to genuine physical distress; rather the reverse. In the company of sadly smiling blue-robed Virgins and 'disapproving' plaster saints, Martha's grumbling stomach attains a certain dignity.



Critical responses to ‘Martha Blake at Fifty-One’ sometimes assume the presence of precisely the condescension that Clarke took care to exclude. Schirmer argues that the poem is a Swiftian rebuke to Martha for ‘disdaining the physical side of life’<sup>16</sup>. But where Swift’s scatological verse proceeds to sympathy along the *via negativa* of disgust, Clarke – despite his admiration for Swift – is tender from the start, intimate, indecorous and imitative: ‘all below was swelling, heaving / Wamble, gurgle squelch.’ (*Collected*, p. 270) Harmon finds Martha’s reveries of Saint Teresa of Avila ‘absurdly superficial’ and ‘sentimentalised’, on the grounds that Martha is inspired by her reading in a ‘holy book’, which in Irish idiom signifies a condensed work of popular hagiography – usually a Catholic Truth Society pamphlet – rather than an original theological text. ‘Martha has no knowledge,’ Harmon asserts ‘of Teresa’s ascetic and mystical works, the *Way of Perfection* and the *Interior Castle*, which give positive instruction in the spiritual life’ (Harmon, p. 194). But she does, it seems, know the *Life of St Teresa of Jesus*, which contains substantial passages on prayerful practice and discusses illness as both aid and impediment to spiritual advancement, in rather more detail than a ‘holy book’ might be expected to provide. Harmon quotes the passages of the *Life* with the closest parallels to Martha’s reflections, with the intention of proving Martha’s failures of comprehension:

The entrance seemed to be by a long narrow pass, like a furnace, very low, dark, and close. The ground seemed to be saturated with water, mere mud, exceedingly foul, sending forth pestilential odours, and covered with loathsome vermin. At the end was a hollow place in the wall, like a closet, and in that I saw myself confined.<sup>17</sup>

It must be pointed out, however, that Teresa writes that this unsensational vision, which Martha remembers still more modestly as ‘a muddy passage / That led to nothing, queer in shape / A cupboard closely fastened’, was more memorable and terrifying than vivid depictions of torments, to which her reading had inured her (*Life*, 32:6). Martha, imprisoned in a feeble body, her life confined to small circuits in a Dublin suburb, is perhaps still better placed

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory A. Schirmer, *The Poetry of Austin Clarke*, (Mountrath and Notre Dame: Dolmen and Notre Dame University Press, 1983), p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> St Teresa of Jesus, *Life of St Teresa of Jesus*, trans. David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1904), ch. 32:2.

to understand the banality of evil. The poem's account of Teresa's vision of an angel piercing her heart with a spear is, likewise, very close to the source:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. [...] The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. (*Life*, 29: 17)

#### Swooning

With pain and bliss as a dart  
 Moved up and down within her bowels  
 Quicker, quicker, each cell  
 Sweating as if rubbed up with towels  
 Her spirit rose and fell.

(*Collected*, pp. 271–2)

The towels are Martha's (or Clarke's) addition, but are not inconsistent with affective mysticism; writers in the tradition use domestic objects to signify the immediacy of their visions and their intimacy with the divine. Puzzlingly, Harmon contends of this passage that 'By not trying to present Martha's perception of the transverberation of Teresa, Clarke indicates that it is beyond her understanding' (Harmon, p. 195). Martha is certainly capable of a kind of Teresian prayer, and she is able to concentrate until 'the walls of the parlour / Would fade away' (p. 271). In hospital, later, Mother Superior charges her with obstinacy and self-will, accusations typical of those brought against mystics by the orthodox. Martha's 'fit', which ends her spiritual progression, reducing her to a state of near-imbecility, is anticipated by Teresa in the *Life*: '[Spiritual aridity] comes most frequently from bodily indisposition – [...] for we are so wretched, that this poor prisoner of a soul shares in the miseries of the body.' (11:23) Martha follows Teresa's humane prescription of a change of habits (*Life*, 11:23), varying her routine of shopping and prayer. Her mistake is to finally adopt a habit, an institutional identity which stifles her soul before it has recovered from the attacks of 'ill-natured flesh': 'Martha became / A member of the Third Order [...] / Brown habit and white cord / Her own when cerges had been lit / Around her coffin.' (273). Martha becomes a lay member of Teresa's order, the Carmelites: Clarke is

faithful both to biographical fact, insofar as Martha is a fictionalised version of his sister Eileen, and to his own penchant for ambiguity and irony.

To claim that the poem 'makes an ironic contrast between the visions of a saint and the daydreams of a pious woman' (Harmon, p.195) is surely to miss the point that irony goes both ways – Martha's intimations of Teresan ecstasy show Teresa capable of Martha's intellectual limitations. This is perhaps clearest at moments of apparent bathos:

Teresa had heard the Lutherans  
Howling on red-hot spit  
And grill, men who had searched for truth  
Alone in Holy Writ.  
So Martha, fearful of flame lashing  
Those heretics, each instant,  
Never dealt in the haberdashery  
Shop, owned by two Protestants. (*Collected*, p. 271)

Again, the reader might ask if there is really a mock-heroic descent here, or simply a dwindling – as the 'lashing / haberdashery' *pairing* suggests, though Counter-Reformation persecution devolves into a trivial personal boycott, the prejudice remains the same.

In his account of Martha's last days in hospital, Clarke returns to campaigning mode. Contemptuous neglect and authoritarian interference characterise institutional life: Martha receives no medical attention on admission because the doctor is on holiday, and the nursing nuns ignorantly prescribe laxatives which worsen her physical symptoms. She is denied comforts physical and spiritual: 'refused / The daily sacrament by regulations, forbidden use / Of bed-pan'. Dualism undoes its own hierarchy of esteem: the state of Martha's body, not that of her soul, establishes whether she can take communion. The body's determining importance does not, of course, prevent its subjection to indignity: 'Soul-less, she tottered to the toilet' (p. 274). The final irony of Martha's life is that the regulations which prohibit the Body of Christ from touching loose bowels permit the use of Church property for distinctly worldly purposes: 'The nuns had let the field in front / As an Amusement Park'. Unable to pray or sleep because of the noise, 'anointed' but alone, Martha dies, having 'ruptured a small vein / Bled inwardly to jazz'. Non-Irish or younger readers who imagine Duke Ellington or Ella Fitzgerald miss the unflinching tragic bathos: 'jazz' in the context of a 1950s Irish fairground

almost certainly means the sort of lachrymose country-and-western that would become over the next decade the staple of the showband circuit.

'Martha Blake at Fifty-One' is exemplary of so much in this period of Clarke's career that it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that had he written no other poem between the years 1955 and 1963 we would miss very little of significance. It is all there: sound-patterning which, though often ingenious and telling, is still subordinate to an *engagé* poetics not primarily interested in language or form; the fascination with the interrelation of soul and body, heavily inflected nonetheless by an unshakable dualism; rage against cruel self-serving authority; disdain for simplistic piety checked by a pious sense of its humble dignity. It anticipates in biographical detail and critique of institutional life the problematic poem often regarded as Clarke's major achievement, *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, but it also stands on its own terms as his most impressive exercise in moral imagination. Unpatronising and compassionate, it typifies Clarke's ambitions and achievements as a social commentator.

## Chapter 5

### ‘Every tickle i’ the thalamus’: 1964–1974

A selection of Clarke’s work from his last decade might without undue damage to his reputation confine itself to two poems, one celebrated but perhaps overvalued, the other rarely given the attention it deserves. Between *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* (1966) and *Tiresias* (1971), the poet published four collections notable mostly for the misdirection of their undoubted energy. The poems of *Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage* (1967), *The Echo at Coole*, *A Sermon on Swift* (both 1968), and *Orphide* (1970) are the more disappointing for being promising in précis. For example, ‘The Subjection of Women’ (*Collected* p.431) protests the erasure of women’s achievements from the historical record, while ‘The Pill’ and ‘The Redemptorist’ anticipate feminist arguments defending the right to reproductive health (*Collected*, pp.373–4). The poet confronts his own sectarian prejudices and by implication draws attention to Irish society’s failure to do the same, in (among others) ‘The New Tolerance’ (*Collected*, p.428), ‘In Kildare Street’ (*Collected*, p.434) and ‘The Disestablished Church’ (*Collected*, p.460). In ‘Orphide’ (*Collected*, pp.485–94) he attempts to overcome his distaste for simplistic piety to offer a psychological biography of St. Bernadette of Lourdes. Literary memory and reminiscence occupy a large place in these late books, as Clarke broods upon the reputations of Whitman, Poe, Emerson, Frost, Pound and Neruda as well as on Irish contemporaries and predecessors. The language of these reflections on posterity is rarely more exciting than the prose of *A Penny in the Clouds* (1968), and is often made heavy by devices deployed lightly in some of his earlier poems. Clarke claims in ‘Letter to a Friend’ that

Something has happened to this eye  
Since it discovered homonyms  
All things shine now, all have nimbus

Nature displays nimiety

(*Collected*, p. 369)

The admission that homonyms are more likely to communicate redundancy than radiance appears less than conscious. Occasionally, *rime riche* suits the poetry's critique of wastefulness and pretension. 'New Liberty Hall', for example, draws attention to the less than vernacular design of the building of the title with Dublin vernacular:

On top, a green pagoda  
 Has glorified cement  
 Umbrella'd the sun. Go, da,  
 And shiver in your tenement.

(*Collected*, p. 426)

New formal departures, such as the long line of 'Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage' and 'Another Protestant Insult', convey both a sense of Yeatsian perseverance – Clarke follows his great predecessor in aspiring to prolific and vigorous old age – and unYeatsian fatigue.

*Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* and *Tiresias*, which bracket this period of voluminous but enervated production, are as rewarding in their strikingly different ways as the shorter poems are not: in a reversal of the dynamics of his early career, Clarke seems to have had an access of narrative energy to set against a difficulty in managing lyric. *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, however, denies the reader the satisfactions of conventional development and resolution, whereas *Tiresias*, intended as a 'cheerful' counter-balance for 'our new permissive age' to Tennyson's and Eliot's dismal portrayals of the sage, belatedly grants them (*Collected*, p. 554).

*Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* is Clarke's poetic account of his hospitalization for severe depression. Though completed shortly before publication in 1966, forty-seven years after Clarke's stay in St Patrick's Hospital, it draws on a prose memoir written shortly after the events described. The eighteen-part poem, using a variety of stanza forms, follows 'Maurice Devane' from his journey to the hospital on St Patrick's Day, to his release, 'rememorised', in late summer (*Collected*, p. 348). As the poem's title suggests, Maurice suffers from amnesia, and the chronology of his somewhat provisional recuperation is blurred. With this uncertain narrative Clarke can be seen to make a point about the precarious, contingent nature of a 'cure' for depression, though the success of his project in aesthetic terms is arguable. Neil Corcoran, in a

broadly sympathetic commentary, expresses disappointment with its 'structural oddity', writing of the last seven sections:

It is impossible, in these sections, to trace any process or progress of further resolution, any gradual growth towards the light, in Maurice; and eventually, his becoming "Rememorised" in the final part of the poem is bound to seem abrupt and perfunctory, especially as the rhythms of the concluding lines are casual to the point of the headlong, as they slip and tumble and gabble flatly down the page.<sup>1</sup>

This flat and quotidian quality is the result, Corcoran suggests, of the abandonment of a mythopoesis sustained by madness, and the admission of autobiographical truth: 'a further insistence on the untidy incompleteness of any such willed resolution or climax when the will at work in the poem is one with the will that must also operate in the life of which the poem is a part' (Corcoran, p. 51).

That *Mnemosyne* has attracted interest from a broader range of critics than Clarke's other work is at least in part attributable to its unconventional structure. M. L. Rosenthal, in an essay which continues to be influential, aligns it with American examples of sequential and confessional verse, such as Lowell's *Life Studies* or Berryman's *Dream Songs*, themselves unusual in arrangement or incapable of completion.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars take 'eccentricity' literally: Pascale Amiot-Jouenne, in her article on centres and margins in *Mnemosyne*, takes Maurice's sense of 'inward-outness', when he emerges from delirium to find himself incarcerated in a padded cell, as paradigmatic of mental illness, its treatment, and the poem's construction (*Collected*, p. 333).<sup>3</sup>

It may then be permissible to begin an analysis of the poem not with its first lines, but in the middle, where we encounter an allegorical apparition:

*Timor Mortis* was beside him.  
In the next bed lolled an old man  
Called Mr. Prunty, smallish, white-haired

<sup>1</sup> Neil Corcoran, 'The Blessings of Onan: Austin Clarke's *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*', *Irish University Review*, 13:1 (Spring 1983), pp. 43–53, at p. 50

<sup>2</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, 'Austin Clarke's *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* and W. D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle"', *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genesis of Modern Poetry*, eds M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 408–15.

<sup>3</sup> Pascale Amiot-Jouenne, '«Inward-Outness»: Ou le Rapport au Centre dans *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* d'Austin Clarke', *Etudes Irlandaises*, (Spring 2002), pp. 49–63.

Respectable. If anyone went past,  
 He sat up, rigid, with pointed finger  
 And shrieked: "Stop Captain, don't pass  
 The dead body!" All day, eyes starting,  
 Spectral, he shrieked, his finger darting.      (*Collected*, pp. 336–7)

Mr Prunty plays only a minor role in the narrative of *Mnemosyne*: he is glimpsed a few sections later gobbling cake, in contrast to, yet perhaps also a catalyst of, Maurice's decision to break his fast. He is, however, thematically important and structurally crucial, and iterations of him appear elsewhere in Clarke's work. In *The Bright Temptation*, he is transposed to seventh-century Co. Kerry and the semi-legendary Glen of the Madmen. Lunatics who believe that their souls have died also feature in 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' (*Collected*, pp. 124–127) and in 'Summer Lightning' (*Collected*, pp. 190–1), deployed nearly three decades after its publication in *Night and Morning* as part VIII – that immediately preceding the introduction of Mr Prunty – of *Mnemosyne*.

Mr Prunty represents total abjection: he is the 'rigid' centre around which the rest of this perhaps excessively kinetic poem revolves. The relationship between such abject states and literary art is explored by Julia Kristeva in her study *Powers of Horror* (1980). Kristevan abjection is an intermediate stage between the harmony and continuity of pre-linguistic experience and the social world of language and authority. Kristeva contends that the latter, termed 'Symbolic', cannot impose itself without denigration of the former, which is associated with the maternal. After the subject emerges into speaking selfhood, traces of abjection remain, producing feelings of disgust, loathing and uncleanness. Abjection is 'that which troubles identity, system, order';<sup>4</sup> it is associated with boundaries and margins, particularly bodily orifices. Mr Prunty's abjection is demonstrated by his lack of oral control – he shrieks nonsense and gobbles food – and by his nightly incontinence (*Collected*, p. 337).

Maurice's condition overlaps with and differs from Mr Prunty's. He soils himself in part VI, and, wetting his bed in part IX (p. 334), awaits the same exasperatedly brutal treatment as 'the corpse' (p. 337). Maurice is often silent, in contrast to Mr Prunty's screaming, and does not eat until part XI, when he reaches for strawberries brought by his mother. The self-containment

<sup>4</sup> «ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre»; Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1980), p. 2.



suggested by food refusal, however, is also a sign of abjection: 'Because the food is not an "other" for "me", who exists only within their [i.e. the parents'] desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* [...] thus they see I become an other at the cost of my own death [...] I give birth to myself in the violence of tears, of vomit.' (Kristeva, 10–11).<sup>5</sup> Several episodes in the poem are suggestive of this ambivalent process of self-creation:

His stomach closed: He eyed the food,  
Disgusted: always beef or mutton,  
Potatoes, cabbage, turnips. Mind spewed,  
Only in dreams was gluttonous. (Collected, p. 331)

Maurice turns from the food offered by the asylum, which is here in *loco parentis*, but recognises that there is also a dream-desire to acquiesce and assimilate. This ambivalent struggle results in the spitting out of self. Maurice has spent this section of the poem (iv; *Collected*, pp. 329–31) in a search for identity, first trying to recognise his reflection, then remembering childhood walks past the wall and 'enormous / Gate' of another mental asylum, Grangegorman, on the North side of Dublin. This mental exercise gets 'memory afoot', but the remembered scene turns into a mythic one:

Ramàyana, Bhagavad-gita,  
Hymnal of Brahma, Siva, Vishnu.  
'The temple is gone. Where is the pather?'  
A foolish voice in English said:  
'He's praying to his little Father.' (Collected, p. 330)

Maurice looks to maternal Mnemosyne for selfhood, but receives a jumble of allusions to patriarchal deities. He cannot fully return to a pre-linguistic state – indicated by the 'hissing / And lisp of steam' in the laundry, nor can he make himself understood in the Symbolic realm of articulate speech: hence 'pather', a neologism suggesting paternity, but perhaps also frustrated ambulation and inchoate speech. (The reader, expecting a journey through

<sup>5</sup> «De cet element, signe de leur désir, «je» n'en veux pas, [...] «je» ne l'assimile pas, «je» l'expulse. Mais puisque cette nourriture n'est pas un «autre» pour «moi» qui ne suis que dans leur désir, je m'expulse, je me crache, je m'abject [...] ainsi ils voient, eux, que je suis en train de devenir un autre au prix de ma proper mort. [...] j'accouche de moi dans la violence du sanglot, du vomit.»

illness and recovery, sympathises.) The abject self rejects relationships with others. ‘Nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory’ (Kristeva, p. 13), so Maurice, in his abjection, laments:

“My mother” [...] “and my sisters  
Have passed away. I am alone now,  
Lost in myself in a mysterious  
Darkness, the victim in a story.” (*Collected*, pp. 332–3)

This, in Kristeva’s terms, is the characteristic ‘elaboration’ of abjection: ‘I imagine a child who has devoured his parents too early, who makes himself – “quite alone!” – frightened, and rejects and vomits up everything that is given to him’<sup>6</sup> (Kristeva, p. 13).

Conversely, when Maurice decides to eat again in section XI, he does so in recognition of his desire for his mother who, acting as the agent of a feminised Nature, has given him an object to desire; given him, psychoanalytically speaking, herself. Maurice recovers desire and its object with a gesture that reaches outside its borders of abjection: ‘[p]ut out two fingers toward the wished-for’ (*Collected*, p. 341). As Neil Corcoran mentions, the absence of the expected noun conveys Maurice’s quasi-erotic play with the fruit, but more than that, the line is a grammatical joke in which the absence of the expected grammatical object signifies the restoration of the psychoanalytic object (Corcoran, p. 50).

Starvation also has psycho-political resonance, most graphically shown in the scene of Maurice’s forced feeding:

Four men  
Covered him, bore him into the ward.  
The Doctor bared his sleeve to the forearm.  
What was he trying to do? Arms rounding,  
Held down the hunger-striker, falling  
To terror, a tube forced halfway down  
His throat, his mind beyond recall.  
Choking, he saw a sudden rill  
Dazzling as baby-seed. It spilled

<sup>6</sup> «J’imagine un enfant ayant avalé trop tôt ses parents, qui s’en fait «tout seul» peur et, pour se sauver, rejette et vomit ce qu’on lui donne ».

In air. Annoyed, the Doctor drew  
Back, glucosed milk upon his shoulder  
And overall. The rubber spewed  
As Maurice feebled against his holders  
The noise and fear of death, the throttling.  
Soon he lost all consciousness  
And lay there, all the struggle forgotten,  
The torture chamber and the pressure.  
He woke in bed. The counterpane  
Gentle with noon and rid of pain. (Collected, p. 334)

The depiction of Maurice as a corpse '[c]overed' and borne by four men, points forward to Mr Prunty. As Mr. Prunty is at the centre of the whole poem, so this force-feeding scene is at the centre of Maurice's fast – his period of deepest abjection (sections IV-XII). Meanwhile, the seminal consistency of the 'glucosed milk' recalls the agonised *coitus interruptus* of Maurice's remembered relationship with Margaret. No real women appear in *Mnemosyne*: they are hallucinations, personifications, unearthly screaming voices, maternal presences signified only by the gift of nourishment. Kristeva, however, associates abjection firmly with the female, ultimately, the maternal body, stating 'Neither tears nor sperm, though they are found at the margins of the body, have any power to pollute.'<sup>7</sup> (Kristeva, p. 86). But in this passage semen is associated with the self-expulsion characteristic of abjection: 'a sudden rill/ Dazzling as baby-seed. It spilled/ In air'. In the section immediately preceding the forced feeding scene, semen is linked to excremental pollution: Maurice wakes to find himself 'all shent' after dreaming of Margaret, 'his pale protectress / Nightly restraint, unwanted semen / had ended their romantic dream' (*Collected*, p. 333). Margaret shares her pallor and patron status with a later visitor to the hospital: 'in priestly robe [...] Onan / Consoler of the young, the timid / The captive' (*Collected*, p. 340).

The level of irony involved in portraying Maurice as a 'hunger-striker' is not at all easy to determine. It seems neither an endorsement nor quite an undercutting of his fantasies of Republican activism in which he is a hero in a romanticised adventure story (*Collected*, p. 332). Clarke resists equation of the hospital authorities with Britain: in his interrupted sleep, Maurice sees

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<sup>7</sup> «Ni les larmes ni le sperme quoique se rapportant á des bords du corps, n'ont valeur de pollution.»

himself as a ‘young Englishman’, presented in martyrish pose, ‘on a bier,/ Submissive to his fate’ (*Collected*, p. 335). The detail is authentically dream-like, but its inclusion is inexplicable unless to forestall crudely nationalistic readings.

McCormack finds that *Mnemosyne* is ‘an interiorized repetition both of non-engagement in significant moments of the nation’s trauma and of particular strategies employed by those who were engaged, even to death.’ (*Selected Poems*, p. 10) Feeling guilty about his non-participation in nationalist and Republican struggle, Maurice enacts in private what is occurring elsewhere in public. But the non-engagement extends to the poem’s temporal frame, so that Maurice’s hunger-strike might refer to the past – James Connolly’s week-long hunger-strike of 1913, Thomas Ashe’s death after bungled force-feeding in 1917 – or to the ‘future’ – Terence MacSwiney’s hunger-strike in 1920 – but not to any public event in the poem’s 1919 ‘present’. The historical imprecision is characteristic of a poem in which it is often difficult to gauge how deliberately the poet is deploying his effects.

All the reader can reliably intuit is that calling Maurice a ‘hunger striker’ shows the protagonist’s desire to engage with, indeed to embody, a political and social reality from which his situation in the hospital excludes him. The protest symbolises his outcast status by excluding everything, every object, from the empty site of the abjected body. His anorexia is an attempt to resist his incarceration, though it becomes merely a further element in it. As an exploration of intentionality the trope is more promising. Hunger strikes are commonly understood as the opposite of the abjection of the mentally ill. The hunger-striker has a living mind in a body being allowed to die, as opposed to a dying mind in a vital body. This simple opposition between conscious and ‘political’ hunger-strike and unconscious and ‘private’ anorexia, is however, unsatisfying. Kristeva’s notion of abjection is psycho-analytically radical, challenging the concept of the unconscious:

The ‘unconscious’ contents here stay excluded but in a strange way. Not radically enough to permit the firm distinction Subject / Object, but nonetheless with a clarity sufficient for a defensive position to be established [...] As if the basic opposition were between I and Other, or more archaically still, between Inside and Outside. As if this opposition subsumed that between Conscious and Unconscious.<sup>8</sup> (Kristeva, p. 15)

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<sup>8</sup> «Les contenus «inconscients» demeurent ici *exclus* mais d’une manière étrange: pas assez

The distinction between I and Other, already pronounced in Maurice's refusal of food, is emphasised by forced feeding, the violent invasion of I by Other. This dynamic of attack and resistance subsumes consciousness: 'Soon he lost all consciousness'. The insentient things around him assume his human existence, his relation to the world: 'The counterpane/ Gentle with noon and rid of pain' (*Collected*, p. 335).

Like the abject, the hunger-striker construes the world in terms of 'I' and 'Other', embodying reactive, oppositional politics. Hunger-strikers must reorient their relationship to the Other from a model of desire to a model of exclusion. Once the act of starvation is embarked upon, for both the hunger-striker and the abjected self, the purpose of the hunger becomes irrelevant, since intentionality disappears beneath the opposition of 'I' and 'Other'. This is something memorably realised in a single gesture in Yeats's play *The King's Threshold* (1904, revised 1921). After the entreaties of Seanchan's townspeople and his lover Fedelm have failed to get the poet to break his fast, the King offers him food with his own hand. Seanchan '*pushes bread away, with Fedelm's hand*' and says, 'We have refused it'.<sup>9</sup> The gesture allows Seanchan to take on equal authority to the king, by the assumption of the royal plural, but it is also an abject admission of revoked intention, agency ascribed to another.

However, while the abject self maintains the void of want in place of the unconscious/conscious 'I', for the hunger-striker, a voided 'I' is intolerable. The cause of the hunger-strike fills that void, making the increasingly wasted body an ideology in itself. The body, which in threatening to become a corpse threatens the system around it with its meaninglessness, can thus enter signification. The body, however, continues to resist the imposition of meaning upon it. In the force-feeding scene these dynamics of imposition and resistance become visible. By force-feeding him, the hospital authorities turn Maurice's inchoate, anorexic protest into a hunger-strike. He struggles to maintain the borders of his empty body, his non-identity as 'anonym', while the doctor tries to give him a self, a name, by forcibly inserting food into his abject body. Dr Leeper's violence is a crude attempt to drag Maurice into meaningfulness. It figures the violence of the subject's entry into the

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radicalement pour permettre la différenciation solide sujet / objet, et néanmoins avec un netteté suffisante pour qu'un *position* de defence [...] puisse avoir lieu. Comme si l'opposition fondamentale était, ici, entre Je et Autre, ou, plus archaïquement encore, entre Dedans et Dehors. Comme si cette opposition subsumait celle [...] entre Conscient et Inconscient.»

<sup>9</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Collected Plays* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), p. 140.

Symbolic, giving a meaning ('the hunger-striker') to Maurice, reinterpreting his suffering as the resonance of that term within Irish political culture. Maurice's final acquiescence in the symbolic project of naming comes when he names or misnames his condition, "Claustrophobia", and is rewarded with removal to the social space of the dormitory (*Collected*, p. 335). But he is also, and more memorably, shown struggling against entry into the Symbolic and the use of his body for the purpose of signification.

Maurice's reluctance to enter a social, patriarchal world of stable nomenclature may account for apparent oddities of structure in *Mnemosyne*: his early recovery (just over half the way through the poem), the slackening of pace in the final seven sections and the apparent relapse of section XVI (in which he has further Oriental hallucinations, is unable to make sense of the words he reads, and has his condition compared to the madness of King Lear). The Symbolic realm is supported by abjection; likewise, relative sanity retains traces of the misery of madness, not just as remnants but as critical supports. Nonetheless, in the second half of the poem, Maurice is persuaded to name and classify, and he shows interest in the hospital as a microcosmic society, recognising other patients by racial or class characteristics (*Collected*, pp. 343–5). Section XVII, in which Maurice, out on day release to the Phoenix Park with an attendant, names the things he sees around him, marks further mastery of Symbolic codes. A self-reflexive facility is evident in this passage, as the patient names the flowers he sees: 'marigold,/ *Clarkia* and rose-beds' (*Collected*, pp. 347–8).

The need to name and the successful act of naming may not, however, be evidence enough of the subject's break with the abject. As in the final lines of section VII, they might rather indicate acquiescence in a signifying system over which the abject self exerts no control. They might also indicate fear, the 'terror' of Clarke's early memoir, the 'falling/ To terror' that Maurice experiences as he is named as a 'hunger-striker' (*Collected*, p. 334). Kristeva reads phobia as a form of abjection; phobia is a metaphorical elaboration of the basic want (« manqué ») that constitutes the abject void. She emphasises the phobic's linguistic agility, a characteristic noticed by Freud in his treatment of the phobic child whom he calls Little Hans:

the phobic object is a proto-writing and, conversely, any practice of speech, inasmuch as it involves writing, is a language of fear. [...] Not the desiring exchange of messages or of objects [...] but a language of want, of fear that borders upon it and borders it. The one who tries

to utter this 'not yet a place,' this no-place, can obviously only do so in reverse, starting from an over-mastery of the linguistic and rhetorical code. But it is to fear he refers at last. (Kristeva, p. 49)<sup>10</sup>

*Mnemosyne* is a poem possessed by fear, which manifests itself not only in frequent descriptions of Maurice's 'terror', but in neologism and eccentricities of narrative. Rather than reading the poem as a quest driven by desire, culminating in recognition of the nature of that desire and progress towards health, one might interpret it as an exploration of the 'no-place' of abject want. 'There are lives not sustained by desire, since desire is always for objects' writes Kristeva, 'these lives are founded in exclusion' (p. 14).<sup>11</sup> If there are poems like this also, then *Mnemosyne* would appear to one of them. Read as a progress narrative, it fails, and fails precisely at the point when objects (strawberries, mother, Nature) appear to challenge Maurice's abjection. The poem demands to be read rather as a group of scenes or sites arranged around a central point, so that progressive movement to recovery is blurred. The central point is the account of Mr Prunty's belief that he is a corpse, and of his nightly defecation. Mr Prunty is archetypally abject, the epitome of abjection. He is the ultimate waste product, the cadaver, his empty body bordered and delimited by institutional ritual. At the same time, the borders of Mr Prunty's 'corpse' exist only to be breached, by his anal incontinence, his screaming, and in section XI by his 'gobbling'. Perhaps Mr Prunty forms the centre of this poem because, as the allegorically named '*Timor Mortis*', he is more truly central to it than its protagonist. Fear produces the neologisms, the syntactical and linguistic enigmas that characterise Clarke's poems; fear produces writing itself: 'The writer: a phobic who succeeds in figuring so as not to die of fright, but in order to resuscitate himself in signs.' (Kristeva, p. 49).<sup>12</sup>

However, even this structure of abject non-progression falters. Some of

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<sup>10</sup> «l'objet phobique est un proto-écriture et, inversement, tout exercice de parole, pour autant qu'il est de l'écriture, est un langage de peur. [...] Non pas de l'échange désirant de messages ou d'objets [...] Mais langage du manqué, de la peur qui l'aborde et le borde. Celui qui essaie de parler ce « non encore lieu » ce non-lieu, ne le fait évidemment qu'à rebours, à partir d'une sur-maîtrise du code linguistique et rhétorique. Mais c'est la peur qu'il se réfère en dernière instance»

<sup>11</sup> «[I]l y a des existences qui ne se soutiennent pas d'un désir [...] le désir étant toujours d'objets. Ces existence-là se fondent sur l'exclusion.»

<sup>12</sup> «L'écrivain : un phobique qui réussit à métaphoriser pour ne pas mourir de peur mais pour ressusciter dans les signes.»

the clearest articulations of Maurice's abjection occur after his decision to eat, to enter a Symbolic world of object-driven desire:

He lay there hourly, puzzled by voices  
 Below in the forbidden Garden  
 Beyond the Gate, from his own void.  
 But all the summer maze was guarded.

Often he touched the hardened cage  
 Around him with its band of steel-hoops.  
 [...]
 He wondered why he had been straight-laced  
 Straight-jacketed.  
 But soon his suture would unseam  
 His soul be rapt.

(*Collected*, pp. 341–2)

The mythology of Gate, Garden and Fountain is undisturbed here, as it will remain until the end of section xvii. It seems that Maurice has actually enlarged upon the myth, adding to it a guarded 'maze', which again figures abjection: boundaries constructed to enclose nothing. Maurice considers the physical boundaries that he has made for himself and imagines them dissolving. Although this stanza is sometimes read as hopeful in tone (see for example, Harmon, p. 217), it retains the dualism that has sustained Maurice's abjection, figuring the body as prison and strait-jacket. He imagines his release as a kind of dissolving, a boundary-defying, abject movement. 'Rapt' suggests both the release of his enraptured soul and its continued imprisonment in his abjected body.

Unlike the writers discussed by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*—Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Proust, and above all, Céline – Clarke cannot sustain a structure based on abjection, nor can he quite emerge from it to follow a Symbolic, socialised, desire-oriented path. Readers may simply respond sympathetically to *Mnemosyne's* candour and its stubborn fidelity to the diffuse experience of mental distress. Intriguingly, however, the poem hints at a shadow-narrative, counter-nationalist and counter-institutional in character, of which Ireland may be said to have as much need now as in 1966, but this alternative history never coalesces into more than momentary coherence. Only so much of the shape and obscurity of *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* can be explained by a deliberate refusal of the Symbolic before special pleading in justification of Clarke's



faults sets in: it is sometimes the case that an intermittently coherent poem is just an intermittently coherent poem.

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*Tiresias* offers a much more persuasive non-linear narrative. Clarke's note describes the poem as a riposte to gloomy portrayals of the seer by Tennyson and Eliot: 'in our new permissive age I have tried to present a cheerful account of the experiences of Tiresias as wife and mother' (*Collected*, p. 554). *Tiresias* is often read as the product of a hard-won, belated ease with sexuality (see, for example, Harmon, p. 36), but the named literary precursors are as important to the poem's structure as developments in the author's personal life. The first four sections, in which Tiresias is challenged by Jove and Juno to settle their dispute over sexual pleasure and recounts his seven years as the woman Pyrrha, might be read as reactions to the prophet's function as tutelary of sexual dysfunction in *The Waste Land*. Sections v-viii, meanwhile, are inflected by Tennyson's crepuscular dramatic monologue; in particular, the attention paid by Clarke's Tiresias to Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes* indicates Tennysonian influence. Clarke's note refers mainly to his poem's first half, and that somewhat misleadingly. The text's open secret – that a capacity for multiple orgasm renders women capable of experiencing more sexual pleasure than men, which Clarke further qualifies and complicates in the concluding lines – is accompanied by mysterious reticence about motherhood: 'I will not speak of / Motherhood, uncradle those memories of milken joy' (*Collected*, p. 525).

The note's occlusion of the second half of the poem is replicated in many critical accounts. Ed Madden's chapter, from his study *Tiresian Poetics*, represents one of very few sustained attempts to explore Clarke's 'representation of historiography and prophecy as a [...] male project, produced in the collaboration between the blind prophet Tiresias, and his scribe, Chelos, a scholar and former lover of Tiresias'.<sup>13</sup> Madden's case, that the polymorphous transformations of *Tiresias* ultimately serve a rather conservative set of heterosexual norms, is unexceptionable, and he draws welcome attention to an important turning point at the beginning of section V. Chelos, now in old age, recounts a meeting with Tiresias after the latter's re-transformation

<sup>13</sup> Ed Madden, "'Pen is lifted': History as Homosexual Panic in Austin Clarke's 'Tiresias'", *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice, 1888–2001* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), pp. 218–254, at p. 218.

into a man. He recalls seeing Pyrrha, apparently unchanged, at the door of his hut after an absence of seven years. She faints into Chelos' arms, and having carried her to his hut, the scholar lifts her robe to reveal penis and testes: 'Tear-dazed, bewildered, I groped to her unchanged haunches, / Anus, thought of Ganymede [...] Tear-dazed, I mourned for Pyrrha under that blue mantle, / Within reach, yet unpossessible except by perverted / Desire' (*Collected*, p. 526). Readers might find Madden's claim that this constitutes a moment of 'homosexual panic' slightly hyperbolic, but his analysis of Chelos' story and the conversation that follows it is thorough. Clarke uses the phallic metaphor of the scribe's stylus and the anal connotations of the 'punctum' that it inscribes to reorient the mood of the poem from heterosexual erotic adventure to homosocial intellectual project. Madden also suggests some interesting autobiographical analogues for episodes in *Tiresias*. Unfortunately, his concluding argument, that 'Clarke queers the aisling by refiguring it through classical myth, so that the body of Tiresias as phantasmic woman replaces the traditional female figure as allegorical emblem of Ireland' (Madden, p. 220) lacks contextualisation, though the fault perhaps lies as much with the poet's ambiguous hibernicizations of classical myth as with the critic's lack of historicization.

A comprehensive assessment of *Tiresias*, as of *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, may require the realization that this is not a poem of liberation and breakthrough. For all its randiness, *Tiresias* is conservative and romantic in its sexual politics: Pyrrha's picaresque first encounter with Chelos, the language of wifely obedience she uses to describe (*pace* Madden, apparently pleasurable) sex with her husband Demetrius, and the submissiveness of Chelos's wife Areta are distinctly unfeminist, while there is a persistent tendency to domesticate both Tiresias' androgyny and the potentially transgressive nature of his attachments. *Tiresias* is structurally successful as the longer, autobiographical poem is not, yet the narrative modes of the two works have their similarities. Both eschew consecutive structure in favour of a mode which, with its flashbacks and prolonged speeches, might be called concentric. The earlier poem never formulates its complicated ideas of institutional and personal territory and boundaries in sufficient detail or clarity to make them visible to the reader. *Tiresias* plays on its own image of multiple orgasm as a series of narrowing circles to structure a story without climax.

The poem's first section introduces Tiresias, already blind and a prophet (Clarke departs from Ovid on how, and through whom, the seer loses his sight and gains his gift). The ambient scenery recalls the Fergusonian excess

of Clarke's first published works: 'the heights still snow-written / Hiding their winter-long tumult in wreathing, inwraithing of vapour / Pent over cavern, pool' (*Collected*, p. 515) and offers no less a mental landscape than those inhabited by Grainne and Cuchullin:

Stopping his wonder to look down  
On the groves of lemong trees, orangeous orchards, Bacchanalian  
Vine-stock, Greek fire of the labyrinthine blossom  
Sieging with steady rounds the hundred cities  
Of Crete, the plain of olive woods no more than five thousand  
Years old; his mind was divining an underground winter –  
Fruiting the whole island with plenteousness from its rock-bound  
Cisterns. (*Collected*, p. 515)

Involved syntax suggests, as in those early works, complex systems emerging less from observation of the world than from Romantic imagination. The vocabulary, by contrast, is definitely in Clarke's late manner, neologistic, allusive, humorously pedantic, indicating the poem's interest in arcana. Tiresias hears a thunderclap that heralds Jove and Juno's quarrel over which sex has more pleasure in intercourse; and, as in Ovid, the deities submit the issue to Tiresias's judgement.

His answer is to tell the story of his transformation into and time as a woman, which occupies parts II to IV. He begins his story with the sex change itself: prompted by curiosity part scientific, part primally sexual, he touches a pair of mating snakes. Clarke notably softens his mythic sources, in which Tiresias kills, beats or tramples one or both snakes; this may simply reflect the poem's gentle tone, but it also suggests that mere interest in the 'origin of species' is archetypally impious (*Collected*, p. 516); perhaps, for a poet still basically conservative and residually Catholic, it is. Tiresias's first reaction to the transformation is disgust at the 'ugly tumours' of his breasts; in alarm, he wets himself. Momentarily personified, his bladder offers a bizarre lament on his new condition, 'humbled by / Fate, yes, forced twice a day to crouch down on her hunkers' (*Collected*, p. 516). Clarke does not elaborate on the carnivalesque implications of an apostrophizing urinary organ, but it is a welcome development of the semi-comic mode of the Onan episode in *Mnemosyne*, a poem which otherwise perhaps treats bodily emissions with undue solemnity. Instead, Tiresias explores his new body, feeling fascination with his breasts and grief at castration. Moonlight resolves his confusion and

brings emotional calm, and he returns home to his mother, whom Clarke slightly misnames Charico (*recte*, Chariclo).

Tiresias's father is never mentioned in Clarke's narrative; Charico can be seen as a play on the Freudian idea of the phallic mother, whereby the male child ascribes to the mother the sexual organ he thinks she lacks, in an attempt to allay castration anxiety which actually affirms the child's sense of threat. Later developments of the theory, associated particularly with Melanie Klein, posit a menacing, castrating combined parent figure, the mother having incorporated the father's penis after intercourse.<sup>14</sup> Charico's domestic bustle and bright chatter deflect the sinister aspects of that psychoanalytic type, but she confesses her to give birth to a daughter with a sly 'tear-in-smile' (*Collected*, p. 516), and in her plans for that daughter's future reveals herself as a determined upholder of the patriarchal social order underpinned by the Oedipus complex. She renames Tiresias Pyrrha, a name replete with allusive potential. Pyrrha is sometimes suggested as the name Achilles assumed while disguised as a woman at Lycomedes' court, being the feminine version of Pyrrhus, the son he fathered there with Deidamia. Madden argues that the name 'register[s] anxieties about the appropriation of the feminine and the invocation of the homoerotic' (Madden, p.226). The name also resonates with the poem's theme of speculative knowledge made concrete, through Thomas Browne's reflection on the nature of supposition in *Urne-Buriall*: 'What Song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling Questions are not beyond all conjecture.'<sup>15</sup>

Pyrrha's curiosity about her genitals and first experience of menstruation is followed quickly by desire for sexual experience. She has 'almost forgotten/Much' of her past as a man, and developed rather coy manners, but she retains a Tiresian hunger for knowledge (*Collected*, p.518). Her wanderings lead her to a 'bothy' which contains the paraphernalia of scholarship – a typically Clarkean combination of studiousness and pastoral. The scholar-shepherd is out, however, so Pyrrha reclines in 'deshabille' to await his return (*Collected* p.518). She wakes underneath 'the gentle/Weight of a naked

<sup>14</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'On the Sexual Theories of Children', *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey *et al.* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–74), Vol. 7, pp. 123–243 and Melanie Klein, 'Early stages of the Oedipus Conflict', *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, Vol. 1 (New York: Free Press, 1975).

<sup>15</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall. Or, A Brief Discourse of the Sepulchrell Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk*, ch. v.

youth' (*Collected*, p. 518). To describe this as a sexual 'assault', as Madden does (Madden, p. 226), is misleading – it is a fantasy of relinquishing responsibility for sexual activity, of the sort commonly encountered in popular romance marketed to women – but such sexist attitudes to issues of consent are nonetheless troubling in a supposedly liberating poem. The reader is not, however, greatly surprised to have that earlier glimpse of Pyrrha examining her vulva with her former self's shaving-mirror confirmed as male fantasy rather than feminist exploration. Over the course of an evening and morning, Chelos and Pyrrha undertake an accelerated courtship – their first attempts at sex are clumsy and unsatisfying, but by daylight Pyrrha has had her first multiple orgasm. Chelos, meanwhile, acts as her tutor in scholarly matters, reacquainting her with the historical, economic and geographical knowledge she has lost as a result of her metamorphosis. The eager female student is another Clarkeian type, in evidence from *The Vengeance of Fionn* onwards; in the later work he gains the confidence to present explicitly sexual pedagogical relationships, but the conventional gender roles here nonetheless seem a regression from the powerful female tutelary presences of, for example, 'The Straying Student' or even the later and less achieved 'Phallomeda' (*Collected*, p. 450).

The essentially romantic nature of 'Tiresias' is illustrated by Charico's unruffled response to Pyrrha's all-night antics: having found 'four / Whitish stains' on Pyrrha's cloak, she announces her intention to marry her off to a wealthy widower. Like Orla's deceptions in *The Sun Dances at Easter*, Charico's plan serves to uphold patriarchal power: feminine evasion of the strictures of chastity is usually presented with insouciant charm in Clarke's romances, but that is scarcely sufficient to make them feminist. He is more alert and sympathetic to women's struggles in realistic and topical mode, but aesthetic success is rarer there.

In the short third section of the poem, Pyrrha returns to Chelos, who greets her with the *aísling's* ritual enquiry: "Are you a goddess? [...] Seashelling / Venus, whom worshippers call by many place-names' (*Collected*, p. 522). Pyrrha, however, does not demur, and playfully accepts her divinity: 'So come, mount me / Mortal. [...] be my nympholept. Come!' (*Collected*, p. 522). It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between extensions of and ripostes to nationalist aspirations for the hellenization of Ireland in Clarke: but here the rejection of patriotic piety seems fairly unambiguous. Venus is local and multiple; if Pyrrha unites all the iterations of the goddess, that suggest lovers' self-preoccupation rather than monolithic national personification. The self-delusive sublimation of erotic drives in nationalist

propaganda, which Clarke identified in the 1930s as definitive of the *aisling*,<sup>16</sup> is superseded by Pyrrha's open admission of identity and desire. Later, in the poem's fifth section, Clarke again invokes the *aisling* when Tiresias sees Athene bathing; calling the goddess a 'sky-woman' (*Collected*, p. 527). Tiresias' spying is motivated by narcissism as well as voyeurism – he mistakes Athene for Pyrrha, and desires his female self. Tiresias's misrecognition partially dismantles the earlier allusion: Chelos' salutation was not a literary trope, but a genuine question, since Pyrrha really does resemble a goddess. Tiresias's desire for the 'sky-woman' he thinks is Pyrrha links the *aisling* to masturbatory fantasy; furthermore, the attempt to have sex with himself really does make him blind.

Such implicit jocosity aside, however, Tiresias's encounter with Pyrrha-Athene is a poignant one. If the poem can be said to be liberating or politically progressive in any way, it is in its insistence that the sexual body is necessary to intellectual enquiry and progress. Tiresias has empirical knowledge of that which, for most people, is confined to the imagination, but certain forms of knowledge are still forbidden him: his desire to have sex with Pyrrha – as it were, to know himself outside himself – is quashed by the intervention of the goddess of wisdom. What might appear to be 'a rather pedantic and pedestrian Jungian interpretation of Athena-Pyrrha as Tiresias's anima' (Madden, p. 248) might instead be a late, and highly developed iteration of Clarke's lifelong personal concern with self-perception. From the bird-king of 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' to the hallucinations of Maurice and other inmates in *Mnemosyne*, the propensity to see oneself from the outside is an indicator of mental distress. (Clarke's recognition of the concept of coherent, containing selfhood as at least a necessary fiction, when so much literary criticism is careless and dismissive of it, has a certain tragic authority.) Tiresias seeks integration through sex with himself-as-Pyrrha, but Athene's prohibition suggests that such a desire belongs to madness, to seeing the self as not-self, rather than to healing and making whole.

Returning to the third section, we see that Chelos' *aisling*-like questions also provoke voyeurism: a satyr spies on the couple as they make love. Chelos chases him away, but momentum has been lost, and rather than resuming sex, Pyrrha asks Chelos why his testicles hang unevenly, to receive in response the following curious lore:

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<sup>16</sup> 'Love in Irish Poetry and Drama', *Motley* 1:5 (October 1932), pp. 3–4.

Theologians assert that Prometheus, a flinty firebrand,  
Riled against the gods, declared they were mythical figures.  
Men, abandoning the true faith, became his fuming disciples.  
Women have always been temple-goers, so priestesses  
Wore the white, purple-hemmed vestment that had been discarded.  
All the human race was punished by the offended  
Deities. Life-giving scrotum, whose simultaneous seed-flow  
Doubled by both ducts, as they spurting, and so enabling  
Women to share without difficulty the bliss, was altered.

*(Collected, p. 523)*

Chelos' fable suggests certain ideas about gender and religion which are particularly apt to twentieth-century Irish Catholicism: a patriarchal institution, fearful that its male adherents may be lost to secularism, enlists the familial power of women, who are conservative by nature or lack of educational opportunity, pious rather than faithful, 'temple-goers' rather than believers. Instead of rewarding women for their fidelity, the gods, or the Church, punish them by (apparently) withdrawing sexual pleasure, which is imagined as a male gift. Instead of equal sexual partners, women become domestic vestals. Of course, Pyrrha knows the 'secret / No man has suspected' (*Collected*, p. 523); but her silence on this point also has its Irish parallels and precursors; for example, the type of the frustrated, ambitious woman who hypocritically endorses Catholic sexual morality while privately trusting to an almost pagan nature appears, thirty years earlier, in Kavanagh's poem *The Great Hunger*. Clarke prefers to present sympathetic female figures who struggle with the conflicting demands of chastity (and the influence it promises) and sexual desire, but they too engage in hypocrisy and deception. Indeed, Charico is one such, as illustrated by her instructions to Pyrrha on her wedding night; she is to cry out: "How it hurts...[...] I must suffer pang without / Pleasure that I may be truly your loving / Wife." (*Collected*, p.523) The laborious flattery of absurd male pride is a staple of picaresque farce, but the insistence on pleasureless sex as an indicator of faithful love belongs perhaps rather to Clarke's ascetic Ireland than to the ancient world. In any case, Pyrrha is irrepressible: by her third night of marriage she has contrived to have a multiple orgasm with her new husband. Here, Tiresias' narrative concludes with a fairly brief if explicit account of Pyrrha's sex life with Demetrius, her pregnancy, and a refusal to recount memories of motherhood. For all the poem's emphasis on orgasmic secrets, it is maternity that cannot be narrated.

Jupiter's contention that women have more pleasure in sex, nonetheless, has apparently been amply confirmed, to the chagrin of Juno: 'Words were lost in a new quarrel' (*Collected* p.525). The narrative might have ended here, its Ovidian source material exhausted. Clarke's continuation parodies a conventional narrative arc – the renewed celestial quarrel is a kind of false climax to a poem which has none such in the literary sense, and may (as we are about to discover) be less centrally concerned with sexual climax than we have been led to believe.

The fifth section begins with Chelos putting down his pen, becoming 'the specific interlocutor of the story, probably its scribe, [...] suddenly the reader realizes that the voice of the poet-scholar must frame the preceding story' (Madden, p.227). Clarke may have derived Chelos's name from Ptolemaeus Chennos, a 2nd-century writer whose lost work gives an account of seven metamorphoses undergone by Tiresias. We know about Chennos through the *Bibliotheca* of Photius, who finds him boastful in his claims of scholarship and absurd in his attempts to explain the origins of desultory mythic ornament.<sup>17</sup> In any case, Chelos is a classical variant on the many scribes and scholars who populate Clarke's work; the recognition that he, perhaps more than Tiresias, is an authorial self-projection should come as no surprise, but it modifies the narrative voice significantly. The pedantry of Tiresias' sexual vocabulary, in which Harmon finds that 'the text book is more in evidence than the imagination' (Harmon, p.238), is recast as jocose intimacy, which readers can certainly interpret, with Madden, as a deflection of homosexual desire. The comically elaborate descriptions of orgasm also poignantly reflect the dissonant experiences of heterosexuality. Pyrrha could not or would not confide in her lover; Tiresias feels he may, and the form he chooses – the dictation of history – is as impersonal as it is lasting. Clarke's interest in the unspoken, particularly in that which women conceal from men about their sexual lives, might be seen as an extension of his concern with failed or incomplete confession. Insofar as the poet identifies with Chelos, not Tiresias, the problem is resolved by casting himself as confessor rather than penitent, but this is itself a transparently, and (the reader presumes) deliberately incomplete resolution.

Unlike a confessor, however, Chelos responds with a narrative of his own, taking up the story of his meeting with Tiresias after the latter's re-transformation. Though we might read their friendship as exemplary of the

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<sup>17</sup> Photius, *Bibliotheca*, article 190.



suppression of homosexual desire into acceptable, usually jocose, forms of masculine affection, we might also note that Chelos and Tiresias are self-aware and frank in a way not usually associated with homosocial interaction:

He turned to Tiresias:

'Believe, old friend

Twice I have grieved for your loveliness.' And the other:

Chelos, since that late noon when you deflowered me so quickly,

Always I wore a blue mantle as our love-pledge during those seven  
Years.

'What has destiny so bound, unbound, bound again, our  
Future?'

(*Collected*, p. 526)

Tiresias then begins to narrate again, with the account of his blinding by Athene which moves almost immediately into prophecy. At first, these prophecies seem jumbled; an allusion to the Trojan Horse is followed by Tiresias' advice to Odysseus, then a series of references apparently to Roman warfare and politics; in a rather blurred way, Clarke suggests that Tiresias' first prophetic intimations are of his own appearances in the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Similarly, in the following, more extended passage dealing with the first Theban War, Tiresias seems to use his foreknowledge of Aeschylus' drama to advise Eteocles: 'I gave to Eteocles and his general in the war house / Plan of assault, counter-assault, as in an historic / Play.' (*Collected*, p.528) Rather than bemoaning his impotence even to influence an individual, as Tennyson's seer does, Clarke's takes an active (though of course non-combatant) part in the defence of Thebes.

However, Clarke's dismissal of Tennyson's 'gloomy' sage is in some ways disingenuous (*Collected*, p. 554). Tennyson's dramatic monologue was originally composed in 1833, and is related to the contemporaneous 'Ulysses' by its imaginative and expansive handling of shared inspiration: the account of Tiresias in the underworld in *Odyssey* IX. In 1883, Tennyson added a dedicatory prologue for Edward Fitzgerald's seventy-fifth birthday; in 1885 an elegiac epilogue.<sup>18</sup> Clarke turned seventy-five in the year of *Tiresias*' publication. Chelos calculates that 'thirty-eight years or more' have passed since he met Tiresias as a man (*Collected*, p. 525); the reader knows from Charico that Tiresias was twenty-five when he was first transformed, and spent seven

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<sup>18</sup> *Tennyson's Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill Jr. (New York and London: Norton, 1971), pp. 73–79

years as Pyrrha, making him at least seventy, and Chelos presumably a similar age, in the last sections of the poem. Tennyson's prologue is affectionate: he notes Fitzgerald's benign nature, expressed in his vegetarianism, praises the *Rubaiyat* for its sensuality, mourns the loss of old friends, and dedicates this early work in recollection of a time when 'You found some merit in my rhymes / And I more pleasure in your praise' (Tennyson, p. 74). The acknowledgement of mutual scepticism, with a hint of Tennysonian self-pity, conveys the loss of illusion contingent on old friendship, even where feelings remain warm. The epilogue returns to literary-critical mode, reflecting that the monologue's 'diffuse and opulent end' (of which Tennyson was vain, quoting it as exemplary of his art in blank verse<sup>19</sup>) may not be to Fitzgerald's taste. Male friendship was even more important to Fitzgerald than to Tennyson; his relationships with men constituted almost the whole of the former's emotional life, and both poets romanticized and eroticized their attachments to men in their work. The contexts of Tennyson's 'Tiresias', written in the period of creativity which followed Arthur Hallam's death and dedicated fifty years later to Fitzgerald, perhaps influence Clarke's portrayal of Tiresias and Chelos in old age. The 1885 version of the poem, which frames desperate rhetoric in cosy hospitality, certainly seems influential upon the structure of the final parts of Clarke's work: the entrance of Chelos' wife Arete with a meal at the end of the fifth part, and her comforting of Tiresias with a cup of hot milk in its last lines, makes the debt to Tennyson particularly clear.

In the poem's sixth part, Tiresias confesses that he once attended the Elusian Mysteries, which Clarke seems to conflate with Dionysiac rites: 'I, too, leaped among the hairpin scatterers, divesting / Themselves for the limbleaming whirlabout of maenadic / Love embrace. Broached, lined by the wine-men' (*Collected*, p. 530). This promisingly cacophonous set-piece remains disappointingly undeveloped, and is followed by an account of Tiresias's wandering life as soothsayer and necromancer. He then returns to prophecy, this time of the military progress of the Roman Empire. He briefly foretells the development of Christianity and the Dark Ages, only to realise that 'Chelos had gone' (*Collected*, p. 533). Tiresias questions the usefulness of his gift, before a dim intimation of the atomic age: 'Enmity of atoms, suspected by Anaxagoras / Cast our hope out of space?' (*Collected*, p. 534) He is interrupted by the god of satire, Momus, who suggests that even his experience

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<sup>19</sup> Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* (New York and London, Macmillan, 1897), p.318.

of multiple orgasm may have been a self-interested deception by Jupiter. Momus checks Tiresias' impulse to ask his (hitherto unmentioned) wife the truth: "By your sebum, don't do that, old man! No wife has / Ever blabbed about her bliss, even on the bolster" ' (*Collected*, p.534). Calm domesticity supervenes in the poem's last lines, as Areta calls Tiresias in for a bedtime cup of hot milk. For all Clarke's attempt at cheer, 'Tiresias' ends with his prophet sceptical of the value of knowledge in an indifferent, violent world, like Tennyson's; like Eliot's, his androgyny embodies ultimate futility. Momus is not necessarily to be trusted on the matter of multiple orgasm itself, but the message he brings is true: sexual sensation is not subject to generalization – Pyrrha's multiple orgasms are hers, not all women's – nor is it easily described, hence the poem's themes of secrecy between lovers or spouses, of the essential incommunicability of experience. Tiresian desolation proves difficult to escape even in 'our new permissive age' (*Collected*, p.554); it cannot be overcome by relaxation of prohibition or change in sexual custom. Tiresias is a symbol of solipsism – the more he knows, experiences and suffers, the less he seems able to communicate. His condition is that of lyric art in its (essentially erotic) attempt to convey to others the perceptions and sensations of the self; poets come to Tiresias when they despair of this possibility, yet are unable to cease gathering poetic material: both Tennyson's and Eliot's Tiresias preside over hybrid texts. Clarke's lifelong love of unusual titbits of historical and mythic lore, of neologism and arcane vocabulary, and his propensity to be distracted from narrative by these, find in Tiresias their tutelary.

As well as being Clarke's last work of substance, *Tiresias* is among his strongest poems: his only truly accomplished non-lyric work. Unsurprisingly, critics have seen it in terms of culmination: evidence of triumph over the sexual prohibitions that disfigured the emotional life of its author – and those of many Irish people – during the near-theocratic mid-twentieth century. It is likely, given that its narrative shape evokes the 'narrowing circles' of orgasm and its play on the idea of climax, that Clarke himself envisaged it in this way. However, an assessment such as Thomas Kinsella's: 'poetry as pure entertainment, serene and full of life',<sup>20</sup> might seem itself too serene. It is perhaps unnecessary to invoke Theodor Adorno's theorization of late style, or Edward Said's late renovation of it – both critics were concerned with

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Kinsella, 'The Poetic Career of Austin Clarke' *Irish University Review* 4:1 (Spring 1974), pp.128–136, at p.136.

achievement on a rather larger scale the Clarke's – to point out that *Tiresias* is irresolute, anxious and contradictory to at least the same extent that it is joyful and fulfilled. And as such, it summarises and typifies the career of this least accommodated of poets with almost uncanny aptitude.

## Conclusion: ‘Rhyme is no comforter’, Austin Clarke, minor poet?

Clarke’s poetry occupies a curious position in the Irish literary canon: at once overvalued and neglected, it eludes critical consensus as to its worth. For most of his career he was a leading member of Dublin’s rather staid literary establishment, yet much of his work is querulous almost to the point of resentment. His posthumous fortunes have been uncertain: often considered along with Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice one of the three most important Irish poets of the post-Yeats generation, he inspires nothing like the affection that attends Kavanagh or the academic interest that continues to accrue around MacNeice. His international readership is small, except among specialists in Irish literature; indeed for clarity’s sake, he must sometimes be distinguished from the Canadian novelist (1934–2016) of the same name.

Owing largely to his inclusion on the Leaving Certificate syllabus between 1969 and 1999, Clarke is remembered by Irish readers for a handful of fine early lyrics, which sometimes surface in surprising contexts. In the early 2000s, Bord na Móna, the semi-state authority that regulates Ireland’s peat bogs, used ‘The Planter’s Daughter’ in a television advertisement for its fuel products.<sup>1</sup> The advertisement trades on the continuing homogeneity of Irish cultural experience: the likelihood that a large proportion of customers might be prompted into nostalgia for a turf fire by the memory of a schoolbook poem. The obliquity of the poem’s commentary on sectarianism is absent from the commercial, which presents a series of bland visual clichés of Irishness, but the advert is authentically Clarkean in as much as the sexualization of its images overwhelms their identitarian connotations. Most

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Planter’s Daughter’, Bord Na Móna Advertising, *Bord Na Móna plc*, retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6X8jv4JusQ>, 11 December 2011.

significantly, perhaps, it suggests the desultory nature of Clarke's reputation among general readers.

Clarke has also his small band of academic enthusiasts, who tend to mistake his aspirations for achievement and his eccentricity for innovation. One of the few assessments of Clarke from outside the field of Irish literary studies, M. L. Rosenthal's essay on *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* as a confessional poem, has regrettably contributed to that work's persistent overvaluation.<sup>2</sup> Claims for Clarke's 'experimentalism' (or otherwise) are almost invariably couched in misunderstandings of his note on assonance in *Pilgrimage and Other Poems* (1929), of the significance of Beckett's essay 'Recent Irish Poetry' (1934), of the meaning of literary modernism, of the relationship of Irish to international literary life, of the success of Clarke's post-1955 output, or of all of the above. Perhaps the most unfortunate critical response to Clarke's poetry is W. J. McCormack's introduction to the Penguin *Selected Poems* (1991), an intricate subtextual reading that might have been calculated to dispel new readers' curiosity.

In short, Clarke's reception has been that commonly afforded a minor poet: admiration by a small number of perhaps insufficiently discriminating specialists, and widespread indifference. It is a profile that scarcely fits with routine claims of his importance, even allowing for the diminished nature of achievement in the arts in the post-Revival period. Something of this diminution of ambition and accomplishment is suggested by Thomas Kinsella, an admirer of Clarke and the editor of the first *Selected Poems*, in two of his own late poems, the reminiscence 'Brothers in the Craft' (1990) and the satirical riddle 'Dream' (1991). 'Brothers in the Craft' meditates on influence, suggesting a faintly unwholesome collaboration between jaded 'mature' writers and the 'half ready' young 'self-elect': 'Again and again in the Fifties "we" attended / Austin Clarke. He murmured in mild malice / and directed his knife-glance curiously among us.'<sup>3</sup> The mildness of the malice and the curiosity (or curiosity) of the gaze imply a limitation of energy and vision, a fatal parochialism in the older poet.

'Dream' endorses the established view of literary Dublin at mid-century:

<sup>2</sup> M. L. Rosenthal, 'Austin Clarke's *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* and W. D. Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle"', *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genesis of Modern Poetry*, M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, eds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 408–15.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kinsella, 'Brothers in the Craft', *Collected Poems 1956–2001* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), p. 287.

it is 'a stony desert, baked and still', onto which emerge two monstrous figures, a cannibal and a monopod, followed by 'a group of human figures',

some seemingly at home in the pitiless waste.

One of their number is smiling all around him.

With another, bolder than the rest,

he approaches the first two creatures,

misjudging their apparent preoccupation.

He is caught by the first and swallowed in an instant.

His companion is seized by the second as a support. (Kinsella, p. 312)

The monsters symbolize the split and deformed 'dual tradition' of Irish literature, upon which Kinsella dilates in his critical study of that title. The 'bolder' human figures have tentatively been identified as Kavanagh and Clarke, though it is impossible to say which might be the cannibal's snack and which the monopod's crutch.<sup>4</sup> This lack of explicitness is partly a consequence of Kinsella's habitual loftiness; the narrative of the divergent fates of the two bolder humans nonetheless interestingly complicates the common view of Kavanagh and Clarke as representatives of opposite poetic tendencies.

'Dream' is a pendant to 'Open Court', Kinsella's ragged satire on the conditions that produced cultural stagnation in mid-twentieth century Ireland, and although there is no individual portrait of Clarke in the longer poem (which exhibits a highly recognisable likeness to Kavanagh in the half-doggerel rhymed tetrameter high dudgeon it shares with the latter's 'The Paddiad') it offers relevant composite figures of poetic minority. 'Three poets sprawl, / silent, minor, by the wall', 'a ruined Arnold' in 'private agony', a tonsured 'ruined Auden' beset by a nagging wife, and 'Downcast and liquid-lipped' a 'speechless, ruined Oscar Wilde' (Kinsella, p. 316). His nationalism notwithstanding, Kinsella cannot but suggest that the imperial United Kingdom offered more to its poets than the post-colonial Irish Free State; the same uneasy, unspoken awareness that what is politically desirable might be culturally deleterious animates Clarke's remarks about the 'ruralizing' of post-Independence Dublin.<sup>5</sup> Kinsella's ruined poets offer a riposte to Kavanagh's belief that 'if the potentialities are there [...] they will burst a

<sup>4</sup> See Derval Tubridy, *Thomas Kinsella: The Peppercanister Poems* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Austin Clarke, *Twice Round the Black Church* (Dublin: Moytura, 1990; 1962), pp. 2–33.

road';<sup>6</sup> in their dismal inconsequentiality they assert the Arnoldian position that great literature requires the coincidence of individual energies with a nurturing culture. Kavanagh's abstract plural noun and his metaphor imply a concern with potency as well as potential, and similarly, sexual dysfunction underlies Kinsella's sketches of poetic insignificance. His spoiled Arnold attracts a strongly Clarkean epithet indicating sexual suppression, the Irish Auden is locked into the closet with a 'shrilling' wife, the belated Wilde has always been the blubbery wreck of his original's last two years. Meanwhile, the Kavanagh figure of 'Open Court' overcompensates for sexual anxiety, clasping a 'female student' to his 'patriarchal side'. Such a conflation of sexual problems with literary minority is relevant to a consideration of many mid-century Irish writers, but to none more so than Clarke.

Kinsella's response to the older poet is typical, and might stand for any number of critical assessments. He claims that Clarke's career (like Kavanagh's) 'demand special attention',<sup>7</sup> that Clarke is exceptional among his contemporaries in his resistance of the influence of Yeats,<sup>8</sup> and that his idiosyncrasy is 'kindred' to that of Ezra Pound (*Dual Tradition*, p. 95). He acknowledges the unevenness of much of the verse but even as he does so makes inflated claims for *Flight to Africa* and, astonishingly, *The Echo at Coole and Other Poems* (*Dual Tradition*, p. 94). And yet Kinsella's poetic evocations of Clarke create an atmosphere of insignificance that undermines the sanguine assertions of his critical prose.

The model of minor poetry invoked by Kinsella's accounts of Clarke more or less inverts the best known contemporary theorization of literary minority. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (1975), specify three definitive characteristics of minor literature. It is written not in a minor language, but in a major one marked by a 'high co-efficient of deterritorialization'.<sup>9</sup> The language of a minor literature is one in which its writers can never feel easy or at home, one which confronts writers at every turn with 'the impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in [the major language], the impossibility of writing otherwise' (p. 16). Secondly, minor literature is inherently political: 'its

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Literature in the University', *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 2003), pp. 231–236, at p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kinsella (ed. and trans), *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. xxviii.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.



cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics' (p. 17). Political implications, submerged in major literature, are worked out on the surfaces of minor texts. Finally, minor literature has no space for the individual genius of a master – 'in it everything takes on a collective value' (p. 17). If minor writers are marginalised even in their own 'fragile' communities, then conditions are all the more ideal for a utopian re-imagining of community, consciousness and sensibility: 'The literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come' (p. 18).

Eccentricity, politicization and collectivity, combined to shape a revolutionary future, are resonant concepts for the study of Irish literature. Deleuze and Guattari's grasp of Irish socio-political reality is illustrated by their parenthetical remark '[...] couldn't we find the same alternatives, under other conditions, in Joyce and Beckett? As Irishmen, both of them live within the genial conditions of a minor literature. [...] But the former never stops operating by exhilaration and overdetermination and brings about all sorts of worldwide reterritorializations. The other proceeds by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities.' (p. 19) It seems no conceptualization is too abstruse to be reduced to sectarian bathos by the application of an Irish instance.

Students of Irish literature often encounter Deleuze and Guattari's formulations through David Lloyd's *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (1987). Like Deleuze and Guattari (to whom he refers relatively infrequently), Lloyd writes about a figure who does not present himself as a master or a genius, but who is exemplary in two senses: his achievement proceeds to universal utterance through eccentricity, and his example can be extrapolated to discuss other writers with whom he has no literary-historical connection. Lloyd's study, moreover, is even more heavily shadowed than theirs by Marxist historical determinism. Unlike the French critics, however, and at considerable expense to the informing paradox of their argument, Lloyd chooses in James Clarence Mangan a writer who might be considered minor in the commonplace sense of the term.<sup>10</sup> This choice deflects the theoretical opening chapter of Lloyd's study away from Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on the mechanisms of the text and towards the extra-textual dynamics of canon-formation (albeit much of the rest of his book is concerned with close readings of Mangan's

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<sup>10</sup> David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1987), p. xi, pp. 20–1.

texts, betraying its origins as a ‘very literary doctoral dissertation’<sup>11</sup>). It is his positioning of Irish minor literature with regard to the canon, however, that has stuck.

For Lloyd, the features of a minor literature include exclusion from the canon, oppositional engagement with the canon and refusal to represent the subject’s attainment of autonomy, the last of which manifests itself textually as parody. Lloyd’s minor literature shares features with forms of modernism and post-modernism, but differs from at least the former in extending ‘the recognition of the disintegration of the individual subject of the bourgeois state [...] it plays out the contradictions that afflict late capitalist society through its paradoxical modes, refusing to offer the possibility of reconciliation’ (pp. 24–25). He identifies minor literature as a product of the era of the nation state and imperialism, aligning it in particular with the ‘native elite’ which has historically formed the core of most nationalist movements. Lloyd foresees in minor literature’s stretching of the boundaries of subjectivity the constitution of ‘a literature of collectivity for which the canon as an institution and representation as a political and aesthetic norm would be irrelevant.’ Minor literature, in Lloyd’s account, implodes along with the canon, ‘ironically at the very moment at which it has become possible for both to become distinct objects for criticism’ (p. 25).

It is tempting to conjecture that if Mangan represents an early instance of minor writing, then Clarke belongs to a late stage of the same development. Clarke’s biography, like Mangan’s, can be framed in relation to significant political events. Lloyd brackets Mangan between the Act of Union and the Famine, with Catholic emancipation as a notable point in his early life. Similarly, we can place Clarke between the fall of Parnell and accession to the European Economic Community, with the conflicts of 1921–23 defining his young manhood. However, this serves mainly to expose the difficulties inherent in Lloyd’s teleological conflation of political and aesthetic systems. His suggestion that the literary canon is an aesthetic manifestation of the principles of representative democracy, both of which may be rendered irrelevant by the emergence of a ‘literature of collectivity’, implies a linear and temporal development towards such a collectivised writing. Moreover, his alignment of minor literature and its challenges to the canon with the hegemonic phase of imperialism suggests that the literature of collectivity belongs to a post-colonial period that has not yet arrived. It is not clear

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<sup>11</sup> Lloyd, p. xii

whether the advent of such a post-colonial era would be desirable, since it must erase the cultural productions of the hegemonic phase at the very point at which they become understandable to us. Though Lloyd's invocation of the post-colonial captures some of minor literature's ambition to re-shape the world, situating the necessarily politicized discourse of minor literature within the realm of canonicity nonetheless has the disturbing implications that the post-colonial means the erasure of colonialism as 'a distinct object for criticism', and that history (and if not history, who or what is the authority here?) might declare parts of itself 'irrelevant' for further study.

Clarke presents a challenging case with which to return to Deleuze and Guattari's original principles. That anglophone Irish writers are typically afflicted with 'a high co-efficient of de-territorialization' is a commonplace of our criticism, one that usually heralds reference to a handful of passages in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, though the subtlety of the 're-territorialization' and universalization achieved by Joyce and others has received less attention. Critics who have applied Deleuze and Guattari's formulations often ignore twentieth-century Irish linguistic reality, especially the extent to which literary achievement for many writers involves the abandonment or rejection of Irish as a 'referential' or 'mythic' tongue. In his use of Gaelic modes alone, Clarke made greater and more successful efforts towards 're-territorialization' than many of his contemporaries, but while some of his strongest work is in this vein, it makes up a small proportion of his total output. Overall, Clarke's English exhibits characteristics – neologism, punning, syntactical density, unexpected manipulations of parts of speech – of a de-territorialized 'paper language', an uneasy idiolect that exceeds the defamiliarizations contingent on any literary utterance. The political and communitarian consequences predicted by Deleuze and Guattari, however, do not occur in Clarke's poetry – in fact, the reverse happens. It can be difficult to discern his political attitudes even from Clarke's poems addressing topical matters; indeed he frequently gives the impression not of collective utterance but of a man talking to himself.

*Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* implicitly proposes a solution to one of the problems besetting attempts to renovate or overturn the literary canon, that of special pleading on identitarian or ideological grounds. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari offer a case study in reading a highly-esteemed body of work for its eccentric and revolutionary qualities, finding in these its 'major' nature. The extent to which their theory depends on the tension between established 'greatness' and subversive potential, however, becomes evident

when it is applied to a minor writer in the commonly-understood sense of the term, such as Clarke. And while Deleuze and Guattari's transformation of 'minor' into an ethical category is to be welcomed for its challenge to racial, class and sexual prejudice, it renders it unavailable to describe work that is important but in some way essentially limited, like Clarke's.

T. S. Eliot's 1944 essay 'What is Minor Poetry?' refuses to answer the question posed by its title, not least on the grounds that no two readers would divide the canon into major and minor practitioners in quite the same way and that what can seem major poetry to one generation can appear minor to another.<sup>12</sup> Eliot sets out 'to dispel . . . any derogatory association connected with the term "minor poetry", together with the suggestion that minor poetry is easier to read, or less worth while to read, than "major poetry"' (Eliot, p. 139). In relation to more contemporary material he argues that the key question is not whether a particular poet's work is major or minor, but whether it is '*genuine* poetry' (Eliot, p. 150). I trust I have done enough in the present study to demonstrate the authenticity, the poetic *genuineness*, of a verbal art that marries musical ingenuity to psychological, social and historical meditation as ably as the best of Clarke's work does. It may be appropriate to conclude with some reflections on why Clarke is still 'worth while to read' and on his place in twentieth century poetry in Ireland and the wider world.

Clarke's engagement with the Irish past seemed quixotic in his own time, when writers were turning away from the habits of the Revival. In his detailed scholarly grasp of the Gaelic literary achievement and his determination to deploy that arcane knowledge in the service of an engagement with contemporary experience, however, he was unlike any leading Irish poet since Samuel Ferguson and diverged fundamentally from the complacent Revival template. Four decades after his death he appears a less eccentric figure than he once did, now that internationally celebrated Irish poets such as Thomas Kinsella, Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson have followed his example (consciously in Kinsella's case) in turning linguistically informed understanding of medieval and later texts to creative account in their own work. Clarke was a senior contemporary of Máirtín Ó Díreáin (1910–88), Seán Ó Ríordáin (1917–77) and Máire Mhac an tSaoi (*b.*1922), three poets who took verse making in Irish out of the arenas of antiquarianism and language revivalism and forged the first art poetry in the language since the eighteenth century,

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<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry', T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp. 39–52.

thereby setting the conditions for the continued flourishing of Gaelic lyric in the work of Biddu Jenkinson (b.1949), Liam Ó Muirthile (1950–2018), Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (b.1952) and others. If Clarke appeared to his contemporaries to have been too interested in history, history has now returned the compliment: his attitude to the Gaelic world appears from the vantage of the early twenty-first century sensitive and intelligent, and the attitudes of Patrick Kavanagh, Samuel Beckett and Louis MacNeice by contrast ignorant and prejudiced.

In the Irish context the profoundest vindication of Clarke relates to his approach to his own time rather than to history, and in this regard he comes off rather better than his too critically – or uncritically – lauded poetic contemporaries Kavanagh and MacNeice. Clarke and Kavanagh lived in the country through a period of theocratic excess, and the former was not afraid to say so. Kavanagh, conversely, was capable not just of quietism before the reality of ecclesiastical power but of truckling sentimentally to it in such poems as ‘House Party to Celebrate the Destruction of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland’.<sup>13</sup> If MacNeice was no lover of theocracy, many of his poems about Ireland are vitiated by a casual attitudinising understandable – if not quite forgivable – in light of the fact that he had not lived in the country since childhood. The Irish detail in his work can be authoritative when he engages with the psychology of childhood, as in the haunting ‘Western Landscape’, but is rather less so in his directly political commentaries (for example *Autumn Journal*, XV1), where he tends to recycle as many stereotypes as he debunks.<sup>14</sup> For insight into the lives of ordinary Irish people at the mid-twentieth century, particularly of the less fortunate and more directly oppressed such as women, children and the urban poor, one must look to Clarke. Though his satirical standpoint can sometimes be muddled, as we have seen, and his politics less than coherent, from the poems of *The Cattle Drive in Connaught* in the early 1920s to the end of his life five decades later he holds the social, political and ecclesiastical practices of the emergent southern state up to the light of the idealism that had brought it into existence. His poetry is thus the diametrical opposite of what the young (not to say immature) Beckett thought it to be.

Clarke’s work is of continuing relevance not primarily because of its

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 212–13.

<sup>14</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 265–7, 137–41.

honesty or moral indignation but by virtue of the formal and stylistic ingenuity with which the best of it goes about its business. Its particular use of local materials can look different in an international context than a strictly Irish one – the poetry has significant correspondences with that of Hugh MacDiarmid and David Jones in its approach to history and the cultural experience submerged in the language and literature of the past, for example, while its defiant insistence on wedding sound to locale connects it to the (albeit more obviously experimental) lyricism of William Carlos Williams. ‘The Planter’s Daughter’, ‘Penal Law’, ‘The Straying Student’, ‘Martha Blake at Fifty-One’ and almost the entire contents of *Pilgrimage and Other Poems*, along with a few stray individual lyrics and the first half or so of *Tiresias*, seem in their delicate yet stubborn distinctiveness set to live as long as the poems of any post-Yeatsian Irish writer. They may require a degree of explication in relation to the particulars of their culture of origin but that is true of rewarding modern and contemporary poems from all quarters of the planet. It is hoped that the present work provides elucidation sufficient to widen the circle of readership of a deeply interesting if understandably neglected poet.

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