

THE EARLY WORK (1916-1938)

OF

AUSTIN CLARKE

BY



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ABSTRACT

Austin Clarke dedicated himself to the ideal of an independent Irish literature in English. This dedication had two principal consequences for his work: he developed a poetic style appropriate to expressing the Irish imagination, and he found inspiration in the matter of Ireland, in her mythology and folklore, in her literary, artistic and religious traditions, and in the daily life of modern Ireland. The basic orientation of Clarke's work determines the twofold purpose of this thesis. It seeks to provide a clarifying background for his poetry, drama and fiction up to 1938; and, in examining the texts in their proper context, it seeks to reveal the permanent and universal aspects of his achievement.

Clarke's early development in response to the shaping influence of the Irish Revival is examined in the opening chapter. His initial interest in heroic saga is considered, but, principally, the focus is on his effort to establish stylistic links between the Anglo-Irish and the Gaelic traditions, an effort that is seen to culminate with his adoption of assonantal verse as an essential element in his poetic technique.

In the second chapter, the emphasis shifts to the thematic consequences of Clarke's involvement with Ireland.

His understanding of Irish tradition is discussed, and, in particular, the origins and nature of his imaginative preoccupation with the culture of early Christian Ireland are examined. What emerges is that Clarke perceives a permanent tension in the Irish mind between the Christian and the pagan viewpoints, a conflict of values that he termed the drama of conscience.

The conflict informs each of the major texts analysed in the remainder of the thesis. Pilgrimage and Other Poems, discussed in the second chapter, reveals the recurrence of the tension between the Christian and the pagan traditions in the course of Irish history. Clarke's early plays and novels, which are the focus of the third chapter, relate the conflict to the culture of medieval Ireland. The fourth chapter examines Clarke's own experience of the conflict as it is presented in Night and Morning. In the recognition that the drama of conscience remains a vital element in Clarke's imagination after 1938, the thesis concludes by indicating the main lines of continuity between the earlier and the later work.

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INTRODUCTION

"I load myself with chains and try to get out of them", Austin Clarke told Robert Frost, who had asked him what kind of verse he wrote. "Good Lord!" the famous poet exclaimed accurately, "you can't have many readers" (CP, p. 545).¹ Since 1959, however, when the conversation took place, Clarke's public has steadily increased. Later Poems (1961) made his work widely available for the first time in twenty-five years, and a collected edition followed in 1974, the year of the poet's death. During his last years, indeed, Clarke won from a "discerning, if tiny public"² a measure of acclaim which, in all likelihood, he had ceased to expect. He garnered an impressive array of tributes from fellow-poets and influential critics, and, as a result, some attempts have been made to examine the nature of his achievement.³ Clarke remains, none the less, a comparatively neglected writer. The full extent of his canon, which includes verse-plays, fiction, autobiography and criticism, is rarely taken into account in estimates of his accomplishment. Two of his best and most entertaining books -- the novels, The Singing-men at Cashel and The Sun Dances at Easter -- have never been reprinted. As a literary journalist, he wrote numerous essays and reviews; the majority of them have little interest, but a careful selection would reveal a distinct critical intelligence, and would, moreover, help to clarify

Clarke's special position in modern letters. More accurate texts and biographical studies are also needed. In short, the critical effort devoted as a matter of course to important contemporary writers has not, so far, been accorded to Clarke, and his significance in modern literature, consequently, is imperfectly understood, when it is acknowledged at all.

To some extent, the obstacles Clarke imposed on himself have impeded the growth of a larger and more sympathetic audience for his work. His poetry is innovative, and, while it is not unusual in that respect, its technical novelty has little in common, on the surface, with modernist tendencies. His principal technical achievement has been to naturalize the devices of Gaelic versification in English, with the objective of developing a characteristic Irish style. He replaces rhyme at the end of the line with assonance, and, within the line, he uses elaborate patterns of vowel and consonant, often as a formal element in the versification. These devices became part of Clarke's sensibility, and the result is a strikingly individual rhythm, a strangely inflected voice that is liable to baffle or displease the ear on first acquaintance. It is only with familiarity that one perceives its subtlety and expressive potential. Clarke's use of language is also individual and complex. Influenced by early Irish art, he fashions his stanzas in an intricate manner, often sacrificing surface clarity to richness of detail. He

shows a preference for the oblique figure, the multiple pun and the discreet allusion. The density and subtlety of his best poems demand a degree of attention from the ear and the intelligence that can be deterring, unless one has faith in the rewards.

But the difficulty of Clarke's work is not solely due to its stylistic qualities. To put the matter bluntly, Clarke is not greatly concerned with addressing an Anglo-American audience. He chose to write outside the mainstream of modern poetry, committing himself almost exclusively to a national literature. He sought to graft his imagination to the Gaelic past, not only stylistically but thematically as well, so that his work presumes familiarity with Ireland's history and literature, with her artistic and religious traditions, and, in the case of his later poetry, with topical issues on the contemporary scene. The Gaelic element in his work, indeed, is so extensive and learned that it is daunting to the Gael as well as to the Gall. The Irish reader may at least feel that he should improve his education, but what of the reader whose interest in Irish history and culture is minimal? One may readily sympathize with the irritation of one American critic: "Clarke can write drivel if it pleases him to do so, but none of us is under any obligation to read it. If a writer wishes to be read, he must offer his audience some hope that it will be able to comprehend the import of his words."⁴ Clarke's

work raises, in relation to a diverse English-speaking culture, the problem of the legitimate use of a specialized frame of reference, but surely, in the context of modern literature, the question is now theoretical: one thinks of the clarifying contexts that critics have provided for writers such as Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce, so that their work has become widely accessible. Ultimately, if the nut promises a kernel, someone is willing to crack it. The premise of this study is that Clarke does not disappoint the determined reader.⁵

Part of my purpose, then, is to establish a context in which Clarke's important work may be better understood. The principles underlying his versification are examined. The historical and cultural hinterland of his work is mapped, and, where relevant, a knowledge of Gaelic sources is brought to bear on individual texts. More generally, I explore, in the first and second chapters, Clarke's relationship to Anglo-Irish literature. Within this context, he emerges as a central figure, whose technical and imaginative concerns go back through the Revival to pioneering poets of the nineteenth century. Partly following the example of Yeats, he went to Gaelic myth and legend, but because he was more deeply committed than the older poet to the independence of the Irish tradition, his knowledge of native materials was more thorough, and he assimilated them more profoundly into his writing. Like Joyce in his

early work, Clarke concerned himself with religious issues, but, again, he was more irrevocably embroiled in the Irish scene. An exile, so to speak, in his own country, he involved himself in the nets of race and religion, seeking to articulate the Irish conscience from within. In the end, Clarke does not attain the stature of the two major writers, but his work is sufficiently distinguished to be compared with theirs; and because he grappled tenaciously with the linguistic and moral difficulties of being Irish, he may prove at least as central as they are to the development of Irish literature. While it is too soon to assess his impact on Irish writing, it is noteworthy that the two best Irish poets to emerge since Clarke, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, have strongly promoted his work.

What of Clarke's relevance outside his native country? In that this study argues for the general importance of Clarke, its proof lies, mainly, in detailed analyses of his best work up to 1938. His interest in Irish tradition came to focus on the culture of the early Irish Church, and, against this background, he began to articulate his major theme, the drama of the Irish conscience. This drama, as Clarke perceived it, arose from the tension between the pagan and the Christian traditions in the early culture, and it persisted as a recurrent conflict in the Irish mind. The conflict between Christianity and paganism obviously has a relevance that extends beyond the Irish

situation, and we may say also that Clarke's work, since it seeks to maintain the primacy of secular values over those of religion, partakes of the Romantic and modern quest for a sustaining vision of life without recourse to established religion.

That this thesis focusses on Clarke's career up to 1938 is not meant to indicate a critical preference for his early work. On the contrary, I am convinced that Clarke produced important books in each phase of his career, and that one of the most impressive aspects of his achievement is the unity of his canon. A concentrated focus, however, is essential if individual texts are to be treated in detail; and a chronological approach, I believe, is best in Clarke's case, because his work gradually unfolds to reveal a larger and more coherent design. An understanding of his early work, in fact, is a necessary preparation in order to appreciate the nature of his poetry from 1955 until his death. I keep in mind throughout that the major concerns remain vital in the later poetry, and the thesis concludes with indications of the main lines of continuity.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

¹The abbreviation CP is used to refer to Austin Clarke, Collected Poems, ed. Liam Miller (Dublin, 1974), the edition of the poems principally used. Page references will normally be incorporated into the text as here.

²Thomas Kinsella, "Introduction" to Austin Clarke, Selected Poems (Dublin, 1976), p. xiv.

³A Tribute to Austin Clarke on his Seventieth Birthday, eds. John Montague and Liam Miller (Dublin, 1966), includes contributions from Thomas Kinsella, Hugh MacDiarmid, Ted Hughes, and Charles Tomlinson, among others.

Both Susan Halpern, Austin Clarke: His Life and Works (Dublin, 1974), and Craig Tapping, Austin Clarke: A Study of His Writings (Dublin, 1981), are comprehensive, but they are very introductory in nature. The best study to date is by Gregory A. Schirmer, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1978).

⁴William John Roscelli, "The Private Pilgrimage of Austin Clarke", in The Celtic Cross, eds. Ray B. Browne, William John Roscelli, and Richard Loftus (Purdue University Studies, 1964), p. 68. Roscelli's comments are directed, with some justification, at Clarke's later poems, and he finds that the earlier work, by contrast, makes few demands on the reader. Some of his observations, however, suggest that he might well have aimed his complaints at all of the poetry: he reads "The Marriage Night" as "the story of a beautiful, rich Roman Catholic girl . . . who, after the battle of Kinsale, sleeps with the victorious Protestants" (p.58). The poem's dimension of political allegory, established through rapport with the Gaelic tradition, escapes him. See below, pp. 127-30.

⁵In discussing Clarke's obscurity, I echo points made by Thomas Kinsella, "Introduction", Selected Poems, pp. x-xi.

TOWARDS THE IRISH MODE

"Ocus roscrútustair ina menmain cia leth noberad
a chéitch ũairt fhilidechta."¹

"For what is song itself but substitution?"
("Forget Me Not", CP, p. 237)

Whenever Austin Clarke surveyed the career of W.B. Yeats, he cast an ironic eye on the Irish poet's popularity among modernist critics. He disapproved of their tendency to scant all that Yeats wrote before he was fifty on the grounds that his early poetry was pre-Raphaelite and suffused with vague Celtic mysticism: "Had they considered that Yeats spent a number of years experimenting in this new Twilight mode and developing its subtle art, they would scarcely have described its impressionistic methods as vague."² Furthermore, he maintained that Yeats, despite evident changes in style, never fully abandoned the influences of his youth. Clarke drew attention to the twilit mood of the final song in The Dreaming of the Bones and pointed out that Yeats had returned to Celtic myth in his last poems and plays.³ In making these points Clarke had a vested interest. When he arrived on the scene, the great poet had just turned fifty, and, although his style had clarified between 1904 and 1914, he was in the public mind the poet of the Celtic

Twilight: the framed poems which the young Clarke saw "on the drawing room walls of every house with any pretensions to good taste" were "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and "When You are Old".⁴ It is not surprising that he retained a respect for the Celtic Twilight, since amid its pervasive music he sought to find his own voice and make it heard.

He began to write poetry in reaction to the Irish Revival, but, unlike James Joyce a generation earlier and Patrick Kavanagh later, he did not reject its ideals. Rather, his work, at least up to 1938, constitutes a deepening and redirecting of the thrust of the movement. Eclectic rather than original, and disposed to neglected causes, he developed a secondary strain on the Revival, finding his tradition among lesser-known writers of the period. To trace the formative influence of the Irish Revival on Clarke's early development, especially on his stylistic preoccupations, is the primary function of the present chapter.

In drawing attention to the unity of Yeats' career, Clarke, writing in later life, may have been conscious also of the critical fate of his own work. In a writing career somewhat longer than that of Yeats, he had outlived an early reputation and the literary ambience that sustained it. Following a period of neglect, he was rediscovered in the late fifties by a young and active generation of poets and critics. When Donald Davie

reviewed Ancient Lights in 1956, his response was one of "startled incredulity . . . that poetry of such avant-garde brilliance and power was the work of a man who had been a figure on the Irish literary scene for forty years".⁵ In a series of notices, John Montague argued for the international importance of Clarke's achievement: "A collected volume of his later work from Pilgrimage . . . onwards, would . . . reveal a talent as considerable as that of Tate, Ransom, or Muir."⁶ Not only did Clarke return to prominence on the Irish scene, but he won for the first time a small audience abroad. The effect of his renewed reputation on his work was invigorating, accounting in part for the sustained energy of his later career. But it led also to some critical distortion. The tendency to emphasise the contemporary quality of his poetry caused some neglect of early volumes, and, more important, partly obscured the significance of his career. For instance, Clarke's Selected Poems (1976), chosen by Thomas Kinsella, devotes seven-eighths of its space to poems published after 1955. In his introduction Kinsella argues that Clarke was reborn "in sudden, full-fledged humanitarian rage" with the publication of Ancient Lights, and he dismisses the work up to 1925 as constituting an apprenticeship.⁷ Nothing is included from the first three books, two poems from the fourth.

To justify his judgement, Kinsella could point to

lines Clarke published in 1936:

The thousand tales of Ireland sink: I leave
 Unfinished what I had begun nor count
 As gain the youthful frenzy of those years.
 (CP, p. 179)

This repudiation, however, like Yeats' "A Coat", is best read as a metaphor for growth and change, not as an amputation of the past. It is true that Clarke abandoned a project to versify the Ulster heroic cycle. But he turned from narrative poetry to a lyrical, dramatic, and fictional exploration of other aspects of the Gaelic heritage, and the preoccupation with the matter of Ireland -- historical and contemporary -- underlies all of his work. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, his "humanitarian rage" was first expressed indirectly within the allusive context of Gaelic Ireland. Besides, the search for a distinctively Irish style, a mode of language that derived as much as possible from the Gaelic tradition, began with his first volume. Clarke, indeed, is a poet whose roots were established early, so that his work matured and ramified without requiring a radical shift of ground. Consequently, examination of his formative period clarifies the nature of his overall achievement, and, in the process, reveals that his early poems have some intrinsic value.

Austin Clarke's literary life began when he entered University College Dublin in 1913. He became

aware, vaguely at first, of the literature of the Irish Revival. He read Yeats, but was confused by "the delicate impressionism" and the elusive rhythms of the Celtic Twilight, qualities, however, which he later appreciated (Penny, p. 3). On his first visit to the Abbey Theatre he was rather disconcerted by "the unabashed hullabaloo" of the keening women in Lady Gregory's The Gaol Gate (ibid.). But he returned, and he found the frequent productions of Yeats' plays "a deeply imaginative experience" (ibid. p. 4), and was impressed most by "the sparse language of The King's Threshold" (ibid., p. 6). No less impressive than Yeats' Seanchan was the author himself when he appeared on the dimly-lit stage after the performances: "He swayed and waved rhythmically, telling humbly of his 'little play', how he had rewritten it" (ibid., p. 4).

Clarke sat in the near-empty theatre listening to Yeats' curtain-lecture. The scene is emblematic. Confronted by the figure of the great poet, the young man listened in fascination, yet, watchful in the shadows, he was instinctively uneasy, not quite sure whether he was in the presence of a true magician or a conjurer. On one occasion his worst suspicions seemed to him to be confirmed:

One night, however, my youthful and romantic illusions were suddenly shattered, and in a trice the Celtic Twilight was gone. As the

poet appeared punctually outside the curtain, a dazzling light shone around him. It might have been the light of his later fame! I glanced up and saw that the brilliant shaft of illumination came from the balcony. A spotlight must have been clamped to the rail and switched on as the poet appeared.

(Ibid, pp. 4-5)

Clarke admits that later he felt Yeats may have been calling attention "not to his own picturesque person, but to the struggling cause of poetry on the stage" (ibid). Indeed, Yeats' gimmick seems altogether insignificant. What is interesting is Clarke's reflex and unreasonable interpretation, revealing an instinctive antipathy, which, however, had a positive function: it kept him from the direct beam of Yeats' example, and led him to absorb the influence of the lesser writers of the Revival.

Yeats' influence, none the less, was felt by the younger poet. "So far as the younger generation of poets are concerned, here in Ireland", Clarke said, "Yeats was rather like an enormous oak-tree which, of course, kept us in the shade".⁸ Yeats' achievement posed a threat, but it was also an inspiring challenge, presenting a standard of excellence which an ambitious poet could strive to emulate in strength, independence, and breadth. There are unmistakable parallels between the careers of the two poets. Yeats' first important poem, The Wanderings of Oisín, is based on a tale from the Fenian cycle; Clarke

also began with narrative verse and with legendary subject-matter. In his later poetry, Yeats contrasted a noble, aristocratic past to the vulgarity of modern Ireland; Clarke, too, became critical of the present, of the narrow-minded Catholicism of the Free State, and, turning to Medieval Ireland, he admired its scholarship and artistic achievement in the service of an insular Church. Clarke followed Yeats into the theatre, which helped his poetry to evolve from a phase of romanticism and vagueness, so that it acquired satiric bite and an appetite for topical controversies. Finally, like Yeats, he had a vigorous late period, when, with the spirit of a "wild old wicked man", he did not shirk the themes proper to youth. The younger poet, it seems, measured himself against the giant example before him, and, avoiding the highway of Yeats' achievement, he beat a parallel path, sniping mischievously from behind the hedges.

Outside the Abbey Theatre, and somewhat apart from the movement that Yeats choreographed, Clarke came in contact with more congenial influences. At University College he was fortunate in being taught by a generation of imaginative Gaelic scholars. Douglas Hyde, whose Love Songs of Connacht had influenced two generations of writers, converted him to the language movement:

On the morning of our first term, he spoke of the aims and ideals of the language revival: we were all equal, all united in

the Gaelic movement. There was no vulgar competition, no showing-off, no twopence-halfpenny looking down on twopence. Those plain words changed me in a few seconds. The hands of our lost despised centuries were laid on me.

(Black Church, p. 169)⁹

Clarke's use of a sacramental metaphor indicates the solemn importance of his initiation into the Gaelic tradition. Unlike Hyde, he did not become a bilingual writer, but he sought, instead, to preserve in his verse something of the lost art of Gaelic poetry. George Sigerson, who had attempted in his book of translations, Bards of the Gael and Gall, to imitate bardic metres, was on hand to teach him "about the subtle art of our formal poetry" (ibid). He was also inspired by the eloquent presence of Stephen MacKenna, translator of Plotinus and another Gaelic scholar: "He would turn from Rabelais to roll out some passionate protest of Ua Bruadair, forget Plotinus to denounce those who belittled the elegance of Carolan" (ibid). Clarke regarded MacKenna as his literary father, for he "seized [his] first lyrics and, with great enthusiasm, had it [sic] published at once in New Ireland, a weekly political and literary paper."¹⁰

At this time, too, Clarke formed a friendship with F.R. Higgins. Higgins was the same age as Clarke but he was already a practising poet, au fait with the literary scene. He furnished Clarke with a necessary part of his education, for he introduced him to the Nineties,

Maeterlinck, and Japanese poetry (Penny, pp. 14-15). Their literary friendship was an enduring one, and for many years they shared the same ideas about poetry, so much so that it is often impossible to tell which way the current of influence was flowing.

But it was the poet-revolutionary Thomas MacDonagh who exerted the most decisive influence on Clarke during his years at University College. MacDonagh belonged to the generation of poets, nowadays neglected, that emerged as the Celtic Twilight waned at the dawn of the century. The generation includes Joseph Campbell, Seamus O'Sullivan, Padraic Colum, James Stephens and Francis Ledwidge. Some of them were fostered by Yeats, yet their modest achievement is in rural lyric and folk-song, and they were little affected by the older poet's delicate symbolism or by his later rhetorical manner. MacDonagh is thinking of them especially when he writes:

They delight . . . in the rich living
language of a people little affected by
book-lore, a people standing but a little way
on the English side of the crossways,
remembering something of the syntax or the
metaphor of Gaelic, much of the rhythm,
inventing mostly for itself its metaphor from
the things of life, things known at first
hand.¹¹

Yeats answers the description in his role as folk-poet, but his younger followers, born outside the Anglo-Irish tradition of the Ascendancy, were more intensely aware of their Gaelic heritage, and were more exclusively

influenced by The Love Songs of Connacht. To the extent that their gifts allowed, they represented more faithfully the emergent voice of peasant, Catholic Ireland than did the major writers of the Revival.

In his pioneering study of Anglo-Irish poetry, Literature in Ireland, MacDonagh set out to define and illustrate what he termed the "Irish Mode". Considering Anglo-Irish verse in general, he focussed on a small body of poems and translations from Gaelic that shared affinities which clearly placed them apart from the English tradition. In attempting to isolate their common qualities, his argument involved some discussion of themes, subject-matter, and language. Mainly, however, he found that poems of the Irish Mode were distinguished by rhythmic qualities, that, in fact, the "most valuable and characteristic contribution to verse made by the Anglo-Irish poets . . . has been a contribution of melody, a music that at once expresses and evokes emotion."¹² He attributed the distinctive rhythms of the Irish Mode to the effect of "our more deliberate Irish speech", and to the influence of Gaelic metres and traditional tunes.¹³

Aware that example served better than analysis, MacDonagh appended a small anthology of poems in the Irish Mode to supplement those discussed in the course of the book. His selection suggests how the Irish Mode evolved during the nineteenth century, as poets became more

conscious of their racial heritage, fragmented and scattered by the breakdown of Gaelic culture, and veiled in a language they did not speak. The poetic tradition MacDonagh pointed to arose from the impulse to reclaim and integrate the past, to make from the psychic defeat, the nightmare of history, a victory in words.

The process began almost accidentally, and not very nobly, when Thomas Moore appropriated the Irish tunes collected by Edward Bunting, and set words to them for the entertainment of the drawing-room.¹⁴ In a few of his songs, he created a delicate verbal music, using elusive rhythmic patterns that have defied confident metrical description to date:

At the mid hour of night when stars are weeping,
 I fly
 To the lone vale we loved, when life shone warm
 in thine eye;
 And I think oft, if spirits can steal from the
 regions of air,
 To revisit past scenes of delight, thou wilt come
 to me there,
 And tell me our love is remembered, even in the
 sky.¹⁵

The underlying metrical pattern is anapaestic pentameter, but the lines, in their variations, have a rhythmic effect unfamiliar in English verse. MacDonagh noted that Anglo-Irish speech is not as heavily accented as English speech, observing that "A child in Cork, reading the word unintelligibility, pronounces all the eight syllables distinctly without special stress on any, though his voice

rises and falls in a sort of tune or croon".¹⁶ As a consequence, he argued, in "most Anglo-Irish verse the stresses are not so strongly marked; the unstressed syllables are more fully pronounced".¹⁷ This partly explains the effect of Moore's lines: a number of adjacent syllables take equal stress ("mid hour", "lone vale", "think oft"), while some, although they may be scanned as short, bear almost the same stress as neighbouring syllables ("shone warm", "past scenes"); thus, the voice is guided towards a deliberate enunciation of all the syllables. The metrical device here could be described in conventional terms as the substitution of cretics (- u -) for anapaests. But this is only one of the many variations that Moore used in setting words to Irish tunes: what is characteristic of his poems in the Irish Mode is that he transforms anapaestic pentameter, normally a tripping metre in English verse, into a carefully modulated, lyrical line.¹⁸

A similar rhythmic subtlety is apparent in a few poems by two post-translators of the early nineteenth century, J.J. Callanan and Edward Walsh.¹⁹ The Irish Mode reached a more mature stage of development in mid-century in the work of James Clarence Mangan and Samuel Ferguson, whose combined achievement constituted a mini-revival that both presaged and prepared for the surge of creativity at the end of the century. Their writing

coincided with a tentative attempt to create a national literature, due to intensified interest in Irish antiquities, and due to the impact of the Young Irelanders, a political and cultural movement that sought to revitalise the national consciousness. Both poets availed themselves of the scholarly quarrying of Gaelic manuscripts by John O'Donovan, Eugene O'Curry and George Petrie. Mangan's imagination, especially, was haunted by the plangent language of the later bards, as is evident in his eloquent rendering of "O'Hussey's Ode to the Maguire":

Though he were even a wolf ranging the round
 green woods,
 Though he were even a pleasant salmon in the
 unchainable sea,
 Though he were a wild mountain eagle, he could
 scarce bear, he,
 This sharp, sore sleet, these howling floods.²⁰

The bulk of Ferguson's verse consists of narrative versions of saga material in a Tennysonian manner, but in early translations from Hardiman's Irish Minstrelsy, he used the elusive rhythms of Moore and Callanan; and in one of his earliest poems, "The Fairy Thorn", he discovered the Celtic Twilight:

They're glancing through the glimmer of the
 quiet eve,
 Away in milky wavings of neck and ankle bare;
 The heavy-sliding stream in its sleepy song
 they leave,
 And the crags in the ghostly air.²¹

W.B. Yeats tells us in Reveries over Childhood and Youth that he read exhaustively the Irish poets of the

nineteenth century.²² Although he condemned in general "their cold and abstract language", he found in a few poems those rhythms, which, varied and refined, he used in his early work. His exaggerated praise of Ferguson was, no doubt, the payment of a debt:

The host is rushing 'twixt night and day,
 And where is there hope or deed as fair?
 Caoilte tossing his burning hair,
 And Niamh calling Away, come away.²³

But Yeats straddled many movements in his search for a universal language: he sang "to sweeten Ireland's wrong" but he kept his appointment in the end with Landor and with Donne.²⁴ Clarke put the matter rather negatively: "Mr. Yeats, coming too soon before the new forces of racial discovery, was unable to find that complete identification of interests which others found".²⁵ By "others" he meant those who, like himself, gave their energies exclusively to Irish poetry.

Informing Literature in Ireland is the ideal of an independent national literature. MacDonagh isolated a narrow tradition in nineteenth-century poetry, and, in attempting to define its distinctively Irish characteristics, he sought in effect to give direction to future Irish poetry. Many Irish poets, of course, both in the nineteenth century and since, have written successfully without a specific nationalistic motivation. The tradition that MacDonagh indicated, none the less, may

well represent the central line of development in Irish poetry. The Irish Mode, in its effort to build an imaginative and stylistic bridge with the past, has behind it a powerful racial pressure, the need both to integrate a broken tradition and, especially, to compensate for the loss of a language. "Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue", Yeats remarked, and the distinction points to the dilemma of the Irish writer, who, in writing in English, almost inevitably experiences an unease in using the instrument that has scattered his household gods.²⁶ This unease receives its classic expression in A Portrait of the Artist in the scene where Stephen and the Dean of Studies get into linguistic confusion over the words "funnel" and "tundish":

- Is that a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life.

- It is called a tundish in Lower Drumcondra, said Stephen laughing, where they speak the best English.

.....
The little word seemed to have turned a rapier point of his sensitiveness against this courteous and vigilant foe. He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson. He thought:

- The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit My soul frets in the shadow of his language.²⁷

One could speculate on the consequences which such unease has had for Anglo-Irish prose: the immediate effect of

Stephen's resentment was that he looked up "tundish" and found that it was "English and good old blunt English too", and there, perhaps, is the seed of his creator's linguistic obsessions, to culminate in Finnegans Wake, 'logomania' with a vengeance.²⁸ The Irish poet, on the other hand, so MacDonagh implied, could benefit from an ancient and sophisticated poetic tradition in his ancestral tongue, a reassurance that also constituted a valuable resource in the effort to naturalize Anglo-Irish poetry. In revealing the interaction between the Gaelic and English traditions during the nineteenth century, MacDonagh's insight proved influential. Very minor poets who contributed to the evolution of the Irish Mode have continued to influence the course of Irish verse, while those who worked in subordinate relation to the English tradition are neglected. Sir Aubrey de Vere's sonnets -- much admired by Wordsworth -- on Irish landmarks are unread; Callanan's "The Outlaw of Loch Lene" is in every anthology.

Austin Clarke caught the flame of cultural nationalism from MacDonagh. He met him first in the spring of 1915, and, during the following academic year, he attended a course of lectures in which MacDonagh drew on the material which would become Literature in Ireland. On one occasion during the fateful spring of 1916, MacDonagh revealed unconsciously the near identity of

the last instance the "rhyme" is assonantal); thus MacDonagh imitates a standard device in Gaelic verse known as uaithne.³¹ He also uses internal rhyme and assonance, and elsewhere in the translation he substitutes assonance for end-rhyme. Clarke admired "The Yellow Bittern" and other poems by MacDonagh (Penny, pp. 26-7). We can assume that he examined them carefully when he began to imitate Gaelic versification in his own poems.

* * *

"In one aspect of his work", John Montague writes, "Austin Clarke is the fulfilment of MacDonagh's dream of a separate Irish mode; the first completely Irish poet to write in English."³² It was not until the early twenties, however, that Clarke wrote lyrics that continue the tradition of the Irish Mode. His first handful of lyrics, indeed, show him in thrall to the pre-Raphaelite muse:

Ah! sweetest, to that isle we fled
 One purpline night: thy lips were red
 And laughing i' the lonely gloom,
 Though bitterly the driven spume
 Had stung them till they richly bled.³³

Fortunately, the conventional isles of late nineteenth-century lyricism did not detain him. Within six months of the publication of his first poems, he was writing The Vengeance of Fionn (1917), a long poem based on a tale from the Fenian cycle, Toruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne), and, though it did not set him on the course that MacDonagh had

charted, it launched him on a career devoted almost exclusively to Irish subject-matter.

The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne is of ancient origin, at least as old as the twelfth century, though the earliest extant manuscript dates from about 1650. It is related to "Deirdre and the Sons of Uisliu" and to the European romance of Tristan and Isolde. Myles Dillon has stated that the theme is "the tragedy of a young girl betrothed to an old man and of the conflict between passion and duty on the part of her lover."³⁴ Grainne, however, is no passive victim of circumstance. On the occasion of a feast given in honour of her betrothal to Fionn Mac Cumhail, she drugs the assembled warriors, except for Diarmuid, whom she obliges to elope with her much against his will. The tale then recounts the wanderings of the couple around Ireland and their several escapes from the vengeful Fionn. Eventually peace is made through the mediation of Aongus, the God of Love, who happens to be Diarmuid's foster-father, and the couple settle down to domestic life in Cois Corrain, Co. Sligo. Some years later, Grainne invites the Fianna to a feast. During the visit Diarmuid is wounded by a boar while hunting with Fionn on Ben Gulban (Ben Bulben). Fionn, who has the power to heal with a drink of water, temporizes, and Diarmuid dies.

Clarke has suggested a combination of reasons for

his choice of subject-matter. At a time of turbulence in Ireland and Europe, he saw the use of Celtic mythology as a means to "adumbrate the forces stirring so violently again in the human race" (PMI, p. 42). But the subject also had a personal thematic attraction, for, as he saw it, the tale was about "two young lovers who fled from violence, night and day, through the glens and forests of Ireland, wishing only to be happy and to be left alone" (ibid.). Clarke was to return to the escape-tale in various guises, for it partook of the central conflict of his work, the tension between the individual's search for fulfilment and the imposed constraints of outside forces. The poem was written "in a state of recurrent imaginative excitement" in the spring of 1917 (Penny, p. 51), and we can surmise that it was the conflict between his youthful romanticism and the public summons to arms -- the voices of nationalism, the ubiquitous finger of Lord Kitchener -- that stirred his imagination. As we shall see, however, the poem does not establish a satisfactory nexus between the two aspects of the theme, for while violence is adumbrated successfully enough, the escape-motif becomes all too concretely realized in descriptive wanderings through the Irish landscape.

The writers of the Revival offered several models for modern adaptations of heroic tales. Following the example of Ferguson's Lays of the Red Branch and Congal,

Yeats, AE and Synge had each resuscitated stories from the heroic cycles. The Vengeance of Fionn is in that general tradition, but the releasing influence behind the poem was that of a minor and almost forgotten poet, Herbert Trench, a maverick of the Revival. Clarke has described his reaction when he happened on Trench's Deirdre Wed in the Municipal Library:

Instead of the muted music of the Celtic Twilight, I held in my fist 'a mad discordancy, like fifes, drums, brasses'. I stopped outside shop-windows in Bolton Street, leaned against lamp-posts, pleasing my brain with the concussion of fine words.

(Penny, p. 167)

He elaborated his response to Trench in an article on his work:

The Celtic Twilight is beautiful in itself, but it can appear Gaelic to those -- and they are many -- who accept with Napoleon the Ossian of Macpherson. The objective manner of Trench is as a fact more racial than the shimmering mists of Fiona Macleod. His rhetorical manner, however indefensible from the point of view of style and of modern tendencies, is similar to the manner of the 'O'Grady's [sic] in the Silva Gadelica and the Bardic History -- themselves parallel to the style of Middle Irish prose.³⁵

Clarke's account of his enthusiasm for Trench's poetry is revealing. Influenced by the ideals of MacDonagh, he was in search of an authentic Irish voice. Literature in Ireland pointed the way to an extent, but the province of its argument was lyric and folk song. Clarke appears to have discerned a parallel tradition in nineteenth-century narrative: The Bardic History, Silva Gadelica, Deirdre

Wed. Because of the imperfect and inchoate nature of this tradition, it could be developed. Moreover, and most decisively, it freed Clarke from the seductive music of the Celtic Twilight: he believed he had found "a way towards a truer representation of Gaelic myth."³⁶

Clarke's debt to Trench, mainly in the areas of language and rhythm, is considerable, as a comparison of parallel passages from Deirdre Wed and The Vengeance of Fionn illustrates:

Gloom suck'd in the banqueters;
And from the warmth of drinking at his feast
Connachar sent forth to the women's house;
And heralds bade bring also the gray seer
Cathva, though Cathva had not will'd to come.
But hardly had those erranders gone out
When rose the door-hide: the gray seer came in
Noiseless.³⁷

There amid the glows
And ruddy warmths many-throated acclaim
Rang smitten from bronze crowded shields, and rose
Among the oaken rafters with slow smoke
And hot sweet savours of the feast, a tune
Harped from cold strings, laughter of women folk
Hurrying, rustle of feet on thickly strewn
Rushes.

(CP, p. 4)

The crowding of words, inversions, and unexpected grammatical constructions, combine with a heavily stressed pentameter line to announce a style that is strange to English poetry. It could be argued that the frequency of epithet and the general extravagance of expression derive from twelfth-century Gaelic prose, but the style of that period is nowadays deplored by scholars, who contrast it

unfavourably with the sparse and functional prose of the eighth and ninth centuries. This weakens somewhat Clarke's justification of the style he adopted by pointing to its "racial" and "objective" characteristics. But it does not actually invalidate the style: creativity often flourishes in conjunction with myopic scholarship. Besides, the interest of the poem is not confined to its language.

Although The Vengeance of Fionn is usually classified as narrative, Clarke's treatment of the material is in fact indirect and semi-dramatic. The poem, as the introductory note informs us, begins in the middle-age of Diarmuid and Grainne, and it extends in time from the evening on which Fionn receives their invitation to the morning following Diarmuid's death. The past is not recalled directly, but exists, at first, as an obscure and threatening backdrop to the dramatic exchanges between the characters. Then, in sections IV, V and VI the incidents of the elopement and pursuit are narrated, but within a dramatic framework, from the point of view of Grainne as she awaits without hope her husband's return from the hunting expedition. The effect of Clarke's approach is to internalize the action, to emphasise the emotions of the characters rather than the events. The element of dramatic presentation is increased by the use of characters peripheral to the story in sections III and

VII, passages of unmediated dialogue which frame Grainne's recollection of the past.

Two comparatively short sections at the beginning involve the principal characters, and the focus is on their interaction following the years of bitterness. The verse is vivid and energetic, excelling when it suggests through its detail the inner drama. The description of the rude, violent splendour of the feast, for example, alerts us to the imminence of the conflicts:

They heard strange trampled sounds
And heavy breaths upon the night outside,
But Fionn bent his grey head, smiling, his mind
Druid-dark. The dagger-guarded door
Was turned by Kerns and with a shriek the wind
Rushed in on them, laughingly Diarmuid cried:
'Surely O Warriors our feast is good . . . !'
(CP, p. 5)

The sense of foreboding intensifies in the second section when Fionn and Diarmuid meet on the mountainside prior to the hunt. Fionn's bitterness surfaces as he recalls Grainne's youthful loveliness, eroded now by vagrant living, child-bearing, and "the black ravine / Of ruinous years" (CP, p. 6). Diarmuid appeals to old comradeship in vain, and, resigned to his fate, he goes forward to the hunt. In his farewell speech he displays (like Synge's Deirdre) an exultant joy that he did not exchange passion and freedom for a long life:

Tell that the clay of age could never creep
Coldly around my heart nor did I sit
Mumbling at a turf fire half blind with rheum
And maybe groping feebly in the gloom

Finger the leather breasts of a dumb hag
 That once, O Gods, was the white Grainne.
 (CP, p. 10)

The death of Diarmuid, the climax of the original tale, is not described, but takes place, as it were, off-stage. In section III it is intimated through the frightened conversation of boys hurrying from the woods past nightfall. Their exchanges create an atmosphere of gloom, deepened when, in the darkened air, they mistake Grainne, waiting on a mound, for a ghost.

In section IV the focus is on Grainne as she mourns her husband. While she meditates on the past, the poem, to quote the introductory note, "changes rapidly, visionally, to their youth and love":

Wild, enraptured,
 Her love was reborn in wondering
 And with a sudden brightness came.
 (CP, p. 15)

What follows is a recapitulation of the elopement night and the wanderings of the lovers. Up to this point, Clarke's handling of the material has been quite dramatic, in that much of the action has been presented in the form of dialogue, and the narrator's intrusions, when they occur, are brief and functional. In view of the nature of the poem so far, it is possible to regard the fourth and following two sections as a dream or reverie on the part of Grainne, as an imaginative recreation of the past from her point of view. Increasingly, however, the narrative

now becomes descriptive and digressive, and one suspects that the poet's interest shifts away from his characters to his own fascination with landscape.

On the whole the sections dealing with the past are not successful. The description of the elopement in section IV and of Fionn's angry reaction to it in section V are effective, though their impact is diffused by an overabundance of incidental detail. Section VII, however, poses more serious difficulties. The longest section of the poem, its thematic function is important, as it is intended both to embody the passionate fulfilment of the lovers, and to convey a waning in the intensity of their love. Clarke relies on natural description to reflect the happiness of the couple. He chooses the lake country of Killarney as the landscape of fulfilment, and its fertile and hospitable contours contrast effectively with the harsh, violent landscape of Connacht described earlier. Individually, some of the descriptions are vivid, but the iteration of mountains, lakes, streams and sunsets eventually lends itself to that sameness which is as tedious as repetition.

In attempting to realize the changing relationship of the couple, Clarke's imaginative failure is also evident. The poem appears to imply that the lovers are, in a sense, searching for the Absolute, for the Land-of-the-Ever-Young, and that, having attained the

pitch of their passion without passing to Tir-na-nOg, their romantic quest expends itself in restless wandering. "It is too late, I know her utterly" (p. 33), Diarmuid exclaims in realization of some such truth. The verse is heavy with the suggestion that their ecstatic love carries a burden of sorrow, implying perhaps that it has engendered a death-wish. The nature of their dilemma, however, remains vague, mainly because Clarke fails to portray the lovers in concrete situations or to give them plausible dialogue.

In the final section we return to the present time of the poem, and, happily, the ending is strong. A dramatic sequence, similar to that in Section III, is used. A young man comes to his beloved on the mound, and in the course of the lovers' flirtatious exchange, they allude to the events of the previous night. Clearly, their love is meant to parallel that of Diarmuid and Grainne, and their happy encounter serves, in accordance with tragic convention, to represent the continuity of life. But it also implies the inevitable tragedy of romantic love, because the shadow of the older couple's fate falls on their too-hopeful wishes:

'O it is best to be young and dance and laugh
And sing all day and comb my sleepy hair
In the startime, and never, never, grow old.'

(CP, p. 40)

Initially, the responses to The Vengeance of Fionn

were almost unanimous in its praise. The appreciative reviewer in The Times Literary Supplement, for example, found the poem "as original in conception as it is refined in execution", and he praised "its jewelled richness of surface", a quality which he considered "thoroughly Irish".³⁸ The one dissenting voice was that of the Ulster poet, Joseph Campbell, who let loose a Northern blast on Clarke's budding fame:

I will begin, point blank, with the statement that the book is a bad book. Why do I make this statement? For three reasons: (1) it sets out with a theme, and fails to accomplish it, (2) it betrays wrong tendencies in form and language, (3) it does not march on the strong feet of self-won knowledge, but shambles along haltingly on the staff of others' experience.³⁹

The severity of the review drew several replies, including one from Stephen MacKenna with the melodramatic caption, "I, Said the Quarterly", a reference to the legendary cause of Keats' death. Since Campbell's first general objection was based on the mistaken assumption that The Vengeance of Fionn was an epic, and since his support of his other objections was careless, MacKenna effectively countered most of his criticism, and then proceeded to list the qualities of the poem as "grandeur of phrase", "passionate wisdom", "fruit of brooding and sudden vision", "ecstatic comprehension of visible beauty", "tragic splendour and gloom, physical and spiritual".⁴⁰ These exalted and elusive terms seem to have reflected

faithfully the popular expectations of the time, and The Vengeance of Fionn, under the stimulus of controversy, quickly went into a second edition.

The controversy is of interest, for it illustrates a continuing problem in evaluating The Vengeance of Fionn. On the one hand, Tennysonian narrative, the genre to which the poem in a general way belongs, sanctions verbal ornamentation, and the rugged and dramatic aspects of Clarke's style enhance his employment of the form, so that the poem contrasts favourably, for instance, with The Wanderings of Oisín. On the other hand, the modern revolution in taste, which flayed verbal obesity and demoted narrative verse, was already in progress, and Campbell, a student of imagism for a time, set his teeth to the language of the poem:

It bristles with school-ma'am words like "demiurge", "smeltered", "youngling", "fierced", "clumsied", "bickered", "dartled". "Saffron", as an epithet ("the saffron west", "the saffron dawn", "saffron pools") occurs so often in the text that one itches to sling the inkpot at it, and spoil its pretty complexion.⁴¹

And he added in defence of his criticism:

"The Vengeance of Fionn", if it is Irish at all, is Irish of a bad period -- the decadence of the "Tara" brooch -- when our craftsmen thought more of superimposed ornament than of inherent beauty of form.⁴²

The modern reader is likely to share Campbell's impatience with Clarke's diction, but he should, perhaps, make some concession to the old-fashioned genre, so as to appreciate

what is of permanent value in the poem. A tolerant view of Clarke's diction need not preclude an awareness that in 1917 he was dealing in debased coin: "decadence" indeed is an accurate term for The Vengeance of Fionn, for it is precisely the excrescence of language that obscures its best, and what could have been its commanding feature, a dramatic presentation of the legendary material.

Campbell, in fact, had a salutary lesson for the emerging poet, one which might have enabled him to add to the promise of his first book immediately. When the two met in the autumn of 1917, the older poet outlined his conception for the future of Irish poetry:

I pointed to the bare outline of the hills about us I asked him to look at the brown waters of the Avonmore flowing under us. I begged him to think of the greyness of the Churches -- Holy Trinity which I can never examine without a cold, atavistic thrill going through my nerves And from architecture my thoughts went on to the sculptured symbols on the gravestones, those terribly simple, wonderful, meaningful circles and crosses evolved from the penannular brooches and the druidic carvings of pagan days. I said: "Here are the roots of a great Irish Renaissance"43

These words may well have influenced Clarke when he began to explore the culture of the Irish Church seven years later, but, for the moment, he had no taste for the austerities either of the Irish landscape or of medieval religion:

Austin Clarke, I know, did not agree with me. He had a mouse-eared copy of Shelley in his pocket . . . he adored Shelley. He adored Keats, too.

He had been working, he told me, on a poem on a Biblical subject, Moses, I think, and he said that he was going to make it more ornate and coloured even than his "Vengeance of Fionn", that he was trying, in the hackneyed phrase, "to load every rift with ore".⁴⁴

The poem Clarke was working on was The Fires of Baal, and it was indeed about Moses, a narrative on the death of the prophet. The choice of a subject so alien to his experience was due to his position as lecturer in the National University. The college authorities, supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party, were outraged by Thomas MacDonagh's role in the 1916 Rebellion, and they were wary of his successor. A Jesuit professor suggested to Clarke that "instead of writing about pagan Ireland, [he] should attempt a religious theme" (Black Church, p. 88). But as Clarke recalled, rather gleefully, the project did not work out quite as intended, for his imagination was attracted by "the various pleasures of polygamy which had been permitted by God to the patriarchs under the Old Law" (ibid.). To make matters worse, he continued, "I was tempted, like the Israelites themselves, by the variety of polytheism and so displayed an undue interest in Baal, Ashtaroth, Dagon and other idolatrous figures" (ibid., p. 88-9). Clarke was uneasy about compromising his muse. When the poem was published in 1921, it bore the date Bealtaine [May] 1917. The poem, however, was not written at that time, but in the course of the following year.

Bealtaine, as Clarke notes, can be translated as Fires of Baal: guiltily, perhaps, he wished to imply some tenuous connection between Ireland and his borrowed subject.

Clarke paid the price for compromise. The Fires of Baal is a dull poem. It could be criticized for its strained, Miltonic periods -- thirty-one lines, for example, in the opening sentence. But its failure is more fundamental, for one senses that the Biblical tale, apart from providing an opportunity for exotic and sensuous description, had no interest for Clarke. Overall, in fact, the verse is more polished and the narrative more evenly and clearly delineated than in The Vengeance of Fionn, but the poem has none of the intensity or adventurousness, and nothing to compete with the best passages of his first book.

The Fires of Baal is an anomaly, useful only in that it taught Clarke "that it is very difficult to sell the sub-conscious self" (ibid.). Returning to the inspiration of Gaelic saga, he conceived the ambition to write an epic poem, based on the Ulster cycle, the richest group of heroic tales. The cycle revolves around Concohar Mac Nessa and his band of warriors, which includes Cuchullin, and it deals mostly with the rivalry between the Ulster heroes and the forces of Maeve, Queen of Connacht. The centerpiece of the cycle is the Táin Bó Cuailnge (The Cattleraid of Cooley), in which Maeve's

army invades the north while the Ulstermen are sick, all except Cuchullin who defends the province until his comrades recover.

Clarke did not complete his ambitious project. He wrote the first and last parts, "Concobar" and "The Death of Cuchullin" (later re-titled "The Music Healers"), and he published them in The Sword of the West (1921). The book was poorly received. AE disliked it; Stephen MacKenna could not read it; and The Times Literary Supplement, which had hailed his first book, had this to say: "All is splendid and heroic, tempestuous and incoherent, and the interest of the first and last pages is the same."⁴⁵ Clarke became dissatisfied with his technique, destroyed a section of his epic entitled "The Intoxication of the Ulstermen", and rewrote two remaining fragments which he included in The Cattle-drive in Connaught and Other Poems (1925).

Some explanation is required to account for the failure of The Sword of the West. The years 1917 to 1921 were a difficult period in Clarke's life. He was immature, emotionally frustrated, confused about religion, yet he had been saddled with a reputation as Ireland's most promising poet. The execution of MacDonagh and the death of Clarke's father two years later were personal tragedies. But the root of the problem was sexual. In 1918 he fell in love with Lia Cummins, a poet somewhat

older than himself. She seems to have been a haunting pre-Raphaelite beauty: "when she lit two candles and let down her hair, I could not resist the pale gleaming of her face" (Black Church, p. 89). But she was not the woman to unbind 'youth's dreamy load':

When the street below was silent, she retired to her small bedroom for a few minutes and then came back in her nightdress, her black tresses flowing almost to her knees.

Was I the last young 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)

The mythological conundrum suggests, I think, that Miss Cummins had a morbid fear of conception due to some painful experience, but Clarke is being deliberately obscure.⁴⁶ What is clear is the tantalizing celibacy of the situation. She eventually consented to be his wife, and they married secretly in a registry office in 1920. The marriage, however, was not consummated, and it ended within two weeks (Black Church, p. 90).

The crisis in these unhappy years was reached in the spring of 1919 when Clarke suffered a complete breakdown, involving insomnia, loss of memory, hallucinations, and infantile behaviour, and he was hospitalized for over a year. In general during his twenties Clarke was depressed and in precarious health. Like Sweeny, the mad poet of a medieval tale much admired

by Clarke, he sought a cure from nature. He spent long vacations travelling in the West of Ireland, his imagination excited by the literary and mythological associations that clung to the places he visited: "Far and wide I wandered on to upper glens of rock and water, dreaming of the Age of Epic" (Penny, p. 128).

Clarke's state of mind accounts to a great extent for the poor quality of the poetry in The Sword of the West. AE, who was assuming a fatherly role in Clarke's life, saw a direct relation between his mental health and the deterioration of his work:

I always believed in his genius since I read "The Vengeance of Fionn" which was really a wonderful poem for a boy of twenty. After that he unfortunately went off his head, was under doctors care for eighteen months, the poetry he wrote after that while imaginative lacked a hard guiding will.⁴⁷

The relationship between the poetry and his mental state indeed is much closer than at first appears. "Goncoabar" is based on Conpert Conchulainn ('The Begetting of Cuchullin'), which relates how Dectora, or Deictine, the sister of Concoabar, was lured by the god Lugh into the Otherworld, where she conceived Cuchullin. Clarke's treatment of the tale is gratuitously elaborate. The bulk of his narrative consists of an account given by an "unarmed stranger" who has been sent in pursuit of Dectora. He tells of his wandering through Ireland and of the various mythological characters that he encounters,

all of which is irrelevant to the main point of the story, until finally, in the last section, Dectora appears to him in a vision. Clarke, unhappy, in love, finding solace in Ireland's landscape and mythology, was simply using the tale to embody autobiographical material. But he does not use the mythological framework to objectify or to analyse his own experience, nor, for that matter, does he infuse the tale with his own emotional intensity; rather, he translates his own experience into the remote and heroic light of the past. To borrow Eliot's terminology, the "first voice" dominates to the detriment of the objective requirements of the form.

The autobiographical element in "The Death of Cuchullin" is equally strong. The poem concentrates on the events that lead up to the hero's death. Cuchullin, enthralled by the wizardry of the children of Calatin, is driven to madness and hallucination, even though druids and the women of Ulster try to distract him with music and story. The second section is told in the first person, and, although it is presented in the guise of a dream in which Cuchullin longs for his fairywoman, Fand, it is clearly a lyrical outcry by the poet:

All night I lie awake
 Watching through storm her sea-lit face
 Lifted against the long tumultuous surge
 Of her dark hair

Yet I shall never feel her passionate breasts
 Beat under mine and silence gathering me
 Into her burning deeps, nor loneliness come
 With slumber.⁴⁸

The woman invoked is readily identified as Clarke's beloved. Occasionally, as here, the pressure of personal experience throws up vivid fragments. But, in general, Clarke's failure to harness his emotional energy in the service of his epic intention immobilizes the narrative, and, in the end, renders it incoherent.

Ostensibly, Clarke was still pursuing his ideal of a narrative style in the Irish Mode. He had absorbed Ferguson's narratives, written in a more conventional style than Deirdre Wed. The influence of Ferguson, however, was not likely to chasten his style; rather, it confirmed him in his profligate use of the adjective. Clarke, however, was not entirely oblivious to the deterioration of his poetry. He included a foreword to The Sword of the West, and, in a curious sequence of non-sequiturs, he is plainly defensive:

These verses come from the remote islands and capes of the west where light is still heroic. They are long for reasons of the sun and the slow burning of candles. They are meant to be chanted as music is still heard and not read: for poetry is incantation.

They form the Introduction and the Conclusion of a poem embracing the entire Cuchullin saga and the wars of the western and northern kingdoms for supremacy. But it is well that the mythological world should remain clouded and that the fords are deep.⁴⁹

The poems were revised severely for Collected Poems (1936). Section I of "Concohar" was rewritten, shortened, and published as "Beyond the Great Forest"; the remainder

of "Concobar" was discarded. "The Death of Cuchullin" was rewritten and renamed "The Music-Healers"; section I and much of section II were rejected. From the second section, however, Clarke saved a fine lyrical passage, "O Love, There is no Beauty". It may be judged disconcertingly romantic and too loosely structured to qualify as a good poem, but its intensity is difficult to resist. The poem concludes:

I know the steps of love.
Take hands with me, sad dancers in the glen,
For autumn leaves dance best when they are dead,
And we are less than they, O bitter dancers
That dance with bloodied feet.

(CP, p. 116)

Clarke further revised the poems for the 1974 edition of his Collected Poems. In doing so, he restored much of what he omitted in 1936, but he retained "O Love There is no Beauty" as a separate lyric.

The Sword of the West as it appears in Collected Poems (1974) is an improvement on the first edition. There are some omissions; the narrative development is clarified; clichés have been replaced. The poetry, none the less, is still difficult to read, mainly because the style remains adjectival. The restoration of the poems, consequently, may seem to indicate a lack of self-critical severity. However, Clarke's guiding principle in his second revision appears to have been to minimize interference with his younger self, to rewrite in keeping

with the original inspiration.

This probably indicates not so much a belief in the absolute value of the poems as an acknowledgement of their importance as a phase in his development. These early narratives mark an initial point in the trajectory of his career, a broad curve that passes consecutively through lyric, analytic and satiric phases, to round off with a return to narrative forms in a comic mood. Not only does the romantic and heroic period add to the scope of his own canon, but it underlines and partly explains the depth of his disillusion when his work became self-analytic and embittered. Moreover, it was in these years that he immersed his imagination in the landscape and lore of Ireland, and the excitement of that initial plunge never left him. While he was writing The Sword of the West, he absorbed impressions, found metaphors and images, which were to nourish his poetry for many years. A number of phrases edited from the volume reappear in subsequent poems. For instance, the line, "In the gap of the pure cold wind", from "The Lost Heifer", was first used in section III of "The Death of Cuchullin"; and the closing three lines of section II were adapted in "The Tales of Ireland" (CP, pp. 126, 179) Besides, as Thomas Kinsella admits in spite of his distaste for the early narratives, "Marvellously successful details occur everywhere":⁵⁰

When mountain-rocks are red with bracken
The fox may run unseen!

.....
O we will hurry
South where the squirrels run a mile through boughs
From isle to isle, and in the hazels
The sunlight dances with green heels.

(CP, p. 94)

Such imaginative observation is spoilt through excess in The Sword of the West. But when Clarke began to fashion tightly structured poems, he had a fund of imagery to draw on.

* * *

During the early years of Clarke's career as a poet the literary life of Dublin revolved around the two acknowledged elders of the Revival, W.B. Yeats and George Russell (AE). On Sunday evenings, writers congregated at AE's house in Rathgar; on Mondays, Yeats presided over a rival gathering in Merrion Square. In accordance with his guiding instinct Clarke aligned himself with the group that went to hear AE talk of politics and of poetry. AE in fact became Clarke's literary guardian. In the dedication to Collected Poems (1936) he acknowledged the role AE had played in his development, writing that he had "sustained the cause of Irish poetry, giving imaginative courage and hope to us all."⁵¹ AE had helped in the publication of The Vengeance of Fionn; he had watched uneasily as its author had suffered a nervous breakdown; and in 1921, when The Sword of the West was written, he

took Clarke aside and told him that "his technique was going to pieces":

Coming from so kindly a critic that remark had implications from which I could not escape. I tried to withdraw the book eventually, burned a long poem called "The Intoxication of the Ulstermen" and started to learn again.⁵²

The results of Clarke's new learning begin to appear in The Cattle-drive in Connaught and Other Poems (1925). A transitional volume, it displays a variety of styles and a diversity of subject-matter. A careful design, however, enacting a transition from the present to the past, from the lyrical to the narrative, brings the various elements into unity. The book opens with tense personal lyrics set against the background of the western sea-board, on the verge, as it were, of the Gaelic past which they gradually begin to explore. The second section, entitled "The Land of Two Mists", treats legendary and mythological subjects in a lyrical manner, culminating in the narrative poem "The Circuit of Cuchullin", which, in turn, is followed by a more prolonged exploration of the heroic age, "The Cattle-drive in Connaught". The book, then, is not a complete departure from previous practice, but it represents several developments in style and treatment of subject-matter, that serve, in the words of Robert Graves, to make the poems "definite, economical, imaginative."⁵³ The remainder of this chapter will complete the

story of Clarke's involvement with heroic Ireland; then, isolating the technical innovations in the poems, I will trace Clarke's acquisition of a completely Irish style; a consideration of fresh thematic concerns burgeoning in the volume will be reserved for the following chapter.

Of the narrative poems, "The Cattle Drive in Connaught" is the better and the more illustrative of Clarke's development. It is based on "The Pillow Talk" from the Táin Bó Cuailnge. This episode recounts the quarrel between Maeve, queen of Connacht, and Ailill, her husband, on the question of who had the greater wealth. They order a tally to be made of their possessions -- household effects, jewellery, clothes, herds -- and it is found that they match in every respect except that Ailill has a white bull superior to any among Maeve's herds. Maeve, however, discovers that an Ulsterman by the name of MacDara owns the finest bull in Ireland. She sends messengers to acquire him, promising generous gifts in return, including her own "friendly thighs."⁵⁴ But in the course of the bargaining, a quarrel starts between the messengers and the Ulstermen. As a result, MacDara obstinately refuses to part with the bull. So the scene is set for the Cattle Raid of Cooley.

A new approach and a new confidence are apparent in Clarke's handling of the heroic material. Gone is the cloudy description, so dense in The Sword of the West.

The narrative is unimpeded, realistic, relieved by dialogue and humour. Clarke's article on Herbert Trench, cited earlier, was written about the same time as "The Cattle-drive in Connaught", and it offers a clue to the thinking behind the poem: "It is obvious . . . that Anglo-Irish poetry however much it may draw wisely from its rich racial sources, must observe the high tradition of the language which is its medium."⁵⁵ This implies a qualification of his admiration for the "racial" style of Trench, and some recognition of the dangers involved in pursuing a characteristic Irish mode. Clarke now constructs a logical, coherent narrative, and he concentrates on bringing the tale alive into the present, rather than on transporting himself and the reader into a remote atmosphere. As Padraic Colum observes, "he does not hesitate to make great Maeve talk like an assertive Connaught woman we might have known, while MacDara . . . talks like the tough particularist of today":⁵⁶

'Come west, MacDara. You shall have,
 Bringing the Bull as broad lands he can roam
 Within a day, a big car worth a score
 Of women, brown land, early land and mowing
 To spare, come west MacDara, west.'

He spat

Awhile.

'But tell me of the grass
 There',

'Sweet it is and hardy to the mouth
 Now.'

'Take a quart of ale, young man
 And let me think'

(CP, pp. 149-50)

Interestingly, in moving away from the epic style of Ferguson and Trench, Clarke not only improves his style, but he comes closer to the spirit of the earlier versions of the saga, to the vivid prose of the eighth and ninth centuries as opposed to the decadent style of the eleventh. The Táin is a composite of styles, but the most authentic passages can often be recognised because of their matter-of-factness: "'We needn't polish the knobs and knots in this, Mac Roth,' Medb said. 'It was well known it [the Bull] would be taken by force if it wasn't given freely. And taken it will be.'"57

But just as Clarke demonstrated that he was mastering the technique of narrative verse, he abandoned the genre. He did not give up the ideal of a distinctively Irish style, however, and, in turning to the writing of lyrics, he began to develop the mode suggested by MacDonagh. He turned to the example of Gaelic versification, and, in particular, he attended to the theories of William Larminie, whose essay on the use of assonance I shall return to later in the chapter. He listened again to the music of the Celtic Twilight, not so confusing now that he appreciated the tradition that lay behind it. The combined influence of Gaelic poetry and the tradition of the Irish Mode is apparent in "The Lost Heifer", the most elaborate lyric musically in The Cattle-drive in Connaught, and one which could well be

regarded as the quintessential example of the Irish Mode. It takes as its title one of the secret names of Ireland used by the Jacobite poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in so doing, it recalls the mode of the aisling, or vision-poem, a popular Gaelic form of the period. Clarke, in fact, had been reading Daniel Corkery's The Hidden Ireland, a semi-scholarly study of eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry, which contains, according to Clarke, "a wonderful chapter on that form."⁵⁸ In the aisling, Corkery wrote, "the vision the poet always sees is the spirit of Ireland as a majestic and radiant maiden."⁵⁹ The genre became popular and highly conventionalised, and the quality of the poetry suffered accordingly. None the less, the finest of the aislingí attained a lyrical purity unequalled elsewhere in Gaelic verse. The most famous one, by Egan O'Rahilly, begins:

Gile na gile do chonnarc ar slighe i n-uaigneas;
Criostal an chriostail a guirm-ruisc rinn-uaine;
Binneas an bhinnis a friotal nár chríon-ghruamdha;
Deirge is finne do fionnadh n-a gríos-ghruamdhaibh.⁶⁰

(The brightest of the bright I saw on my path in
loneliness;
Crystal of crystal was her flashing blue-grey eye;
Essence of sweetness were the words she spoke;
Redder than wine was the light in her shining cheeks.)

Frank O'Connor, who despaired of translating the poem, said of it:

In Irish the poem is pure music, each line beginning with assonantal rhymes on the short

vowel "i" (like "mistress" and "bitter"), which gives it the secretive, whispering quality of dresses rustling or of light feet scurrying in the distance.⁶¹

It could be added that the slender initial vowels are in counterpoint to long vowels at the end of each line, so that the poem's subject, a vision of beauty on a lonely hillside, is suggested aurally in every line, with the effect that the woman seems to shimmer through the desolate landscape.

"The Lost Heifer" attempts and attains a similar degree of rhythmic subtlety. The metrical ancestry of the lyric, however, is complex, for it owes as much to the Anglo-Irish tradition of Moore, Ferguson and Yeats, as it does to the devices of Gaelic versification. Assonance, as we shall see, is important in the poem, but equally important are its metrical variations: lithe trisyllabic rushes, marching iambs, spondaic delays, are blended to achieve an elusive wavering movement. As in O'Rahilly's aisling, the rhythmic devices contribute to the realization of the theme, for they suggest the immanence of a fugitive female spirit in the landscape:

When the black / herds of the / rain were / grazing
 In the gap / of the pure / cold wind
 And the wa/ter/ry ha/zes of / the hazel
 Brought her / into / my mind,
 I thought / of the last / honey by / the water
 That no hive / can find.

Brightness / was dren/ching through / the branches
 When she wan/dered again,
 Turning / the sil/ver out of/dark grasses
 Where the sky/lark has lain,
 And her voice / coming soft/ly o/ver the mea/dow
 Was the mist / becoming rain.

(CP, p. 126)

A definite metrical pattern is not apparent in the poem: the opening line, for example, could also be scanned as trochee, spondee, anapaest, iamb, with a short final syllable. Yet a metrical rhythm is at work in the lines, for they refuse to be read as rhythmic prose. It is characteristic of metre to alter, by virtue of the pattern it establishes, the accents of prose, slightly muting some syllables and giving stress to others that would be unaccented in ordinary speech. Clearly this happens with "were" in line 1 and with "of" in line 3. The effect of the rhythm, precisely its wavering quality, derives from the manner in which a tension is maintained between metrical and speech rhythm to the point where metre almost, but never quite, breaks down. Some syllables ("herds", "cold") clearly resist a metrical tendency to leave them unstressed; others succumb to the imposition of a metrical pressure: this happens with "dark", and with the first syllable of "coming", so that they may be

scanned as short. The placing of stresses is liable to vary with each reader, with each reading indeed, but what is consistent is the wavering movement of the rhythm. The short lines are the most difficult to scan: the eighth line could be read as a trimeter (u- / -u / u-) as also could the last line (uu- / u- / u-). I offer the above interpretation of the lyric as a personal favourite.

Assonance also contributes significantly to the music of the verses. Vowel-rhyme links lines 1, 3 and 5 in each stanza. There are many instances of internal assonance: "black"/"gap", "rain"/"grazing", for example, in the opening two lines. There are numerous echoes between stressed and unstressed syllables; we have consonance between "drenching" and "branches"; line 11 contains five variations on the vowel "o". The vowel music is intricate indeed, but, essentially, assonance functions in a traditional manner, as a lyrical ornament, not as a formal means of versification.

However, a number of lyrics in the volume, "The House in the West", "The Musician's Wife", "The Frenzy of Sweeny", show that Clarke was beginning to experiment with the systematic use of assonance. AE had drawn his attention to the theories of William Larminie set down in an essay, "The Development of English Metres", in 1894.⁶² Larminie had anticipated modernist theory in believing that traditional metres were "partly exhausted"

and that they were "partly intrinsically insufficient for modern needs".⁶³ As an alternative to the rhythms of Whitman or the Bible, he offered the example of Gaelic poetry which uses assonance instead of rhyme. The use of assonance, he believed, had a number of advantages, in that it was "a more delicate kind of rhyme", afforded greater freedom, and could be used as a relief from full rhyme.⁶⁴

Larminie attempted to put his theory into practice, and although his work scarcely constituted a revolution in verse, the "Epilogue to Fand" attracted the admiration of both AE and Clarke, who were fascinated by its music (Penny, p. 54):

Is there one desires to hear
 If within the shores of Eire,
 Eyes may still behold the scene
 Fair from Fand's enticements?

Let him seek the southern hills
 And those lakes of loveliest water
 Where the richest bloom of spring's
 Burns to reddest autumn:
 And the clearest echo sings
 Notes a goddess taught her.⁶⁵

The assonantal rhyme-scheme is ABAB CDCDCD. Larminie's use of this basic pattern demonstrates the freedom of which he spoke. The "rhyme" between lines 2 and 4 is off the accent, thus allowing him to place a three-syllable word at the end of the line, an infrequent occurrence in English verse. In the second stanza, "water" is first echoed by "autumn", then answered by "taught her", and the

feminine rhyme, which might have been awkward, closes the verse gracefully. The poem has the delicacy of an early lyric by Yeats, yet the versification owes little to Anglo-Irish verse of the nineteenth century. It derives its effect more directly from Gaelic.

In concluding his essay, Larminie urged Irish poets to make their contribution to English poetry by adapting "metres having in them the promise of the future, rich with unexhausted possibilities".⁶⁶ His ideas, however, were ignored or unknown for thirty years. Indeed, Clarke was also wary at first of pursuing Larminie's innovations. But having studied the use of submerged rhyme by the French poet Paul Fort, he saw the possibility of experimenting successfully with Gaelic versification (PMI, p. 43). He made occasional use of assonance in his narratives, especially in "The Death of Cuchullin". In The Cattedrive in Connaught, however, he leaned more heavily on its use, and in some of the shorter poems, it replaces rhyme as the principle of versification. The first stanza of "The Musician's Wife" is a typical example:

The hour of the player
 Begins with a star
 And men build a blaze
 To double the pillar
 In the house of mead:
 But the music of Craftinē
 Was blown with the laughter
 Of his wife as she fled.

(CP, p. 129)

The opening four lines "rhyme" ABAB. Then the pattern becomes more complex: "mead" stands somewhat isolated, though it is echoed in "fled"; "Craftinë" answers "pillar" in one syllable, and anticipates "laughter" and "fled" in its first and last syllables. The word, in Clarke's phrase, divides its echoes (CP, p. 547), a device which combined with its hyper-metric position, gives emphasis and appropriate resonance to Craftinë, the legendary musician of Tara.

In The Cattedrive in Connaught assonance functions, generally speaking, as a discreet form of rhyme. Unobtrusive to the eye and almost secretly pleasing to the ear, it takes, in Clarke's metaphor, "the clapper from the bell of rhyme" (CP, p. 547). This in itself is a significant contribution to the music of verse, but the example of Craftinë suggests more varied uses, elaborate possibilities which Clarke developed systematically in subsequent volumes:

The natural lack of double rhymes in English leads to an avoidance of words with more than one syllable at the end of the lyric line, except in blank alternation with rhyme. A movement constant in Continental languages is absent. But by cross-rhymes or vowel-rhyming, separately, one or more of the syllables of longer words, on or off accent, the difficulty may be turned: lovely and neglected words are advanced to the tonic place and divide their echoes.

(CP, p. 547)

His experiments with assonance also led Clarke to use

forms of submerged rhyme, what he termed "stopped rhyme (e.g. window:thin; horn:morning)" and "harmonic rhyme (e.g. hero:window)".⁶⁷ Finally, he did not fall out with conventional rhyme, for he believed that "assonance . . . is not the enemy of rhyme":

It helps us to respect rhyme, which has been spoiled by mechanical use. By means of assonance we can gradually approach, lead up to rhyme, bring it out so clearly, so truly as the mood needs, that it becomes indeed the very vox caelestis.⁶⁸

The use of assonance, then, multiplies the number of musical devices available to a poet, and, in effect, revolutionizes the nature of versification. Rhymes, even when plentiful, have to be used sparingly lest they offend or tire the ear. But assonance, because of its discreet nature and because of the variations possible, can be used elaborately without a monotonous or jangling effect:

é o
 Summer delights the scholar
o é é+z
 With knowledge and reason.
é o
 Who is happy in the hedgerow
é o é+z
 Or meadow as he is?

u u y
 Paying no dues to the parish,
u y y
 He argues in logic
u u é
 And has no care of cattle
u é y
 But a satchel and stick.

(CP, p. 162)⁶⁹

The stanzas are from "The Scholar", written shortly after the publication of The Cattedrive in Connaught and included in Pilgrimage and Other Poems (1929). It is a free adaptation of an eighteenth-century Gaelic poem, An Mac Leighinn ('The Son of Learning'), and Clarke initially claimed that his version preserved "the exact metre of the original", but later described its "assonantal pattern" as being "more or less equivalent with the classical metre of the original."⁷⁰ In fact, as an example of bardic verse, An Mac Leighinn displays, according to its editor, "the extreme of looseness, the only rules observed throughout being (1) seven syllables in each line, and (2) riming dissyllables at the end of the second and fourth lines of each quatrain."⁷¹ Clarke does not adhere strictly even to the minimal rules. Nevertheless, a couple of the formal devices of Gaelic versification are present in "The Scholar", and it is specifically those devices that are present in all Gaelic poetry, from the Old Irish period to the folk songs of the nineteenth century, that it reproduces. As my notation indicates, Clarke "rhymes" lines 2 and 4, and he also "rhymes" syllables at the end of lines 1 and 3 with syllables in the middle of 2 and 4. These devices are known respectively as comharda and uaithe, and the basic pattern is close to that of debid (pronounced 'devee'), the most common stanza in Gaelic.⁷² In English, which

has a more varied vowel system than Gaelic, this is a demanding enough scheme, at least as restrictive as the heroic quatrain. Moreover, the "rhyme-scheme" becomes the basis for an intricate weave of sound, in which all the significant words are stitched together by alliteration and further use of assonance. Apart from the strictly phonetic correspondences I have indicated, there are numerous echoes, "Summer"/"scholar", for example; and "knowledge"/"hedgerow" is effectively a cross-rhyme. None the less, "The Scholar" does not differ markedly in its effect from conventional verse, where the elaborate linking of sounds is a common enough characteristic; but it does differ fundamentally in its schematic use of assonance.

Clarke's adoption of assonance was an extension of his interest in the Irish Mode and a logical move in his pursuit of a style that made a bridge with Gaelic tradition. Continuous practice with the devices of Gaelic versification, however, took him beyond his formative influences. The discipline of attending minutely to the sounds of English enabled him to acquire a unique voice, to develop a mode of feeling and a means of expression that has no precedent in Gaelic poetry nor in the graceful lyricism of the Irish Mode:

Bedraggled in the briar
 And grey fire of the nettle,
 Three nights, I fell, I groaned
 On the flagstone of help
 To pluck her from my body;
 For servant ribbed with hunger
 May climb his rungs to God.
 (CP, p. 155)

Although the formal devices in such a stanza derive from the older literature, they bear little resemblance on the tongue to the felicity of Gaelic poetry. Clarke's mature rhythms are nervous, his language knotted, the surface of his verse cobbled rather than smooth. In this instance we can see how the vowel-pattern is supplemented by an abrasive consonantal music -- gutturals, plosives and fricatives --, recalling the "concussion" of words in The Vengeance of Fionn, a scintillation of sound, however, that is now disciplined, the rifts loaded, not with descriptive ore, but with significant nuances. In "Celibacy", the poem from which the stanza is taken, a hermit battles for spiritual purification by mortifying the flesh: the essence of his struggle is given in the stopped rhyme, "body"/"God"; or, more subtly, we may notice how "nettle"/"fell" creates a current of expectation, so that when we read "help" the ear is aware

of "hell" submerged in the word, and we feel, instinctively perhaps, but to the degree that is necessary, the force of the concealed allusion to Christ's Harrowing of Hell (already intimated by "Three nights", "flagstone"). Thus, the personà's self-sacrifice is related appropriately to that of Christ, and, at the same time, it is suggested that the flesh is equated in the hermit's mind with hell.⁷³ Assonance ceases to be an external discipline or a device for ornamentation, and becomes part of the muscle of Clarke's technique, a supple, flexible mechanism that is responsive to and responsible for inflections of meaning.

Such an example of Clarke's mature verse throws our discussion of his stylistic progress into new gear, for it reveals that his technical innovations have a significance outside the tradition of the Irish Mode from which they originate. As Donald Davie writes, "the assonantal interlacings that Clarke invented for English turn out to be not just structural devices, nor a source of delightful grace-notes, but expressive also."⁷⁴ Clarke parts company with Mangan, Ferguson and the other pioneers of the Irish Mode and takes his place among contemporary innovators. His reliance on assonance can be paralleled readily to the general experimentation in twentieth-century verse, and it is closely analogous to the practice of writers who resuscitated old or forgotten

devices to supplement the "partly exhausted" metres of English poetry. John Crowe Ransom used the ballad stanza as a vehicle for sophisticated irony; Dylan Thomas was influenced by the intricate sound patterns of Welsh verse; and W.H. Auden returned for a time to the alliterative tradition of Anglo-Saxon. Clarke's experiment was both more radical and more determined, in that it was more deeply traditional in terms of his racial inheritance, and in that he developed his medium until it was capable of responding sensitively to contemporary experience.

Reviewing Ancient Lights, Davie remarked: "if the poems were better known [assonance] could be a momentous innovation in the whole tradition of Anglo-American verse".⁷⁵ It is a conditional claim; and, although Clarke's influence has been minimal so far, it remains true as such.

NOTES

Chapter I

¹Aislinge Meic Conglinne: The Vision of MacConglinne, ed. with trans. (based on W.M. Hennessy's) by Kuno Meyer; intro. by Wilhelm Wellner (London, 1892), p. 9. Translation: And he debated in his mind where he would go on his first poetical journey.

²The Celtic Twilight and the Nineties (Dublin, 1969), p. 31.

³Ibid., pp. 38-9; Poetry in Modern Ireland (2nd ed.; Dublin, 1961), pp. 22-3; see also pp. 47-52 for a clear outline of Clarke's view of Yeats' development. The short-title, PMI, will be used in subsequent references to this book, and page references will normally be incorporated in the text.

⁴Ibid. pp. 47-8; A Penny in the Clouds (London, 1968), p. 2. The short-title, Penny, is used in subsequent references to this book, and page references will normally be incorporated in the text.

⁵"Austin Clarke and Padraic Fallon", Two Decades of Irish Writing, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle, Cheshire, 1975), p. 46. For Davie's review, see Irish Writing, no. 34 (Spring, 1956), 57-8.

⁶"Letter from Dublin", Poetry, XC (August, 1957), 310-15; "Contemporary Verse: A Short Chronicle", Studies, XLVII (Winter, 1958), 441-9; "Isolation and Cunning: Recent Irish Verse" [Review of Too Great a Vine and other volumes of Irish poetry], Poetry, XCIV (July, 1959), 264-70.

Clarke's star continued to rise during the sixties. Charles Tomlinson called the publication of Later Poems "the literary event of 1961", "Poets and Mushrooms", Poetry, C (May, 1962), 113. Clarke's instalment as the doyen of Irish letters was accomplished in 1968 when he received the Gregory Medal, the highest award of the Irish Academy of Letters.

⁷"Introduction" to Austin Clarke, Selected Poems (Dublin, 1976), p.xiii.

⁸Irish Literary Portraits, ed. W.R. Rodgers (London, 1972), p. 19.

⁹The short-title, Black Church, is used to refer to Twice Round the Black Church (London, 1962), and references will normally be incorporated in the text as here.

¹⁰"Poetry in Ireland Today", The Bell, XIII (November, 1946), 156.

¹¹Literature in Ireland (Dublin, 1916), p. 23.

¹²Ibid., p. 81.

¹³Ibid, pp. 70-82; quotation, p. 72.

¹⁴For a fuller account of the history of the Irish Mode, see Robert Farren, The Course of Irish Verse in English (London, 1948). He regards Clarke's work, essentially, as a culmination of the development of the Irish Mode: see, especially, pp. 150-165.

¹⁵"At the Mid Hour of Night", quoted in Literature in Ireland, p. 209.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸For a detailed discussion of Moore's metrical skills, see Thérèse Tessier, La Poésie Lyrique de Thomas Moore (Paris, 1976), III Partie, pp. 123-228. Sean Lucy, "Metre and Movement in Anglo-Irish Verse", Irish University Review, VIII (Autumn, 1978), 151-77, relates the rhythm of "At the Mid Hour of Night" to the metre of popular Gaelic songs, thus corroborating MacDonagh's view that Irish music influenced the evolution of the Irish Mode.

¹⁹Callanan's "The Outlaw of Loch Lene" and Walsh's "Have You Been at Carrick" and "Pulse of My Heart" are given as examples in Literature in Ireland, pp. 181, 179-80, 185.

²⁰Ibid., p. 76. The original Gaelic is much more restrained in language and rhythm than Mangan's version.

²¹Ibid., p. 215. Clarke writes: "I remember A.E. quoting to me the stanzas in this poem which had inspired Yeats and himself because of their twilight hue and a vowel-music suggested by Gaelic internal assonance" (PMI, p. 15).

²²Autobiographies (London, 1965), p. 101.

²³"The Hosting of the Sidhe", The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (London, 1950), p. 61.

²⁴Ibid., p. 56; p. 157.

²⁵"Irish Poetry Today", Dublin Magazine, X (Jan.-March, 1935), p. 29.

²⁶Essays and Introductions (New York, 1961), p. 520.

²⁷A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 188, 189.

²⁸Ibid., p. 251.

Clarke was conscious of psychic unease about English, and reflected on the possible effect it had on Joyce: "If the present bi-lingual experiment in this country has any inner meaning, the explanation can only be that the race itself is daily conscious of its lingual maladjustment. Was it this mental discomfort that made Joyce, for instance, use a Romance language in daily life and eventually change the entire cut of English to suit himself? Certainly, the sound of spoken Irish at a street corner or in a Government office comes as a distant psychic shock. In such uneasiness can a few of us be blamed if we abandon English rhyme and pursue the complexities of another prosody!" ["The Black Church", Dublin Magazine, XIV (Oct.-Dec., 1939), 12-13].

²⁹On the relationship between Clarke and MacDonagh, Robert Farren writes: "We must take MacDonagh's execution as a trebling of the link; for, first to be taught by a man; next to teach where he taught oneself; and third to have his place left open by his death for a cause -- this is to link one trebly to him and his truth" (The Course of Irish Verse, p. 130).

³⁰Literature in Ireland, p. 199.

³¹For the rudiments of Gaelic versification, see Douglas Hyde, Irish Poetry (Dublin, 1902). Hyde seems a likely source for Clarke's knowledge of Gaelic prosody.

³²A Tribute to Austin Clarke on his Seventieth Birthday, eds. John Montague and Liam Miller (Dublin, 1966), p. 9.

33 "The Isle.-- A Fantasy", New Ireland, II (July 8, 1916), p. 349. Clarke published two other lyrics in a similar vein: "Song", New Ireland, II (July 22, 1916), p. 381; and "A Memory", New Ireland, II (August 19, 1916), p. 444. These early efforts were not reprinted.

34 Early Irish Literature (Chicago, 1948), p. 42.

35 "The Poetry of Herbert Trench", London Mercury, X (June, 1924), 159.

36 Ibid.

37 Deirdre Wed (London, 1901), p. 10.

38 January 17, 1918, p. 30.

39 "The New Epic", New Ireland, V (March 2, 1918), 273.

40 "I, Said the Quarterly", New Ireland, V (March 9, 1918), 292.

41 "The New Epic", 274.

42 "A Decent Row", New Ireland, V (March 16, 1918), 307.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 March 16, 1922, p. 168. For MacKenna's reaction, see Penny, p. 21; for AE's, see below, pp. 47-8.

46 The children of Mergara were devoured by her husband Hercules in a fit of madness. Later, he gave her as a husband to his nephew as he feared to have more children by her. I could find no reference to either Telisiphe or Attlis, but the latter may be a misprint for Atthis, who gave her name to Attica, but whose history is otherwise suitably obscure: "Some say that she died before marriage . . . others say that she was the mother of Erichthonius", "who was half human and half serpent" [The New Century Classical Handbook, ed. Catherine B. Avery (New York, 1962)].

47 Letters to W. B. Yeats, eds. Richard J. Finneran, George Mills Harper and William M. Murphy (London, 1977), II, 532-3. [Letter written ? April, 1932].

- 48 The Sword of the West (Dublin 1921), p. 55.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 "Introduction" to Selected Poems, p.xii.
- 51 The Collected Poems of Austin Clarke (London, 1936), p. [7].
- 52 "Poetry and Contemporary Facts: Donagh MacDonagh's First Book of Poems", Irish Times (April 19, 1941), p. 3.
- 53 "Donnybrook Fair and Seven Poets", Nation and Athenaeum, XXXVIII (April 19, 1941), p. 3.
- 54 The Táin, trans. Thomas Kinsella (London, 1970), p. 55.
- 55 "The Poetry of Herbert Trench", p. 159.
- 56 "Introduction" to Collected Poems (1936), p. 13.
- 57 The Táin, p. 58. See Frank O'Connor's The Backward Look (London, 1967), pp. 33-4. O'Connor argues on stylistic grounds that "The Pillow Talk", although written in the decadent prose of the eleventh century, is based on the authentic opening of the saga written two or three centuries earlier.
- 58 Later Poems (Dublin, 1961), p. 91.
- 59 The Hidden Ireland (2nd ed.; Dublin, 1967), p. 128. Corkery's book was first published in 1924.
- 60 Quoted by Corkery, ibid., p. 175.
- 61 Kings, Lords, & Commons (Dublin, 1970), p. 104.
- 62 Penny, p. 53; for Larminie's article, see The Contemporary Review, LXVI (November, 1894), 717-36.
- 63 "The Development of English Metres", p. 728.
- 64 Ibid., pp. 732, 734.
- 65 Fand and Other Poems (Dublin, 1892), p. 28; these verses are quoted by Clarke in a slightly different version (Penny, p. 54).

66 "The Development of English Metres", p. 736.

67 Collected Poems (1936), p. 309; see also PMI, p. 43.

68 Ibid.

69 System of notation suggested by Sean Lucy, op. cit. In this instance, I have used a phonetic system -- that of the Concise Oxford Dictionary -- to indicate Clarke's assonantal patterns. This is not to suggest, however, that he always aimed for exact phonetic correspondences.

70 "The Son of Learning" [later retitled "The Scholar"], Irish Statesman, VI (April 10, 1926), pp. 121-2; Collected Poems (1936) p. 316.

71 Thomas F. O'Rahilly, Measgra Dánta (Cork and Dublin, 1927), I, 69; for An Mac Leighlinn, see pp. 16-17.

72 See Hyde, op. cit., especially pp. 31ff.

73 "Celibacy" is discussed more fully in Chapter II.

74 "Austin Clarke and Padraic Fallon", op. cit., p. 45.

75 Op. cit., p. 58.

II

THE DRAMA OF CONSCIENCE: POETRY

"to express the moral and religious imagination . . . of Irish life, and to relate it to that richly austere period when Celtic-Romanesque art prevailed."¹

In naturalizing assonance as a formal means of versification in English, Austin Clarke brought to completion a central line of development in Anglo-Irish poetry, and, at the same time, put to rest his personal unease in using his mother tongue rather than the national language of Ireland. He made a bridge between the Anglo-Irish and the Gaelic traditions and he developed a technique which, he felt, best expressed the Irish imagination. The inevitable complement of this concern with a racial mode of expression is his reliance on native subject-matter. As we have seen, the dual interest is present in his work from the outset, in his derivative and largely unsatisfactory adaptations of heroic tales. But just as Clarke's technique developed rapidly following The Sword of the West, so his exploration of Gaelic subject-matter expanded during the twenties to include a wealth of new material, some of it neglected by his predecessors, much of it freshly available due to the ongoing work of Gaelic scholars. Moreover, Clarke began to exert his mind analytically in response to personal and political issues,

and his work, accordingly, began to shoulder a heavier thematic burden. In the course of this chapter, we shall see that, moving away from the purely mythological, Clarke explored historical aspects of the Irish tradition. In particular, he focused on the Christian heritage, and this enabled him, gradually, to broach new themes, and, in effect, propelled him beyond the formative influence of the Revival.

Clarke's preoccupation with the matter of Ireland was, in its fundamental orientation, an inheritance from the writers of the Revival. Standish O'Grady, the acknowledged parent of the movement, generated the initial impulse by revealing the imaginative richness of native tradition in his volumes of the History of Ireland (1878, 1880). The mythological and heroic material, which a generation of scholarly effort had made available, awakened in O'Grady a vision of Ireland's heroic past, and, filled with the exhilaration of discovery, he inspired his younger contemporaries with a sense of racial pride, thus motivating them to found a movement which took its inspiration from native subjects. AE, letting his "thoughts run on as they will", suggests the original excitement: "When I read O'Grady I was as such a man who feels ancient memories rushing at him . . . and I felt exalted as one who learns he is among the children of kings."² Yeats, whose "boyish indolence" was defeated

by O'Curry's "unarranged and uninterpreted history", believed "every Irish imaginative writer owed a portion of his soul" to O'Grady's work; yet, his admiration was qualified by an awareness of O'Grady's lack of restraint: "He could delight us with an extravagance we were too critical to share".³

Austin Clarke was not directly influenced by O'Grady, but as a student, coming into contact for the first time with Gaelic scholars, he too was exalted by the sudden discovery of an ancestral tradition that went back through the ages: "The hands of our lost despised centuries were laid on me" (Black Church, p. 169).⁴ He set out to repossess the past, filling his imagination with the heroic tales of Ireland, an exploration that was also geographical, for he travelled throughout the countryside to visit places mentioned in the literature. Considering the Revival later, he identified its strength as arising specifically from the discovery that Ireland was a richly inhabited land:

In returning to Irish mythology, our poets experienced an emotion which was unknown to English poets, an emotion which gives their work its peculiar intensity. They were not exploring a borrowed mythology, but one which belonged to their country, survived in its oral tradition, and in the very names of its hills, rivers and plains. When Keats turned to Greek mythology, he went to Lemprière's Classical Dictionary; our poets went out of doors.

(PMI, p. 8)

We can take it that these sentences are reflexive.

Clarke's early narratives, especially The Sword of the West, glory in the romantic evocation of a proud tradition, and, in the excitement of discovery, depict a heroic world where, to borrow O'Grady's headlong prose, "all around, in surging, tumultuous motion, come and go the gorgeous, unearthly beings that long ago emanated from bardic minds".⁵

It was a rather belated manifestation of the original spirit of the Revival. O'Grady's example had left much room for corrective development, and the movement had evolved by a process of modification and reaction in response to the initial impulse. In Beside the Fire (1890) and The Love Songs of Connacht (1893) Douglas Hyde had disclosed another dimension of the Gaelic world, the vivid folk imagination of the west which was still alive in the mouths of the people. His work and that of Lady Gregory in Cuchulain of Muirthemne (1902) and Gods and Fighting Men (1904) provided Yeats with "an old vivid speech", and he, along with younger poets such as Padraic Colum and Patrick Campbell, turned to rural subjects and simple language.⁶ The evolution of the Revival was complicated by the emergence of the Celtic Twilight as the dominant mode, a development which, despite its pervasive appeal at the time, may best be regarded as a temporary outgrowth arising from the central concern with mythology and folk tradition. Clarke's

relationship to this aspect of the Revival has already been considered, and its origins, popularity and ramifications need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that its vogue received its first and most effective rejection when Synge bade adieu to the "plumed yet skinny shee",⁷ and sought instead the inspiration of peasant life.

While the movement evolved towards a truer representation of the realities of Irish life, its general tendencies remained romantic, the only exception being the early work of James Joyce. Joyce was, like Clarke, Catholic, middle-class, and a Dubliner, but he refused the westward journey into Irish tradition. Fifteen years before The Vengeance of Fionn, he informed Yeats that he had made a mistake in everything he had done, and, rejecting nationalist Ireland, Joyce had chosen prose, realism and European tradition, as he took on the task of forging the Irish conscience.⁸ Thus, he formulated what Frank O'Connor has called the "antithesis" of the Revival.⁹ By the early twenties when Clarke too had become dissatisfied with the original dispensation of the Revival, the antithetical spirit of the movement was dominant. The romantic image of Ireland presented by much of the poetry of the period, including Clarke's early work, had as its cultural correlative the insurgent idealism of the nationalist movement. Although the

Catholic bias and patriotic fervour of nationalism, dramatically illustrated by the 'Playboy riots', ensured that an uneasy relationship existed between the political and literary movements, they maintained, nevertheless, roughly interdependent courses up to 1916. Heroic nationalism, however, having reached its apotheosis in the Easter Rebellion, foundered in the violence and bitterness of the years that followed. With the establishment of the Free State, a mood of disillusionment set in, especially among writers, many of whom, such as Frank O'Connor and Liam O'Flaherty, had been idealistic participants in the struggle for independence. As Clarke observed, "The atrocities of the Black and Tan period, the founding of the Free State, the shock and humiliation of the Civil War, were reflected immediately in novels, plays and stories, which were as exciting and embittered as the events they depicted" (PMI, p. 41). Romantic Ireland was truly dead and gone.

Although Clarke did not go with the tide of realism and prose, he experienced, none the less, the need to respond to the sense of disillusionment that followed political independence. A rather uncertain manifesto, "Art and Energy", written jointly with F.R. Higgins, and published by AE in the Irish Statesman, aligns the younger poets with one of the most exciting of the new prose writers, Liam O'Flaherty:

It is realized that a new movement in Irish letters must take cognizance of the primal emotions of our time. Passionate events have changed the mind. Who is there to achieve the happy subjectivity of those writers, who seem now to us, as but giants before the flood? . . .

We will agree with Liam that vehemence and even excessive energy are needed in prose -- and, we may add, also in verse. It is necessary to be objective, elemental, to rejoice in primary colour and in the hard sun.¹⁰

However, as AE gently pointed out to his straying disciples, the vehemence of their theory was not matched in their work, which had much in common with that of their elder poets.¹¹ In fact, their revolt was neither as complete nor as convinced as O'Flaherty's, for they were unwilling to dispense fully with the established charter of the Revival. A subsequent letter lays claims to "Seams . . . revealed by the Gaelic Revival that are rich in ore and objective tradition."¹²

Clarke, indeed, did not forgo the advantages of Ireland's hidden wealth, the discovery of which had roused his imagination. Rather, he evolved a synthesis between his former practice and the new challenge posed by the realists, whereby he continued to avail himself of Gaelic material, while, at the same time, he sought to give it contemporary relevance. Two phrases in the "Art and Energy" correspondence indicate more precisely the direction he took: he rejected "happy subjectivity", a phrase that is directed against AE but which could be applied equally to Clarke's early work, and sought instead

to utilize the matter of Ireland for its "objective tradition". In other words, he ceased to concern himself with the past simply because of its romantic appeal, and he examined it in order to discover permanent factors in the Irish experience, and thus establish a critical and mutually illuminating relationship between the past and the present. Moreover, he was himself, in a sense, a disillusioned survivor from the romantic past, and, in seeking to comprehend his racial heritage, he sought to clarify his position in a culture hostile to his aspirations.

Clarke can be seen, then, as occupying roughly a mid-way position between early Yeats and early Joyce, or, more appropriate to his stature perhaps, as enacting a synthesis between the romanticism of O'Grady and the realism of the generation of O'Connor and O'Flaherty. Clarke's work, however, was slow to accomplish the synthesis, and it is apparent, not so much in any single volume, as in the full trajectory of his career, from heroic narrative to lampoon. The overall perspective, none the less, is useful at this stage, because the process of change begins in 1924, progressing from book to book up to 1938, by which time most of the essential components of synthesis are present.

Some of the preliminary moves appear in The Cattle Drive in Connaught. I have argued in chapter one

that The Sword of the West fails because of Clarke's inability to harness subjective material in the service of the narrative form. The 1925 volume employs a more successful means to embody indirectly personal experience. The primary inspiration is still landscape and mythology, but Clarke uses appropriate personae, drawn from the Gaelic tradition, to express his moods. In Silva Gadelica he became familiar with the exploits of Mannanaun Mac Lir, God of the Otherworld, who leads a lively shape-changing existence in folk-tale and saga. His talent for disguises, fast travel and practical joking is illustrated in, for instance, Ceatharnach Uí Domhnaill ('O' Donnell's Kern').¹³ The "Induction" identifies the poet with this volatile character:

I have been acquainted
 With that most famous juggler, Mannanaun,
 Who runs from lordly fire to fire, when he
 Has wearied of the cold warrens of the wave.
 (CP, p. 117)

The lines form a suitable introduction to poems that range freely through the Irish world, from the present into legend and saga, and, geographically, from Donegal to Kerry.

This protean persona combines with that of the wandering Gaelic poet, a type as readily identifiable in Irish tradition as the troubadour in Provençal. From Anier Mac Conglinne in the twelfth century to Raftery in the nineteenth, itinerant poets have praised patrons,

cursed the niggardly, and celebrated the countryside and its women. Three of Clarke's titles are "Blessing", "A Curse", "Praise". By implying the persona of the wandering poet Clarke renders the "I" of his lyrics unobtrusive: he can refer to his "sorrow on the cold dark tide" and to "her who crazed [his] heart" without risk of sentimentality (CP, pp. 117, 118). At the same time, through the use of allusion, he evokes the folk world, a generalized landscape that allows free-play with time and place. For instance, "The Itinerary of Ua Clerigh" -- Clarke notes that Ua Clerigh is the original form of his name -- runs a quick circuit of Irish tradition, and the poet dines with Yeats at "branchy Cooile" and feasts "In the royal house of Curoi Mac Dara" without incongruous effect. (CP, pp. 121, 122).

The use of personae enables Clarke to incorporate impressions gleaned from his exploratory wanderings into poems that are sensuous and dramatic, and that carry their burden of lost love discreetly. At the same time, there are some intimations of stronger thematic currents beneath the lilting surface:

By the holy well,
 And the honey house
 Of stone, I read the Gospel
 Until a bird called me
 Over bright water
 That was sapping the green miles of barley.
 (CP, p. 122)

Turning from "the holy well" and "the honey house / Of stone", a reference to the so-called beehive huts of the medieval monks, the poet is drawn by the call of a bird. He turns from religion to nature, and the action prefigures a central theme in subsequent volumes, the assertion of sensuous and instinctive values over those of organised religion. It is "The Frenzy of Suibhne", however, that most clearly indicates the route of Clarke's development. The poem is based on Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Sweeny), a twelfth-century romance about a king who insults a saint, is cursed by him, and who, as a result, goes mad in battle.¹⁴ It is a tale that touches on many areas of Clarke's experience. Metamorphosed into a bird, Sweeny wanders the British Isles, roosting in trees and composing lyrics that express an intimate knowledge of nature. Part of his tragedy is that his wife marries his successor as king, and this incident is the focus of Clarke's poem. He returned to the tale on a number of occasions, notably in a late play, The Frenzy of Sweeny, which includes a late poem, "The Trees of the Forest". His most significant use of the story is in The Bright Temptation, where he adapts it to depict an underworld of religious mania. As a parable of the conflict between poet and saint, and as an account of madness induced by religious terror, Buile Suibhne was of central importance to Clarke.

It is the choice of subject-matter, however, rather than the actual handling of it that most distinguishes "The Frenzy of Suibhne". Much in the manner of the other poems in the volume, it develops as a loose accretion of vivid description. What is somewhat distinctive is the use of surprising, illogical sequences of imagery, a reflection of the disjointed consciousness of the speaker, that yet have a metaphoric coherence:

Mannanaun splashes by with a bagful
 Of music to wager for the food
 In a house where the women mull
 Ale; workmen dream of their furnace
 And the male jewels that are alive:
 But I hear the hounds of the black queen race
 As I rest in the drenching ivy.

(CP, p. 131)

Without any overt imposition of a logical continuity, the images establish a contrast between the pleasures of social living and the deprivation of the outcast. Then, there are suggestions of sexual misery, and Freud might have approved of Sweeny's insinuation that the non-representational art of the monasteries was a sublimation of homosexuality. The lines serve as an example of how the poem as a whole might have worked, had Clarke managed to maintain throughout a sense of symbolic unity beneath the rush of images. The impression of fragmentary utterance, however, is all too complete. Individual passages glitter like glow-worms in a thicket, but the whole lacks the radiance of coherent form.

The Cattle Drive in Connaught shows that Clarke was assimilating areas of the Gaelic tradition that had not been used imaginatively before. It also shows that he was assimilating the material thematically, a process that matured over the following four years. The crucial experience that enabled him to do this occurred early in 1924, while he was working on The Cattle Drive in Connaught, but too late to have more than a slight impact on the volume:

Having perfect faith in the Irish literary movement, as I knew it, I had set out for the south-west of Ireland. I was on the track of the lost southern mythic cycle of Curoi Mac Dara and had a notion that in Kerry some imaginative experience might aid me. But 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 Scattery across an inlet of the Shannon. I scarcely saw either the island or its monastic tower owing to the silver blaze of water and sun. But 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.¹⁵

Instead of gaining fresh insight into the Heroic Age, Clarke discerned the imaginative potential of the early Irish Church, one of whose principal settlements had been on Scattery Island. The discovery was to have permanent consequences for his work. The Christian culture of Ireland between the fifth and twelfth centuries, an era Clarke termed the Celtic-Romanesque, exercised his

imagination for the rest of his career. He set his three prose-romances, The Bright Temptation (1932), The Singing-men at Cashel (1936) and The Sun Dances at Easter (1952) in the early Christian centuries, and ten of his verse-plays are set in the same period. The presence of the Celtic-Romanesque in his poetry is less conspicuous. It dominates Pilgrimage and Other Poems (1929), and in subsequent volumes it is evoked in a small proportion of the poems, most notably in "The Loss of Strength" (1957). However, it exists as an important base of reference everywhere in Clarke's thought, serving as a distant mirror that reflects the tensions of modern Ireland, or as an exemplary period that contrasts with the debased religious culture of the present. Moreover, Clarke used the Celtic-Romanesque to express what he called the "drama of racial conscience", a consequence of the conflicts which the imposition of Christianity engendered in the Irish mind.¹⁶

In focussing on Clarke's use of the Celtic-Romanesque, one approaches the hub of his imaginative world, the central thematic issues that radiate throughout his work. Accordingly, it will be convenient at this point to provide an account of what he understood by Celtic-Romanesque; to explain why it became the dominant landscape of his imagination; to define what is involved in the drama of conscience, and to show how it relates to

the Celtic-Romanesque. All of these matters come together for the first time in Pilgrimage and Other Poems (1929), a volume, moreover, which seeks to recover "the elaborate exactness of a lost art", and the present chapter concludes with a detailed examination of its contents.

Given Clarke's ideals, it is hardly surprising that he found inspiration in the culture of the Celtic Church, and that he regarded the early Christian centuries as an exemplary period in Irish history. The monastic system, which was established in the sixth century, derived from the Cenobitic culture of the Nile valley.¹⁷ It inherited, together with eastern asceticism, the traditions of Coptic and early Byzantine art, and these combined with native craftsmanship to produce a remarkable efflorescence in manuscript-illumination, metalwork and sculpture, resulting in such characteristic masterpieces of Irish art as the Book of Durrow and the Ardagh Chalice. Similarly, Christian literacy and scholarship combined with native traditions of story-telling and versification to bring into existence a large corpus of literature. It was in monasteries that the heroic, pagan tales, such as the Táin, were given literary form. A further achievement of the Christian culture was an original body of lyric poetry in both Gaelic and Latin.

The energy of the Irish Church was such that it

became the dominant cultural force in Western Europe. The Columban monastic system overflowed into Scotland and Northumbria. Meantime, a second stream of missionaries and scholars permeated the continent. Irish monasteries were founded in present-day France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and even Northern Italy. The influence of the Irish Church was so great, in fact, that it threatened, at a time when the power of Rome had ebbed, to overwhelm the central authority of the Church.

Irish civilization was ravaged by Viking attacks between 800 and 1000, but it survived to achieve a second flowering in the eleventh century. The independence of the Irish Church, however, came to an end during the twelfth century, when, after centuries of insular development, it was reformed to comply with Roman orthodoxy. The introduction of the Cistercian order and the organization of the Church into dioceses served jointly to displace the old monastic structure. Soon after, the Normans, authorized by Pope Adrian IV, arrived, bringing to an end the political autonomy of the island.

That the native culture failed to meet the challenge of the Norman and Cistercian invasions may well indicate that it had reached a point of exhaustion. Some historians, however, take the view that the events of the twelfth century served to destroy a vigorous civilization that had not attained its full potential. Arnold Toynbee,

in a much-quoted passage, stated that in the seventh century "the embryonic Celtic and the embryonic Roman Church contended with one another for the prize of becoming the chrysalis of the new society which was to emerge in the West."¹⁸ Allowing his imagination to pass through the door history had shut, Toynbee conjured a vision of present-day Oxford in which "a Celtic Easter [was] being celebrated . . . by monks exhibiting the Celtic tonsure and belonging to the Ionan Order of Saint Columba": "the thoroughgoing incorporation of the Irish Christendom into the Roman Church"¹⁹ during the twelfth century was one of the bolts that debarred Europe from this intoxicating future. Very likely Clarke read volume two of A Study of History when it was published in 1934, but there is no documentary evidence to show that he did. It is certain, none the less, that he regarded the Romanization of Irish Christianity as unfortunate: he recalled the early centuries nostalgically as a time when "we almost had a religion of our own" (Black Church, p. 142). "The Loss of Strength" describes the detrimental effects that the Cistercian and Norman invasions had on native culture. In another late poem, "The Disestablished Church", he pays tribute to the latter-day Church of Ireland, which sought, ineffectually, to preserve the spirit of the early Christians.

An interpretation of Irish history compatible with

Toynbee's is implied in Margaret Stokes' Early Christian Art in Ireland, a book Clarke read in 1924, and which was an important source for his understanding of the traditions of the Irish Church.²⁰ Stokes traces the artistic achievement of the Christian culture from its origins in the fifth century to its breakdown in the twelfth. The thrust of her argument is that Irish art and architecture evolved consistently along native lines until they "grew into perfection" in the twelfth century, at which point their development was interrupted.²¹

She believed that the architectural style as represented, for instance, by Cormac's Chapel, built on the Rock of Cashel between 1127 and 1136, was "an Irish Romanesque style", and she argued that "the peculiarities by which it is distinguished are 'native traditions handed down from earlier native buildings'".²²

Clarke, taking his cue from Stokes, coined the term Celtic-Romanesque, and applied it loosely to characterize the entire era of the Irish Church. His use of the term as such is rather inaccurate. Romanesque describes the architectural and artistic style that flourished in Europe during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It was the official style promoted by the Church of Rome as she reasserted her authority over Western Christendom. Its sober architectural forms and its emphasis on realistic representation in art were

opposed in principle to the abstract, decorative nature of Celtic design, and the Romanesque, accordingly, served to counteract 'barbaric' exuberance. The style was introduced to Ireland in the eleventh century when the native Church was being reorganised. The most sophisticated example of Romanesque in the country is Cormac's Chapel, which Clarke regarded as a triumph of Irish civilization, a view that seems to conflict with his negative appraisal of the Roman influence. The apparent contradiction is explained, however, by his and Stokes' belief that Romanesque principles inhered in Irish design during the preceding centuries. This belief is incompatible with present-day scholarship, but it is not totally unfounded. It is usually acknowledged that Irish design, preserved in manuscripts and disseminated throughout the continent, exerted a continuing influence on the new orthodox artists and architects: "its spirit can still be felt", Ludwig Bieler writes, "in the Romanesque art of the eleventh and twelfth centuries."²³ No scholar nowadays, however, would ascribe Romanesque qualities generally to the art of the Irish Church, and, although the term Irish Romanesque is used, it is applied to a comparatively short period, 1020-1170.²⁴

The Celtic-Romanesque, then, was not truly the "objective tradition" Clarke believed it to be. None the

less, insofar as his conception was fictional, it served a creative purpose, for, together with the view that a native civilization was overthrown in the twelfth century, it helped sustain the notion of a great and lost age, one which the modern artist should seek to recover and emulate. The point was underlined by Margaret Stokes. She gave as the raison d'être of her study that it might indicate to a designer or architect

where he may find the salient points in works of ancient Irish Art, which distinguish it from that of other countries, which give it a native character, and which, when once fully grasped, he can seize and graft upon his own design. Thus he is enabled to take up the threads of the too early broken web of his country's arts, and weaving them into his own work, he can add the distinction of an individual and native character to the forms of its future development.²⁵

This invitation endorsed, perfectly, Clarke's own principles, for, in adapting Gaelic prosody, he was engaged already in taking up "the threads of the too early broken web of his country's arts". Her words may well have suggested to him that he should complement this endeavour by modelling his verse on the intricacies of Celtic design, an influence that first appears in "Secrecy" (1925) and that is thoroughly woven into the technique of Pilgrimage.

Clarke, however, did not perceive the Irish Church solely as the embodiment of an ideal. While he admired it insofar as literature and art flourished under the

auspices of a native institution, he recognized conflicts and inadequacies in its culture, and, in this respect, it served to exemplify enduring tensions in the Irish mind. If the eremitical tradition refined the native imagination, it also involved asceticism, a virulent denial of the life of the body. Women, to judge by the numerous poems ascribed to them, enjoyed a high intellectual status, but there was also a fiercely misogynist tradition. Similarly, while monks recorded or adapted heroic tales and love stories, there was, at times, a tendency to eradicate pagan beliefs. Running counter to the imaginative energy of the Irish Church was an undertow of strict, religious zeal, and in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, during what is known as the Culdee Reform, it surfaced in the form of a vigorous campaign against the liberal activities of the established monasteries. Clarke characterized these conflicts as "the drama of racial conscience", and he saw them as newly active at a time when militant Catholicism posed a threat to imaginative writing and to pleasurable instincts generally:

That drama has become intensified now. The immodesty of present-day female dress is denounced in virile Pastorals, and our Parliament passes laws against temptations, the pleasures of dancing and courting. Novels which are liable "to incite passion" are banned and the present writer is among the Irish writers placed on the condemned list.²⁶

Thus, in turning to the Celtic-Romanesque, Clarke fulfilled two important objectives: he continued the work of imaginative recovery integral to the Revival, and, simultaneously, he responded to the new conditions of Ireland, in that he explored an area of the past that was relevant to her Catholic ethos. It may be added that when his work became bitter, contemporary, and realistic, as it did eventually in the fifties, his assault upon Catholic mores benefited from his depth of perspective.

While Clarke's progression from the Heroic Age to the Christian period was a logical step in his development, it is clear from the account of his 'discovery' of Scattery Island that it was not a process of logical deduction that brought it about. Rather, it presented itself to him with the surprise and force of a revelation, an indication that his mind was subconsciously prepared for the event. "The Loss of Strength" points to the hidden source:

I saw before bell rang a warning,
 Scattery Island and its round tower.
 A child was scorching by that corner
 To hurl me back, unknottable power,
 Hell-fire in twist and turn, grotesque:
 Now, Celtic-Romanesque.

(CP, p. 214)

Not only did Clarke awaken to the religious traditions of his race, but the veil dropped from the recesses of his childhood, stored with the memories of Church-ritual, with the imagery of hell and salvation, a world of intense

experience that lay hidden as the fabric of his psyche. In effect, the exploration of the past and the presentation of the drama of conscience involved and dovetailed with the exploration of that psychic history. "As we explore our own small past imaginatively", Clarke wrote, "we find the fears and joys of childhood have taken on new meanings for us. All has become legend -- and symbols are waiting for us" (Black Church, p. 18). To complete this account, then, of Clarke's absorption with the Celtic-Romanesque, some consideration must be given to his Catholic upbringing.

Clarke's early life was in most respects typical of its time and place, and its general nature can be understood from Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Like Joyce, Clarke had a middle-class Dublin background, and he received his education from the Jesuits, mainly at Belvedere College, where he too heard "the celebrated sermon on Hell" (ibid., pp. 136-7). In referring to his school years, Clarke commented that "The 'Portrait of the Artist' had long since become confused with [his] own memories or had completed them" (ibid., pp. 26-7). He refrained, accordingly, from giving an account of his own time at Belvedere. We can take it that Stephen's emotional faith, his love of liturgical forms, and his admiration for the intellectual distinction of the Jesuits were phases in Clarke's development also; and,

emerging into adulthood with an oppressive sense of the Church's authority, he likewise felt compelled to assert his own individuality. The one significant difference was that, while Joyce's revolt was proud and complete, Clarke went through life with what he considered a crippled intellect: "Having been trained by Jesuits from the age of seven, I am still unable to hold opinions with certainty and envy those who can trust in private judgement" (*ibid.*, p. 14).

However, Clarke's intellectual insecurity was not due entirely to the Jesuits. Its root cause, indeed, seems to have been the special intensity of his own experiences in those areas where religion and sex become entangled. The presiding presence in his home was not an irreverent Parnellite, but a mother with a "stern Victorian sense of duty" whose moral sensitivity altogether surpassed that of the clergy:

So rare, so refined was this sense of morality which my sisters and I drew from her example, that, in comparison with it, the religion of the churches we attended seemed gross We said the Rosary each evening and when my Mother gave out the first half of the Hail Mary to which we said the response, her voice always changed as she came to the last words, 'And blessed is the fruit of thy Womb, Jesus.' The pace quickened and she ran them together The sentence was completely incomprehensible to me, but I suspected that it was improper, although it had been first spoken by the Angel Gabriel.

(*Ibid.*, p. 10)

Clarke's childhood sense of impropriety had a retarding

effect on his emotional development. Puberty came as a shock:

Ignorant and confused by physical development and the change in scrotal sensation, I became convinced that the devil entirely possessed me and, startled by the first bristles below, I seized a scissors and in an agony of alarm shored myself.

(Ibid., p. 137)

When he did come by the facts of life, through the graphic account of a schoolmate at Belvedere, he could not reconcile himself to the physical basis of sexuality:

My mind . . . for several years afterwards refused absolutely to accept the uro-genital design, regarding it as a proposition of the Devil. I was convinced that my nipples must have a purpose and I confirmed this by consulting our Douai Bible. In the Songs of Solomon, I found the words: 'He lay betwixt my breasts', and they gave me a delicate dreamy feeling: I was certain, therefore, that conception took place not in a gross way but ethereally by the gentle touch of the male and female paps.

(Ibid., p. 166)

The trials of childhood and adolescence, however, were not merely a private matter, but had to be submitted to the authority of the Church. Clarke retained a vivid impression of his first confession at the age of seven, when, under the pressure of a brutal cross-examination, he admitted, in bewilderment, to the sin of masturbation: "it was not until later," he writes, "that the effects of this tampering reached too far within me" (ibid., p. 132). With the onset of adolescence the conflicts between natural instinct and religious discipline became a

constant terror:

Obscurely, through the grille, came warnings against curiosity, body-blighting sins, voluntary emissions that would eventually bring on madness. The Devil was at my side, tempting with his sweets of darkness, urging me to cunning evasive devices.
(Ibid., p. 138)

As an evasive strategy Clarke began to frequent a confessor who was old and hard-of-hearing. On one occasion, however, the old man caught the drift of his penitent's confession, and, on ascertaining that he had sinned forty times against the ninth commandment, exclaimed: "'Get out of me box, yeh young blaggard'" (ibid., p. 139).

At the time, with the threat of eternal damnation in the balance, Clarke was not amused, and it was only late in life that he could write about such incidents with humour and frankness. Clarke's religious training, in fact, had ineradicable consequences for his psychological life. One of his earliest memories was of a visit to the monastery of Mount Argus near Dublin, where he had an encounter which acquired, through the accumulation of conflicts with religious authority, an archetypal significance:

It was all due to the strange tree. I had run to see those branches which were glowing with rich multitudinous small fruit. I stood in awe beneath its shade for it seemed to me that I was under the Tree of Life itself, and certainly the night-green leaves were sticky as if with syrup and very sweet smelling. Gradually I became aware that I was not alone: someone else was standing there, very

still, within the shadow of the tree. The stranger was clad in long robes and was bearded. His silent brooding presence filled me with a chilly sense of evil. I knew only too well that the Adversary is accustomed to appear to us in the shape we least expect; and so in my dread I mistook a Passionist for the Devil himself. I could not stir from the spot. I could not even call out. Slowly the figure turned and smiled at me in a strange way. That was enough: With a gulp of terror, I fled from the spot.

(Ibid., p. 18)

Following the encounter with the monk, Clarke heard the singing of the church choir, and his subconscious seized upon it as a symbol of redemption. Years later, when religious terrors overthrew his reason, his mind returned to Mount Argus in search of a primal, redemptive memory:

when in a succession of delirious dreams, I hurried for months along grim corridors, up and down dark treacherous stairways, in and out of the wards and closets of great institutions, I was always trying to remember something that I had forgotten. As I rushed, in dreams, through those institutions, full of miserable and thwarted souls, all of us in frenzy trying to escape, yet imprisoned as if within the horrible architectural fantasies of Piranesi -- in which ingenuity is bolted and barred by itself -- there came at last that distant consolation . . .

(Ibid.)

The consolation that came was "the sweet choir of Mount Argus". The two incidents together had come to symbolize the paradoxical consequences of his religious experience: ecclesiastical authority, represented by the monk, signified a satanic power frightening him from the sensuous pleasures of life; at the same time his soul had been shaped by religion, and the happiness, which the

Church promised and he desired, was intimidated by the joyful singing of the choir.

In adult life Clarke struggled to free himself from the many-eyed and terrifying Argus of conscience that guarded the Tree of Life. He contracted his first marriage in a registry office, thus proclaiming his revolt from the Church; and he defied conventional morality, when, in 1937, he returned from England to live near Dublin with his second 'unlawful' wife and their children. More profoundly than Joyce, however, his mind remained supersaturated with the religion he rejected. He was afflicted by guilt and doubt, and especially by a despairing sense of the futility of merely human faculties. These were conflicts, moreover, that were deeply rooted in his psychic life. Although Clarke recovered from his early breakdown, he remained in a precarious mental state, preyed on by nightmares, irrational fears, and reflex uneasiness concerning sex and bodily functions. As he writes in "A Sermon on Swift", he emerged from St. Patrick's Hospital "Reviled but no longer defiled by harpies" (CP, p. 460). He had to engage in a protracted psychomachia, a lifelong struggle to bring his emotional responses into harmony with his intellectual convictions, in order to achieve the freedom of apostasy which he craved, and so attain an integrated personality. From this arises the central theme of his work, the

conflict of a mind seeking salvation by itself, in earthly terms, yet oppressed by the knowledge that, in Christian doctrine, the fundamental error is the sin of pride.

Turning to the Celtic-Romanesque and to the literature of Christian Ireland generally, Clarke found a reflection of his own psychological drama: "Glancing through Irish poetry we notice that it was a medium in which could be expressed the drama of conscience and of inner conflict."²⁷ One period of Irish history, however, Clarke saw as comparatively free of conscientious inhibitions. This was the period that followed the breakdown of native institutions in the seventeenth century, the Penal Age, when the Catholic Church was outlawed. Clarke's interest in the Penal Age was stimulated, principally, by Daniel Corkery's The Hidden Ireland, a study of the Gaelic poetry of Munster during the eighteenth century. From a historical viewpoint, it was a time of political and economic repression for the native population. Corkery, however, explored the imaginative tradition that persisted in Gaelic-speaking areas, and he argued that a hidden but vigorous culture flourished in the Big Houses of remote districts and among dispossessed and wandering poets who gathered in the Courts of Poetry, relics of the Bardic schools of the old Gaelic society. Clarke admired the "rich sensuous poetry" of O'Rahilly, Merriman, MacNamara, and their Munster

colleagues, and he also admired other poetic achievements of the eighteenth century, the songs of O'Carolan and the folk-songs of Connacht.²⁸ The Penal Age, in fact, crystallized in his imagination as an image of romantic Ireland, as a period when a carefree, life-loving spirit prevailed. This aspect of the Gaelic tradition did not have the same profound implications for Clarke as did the Celtic-Romanesque, which reflected more accurately his own tortured experience of the tension between religious and imaginative values. But the persona of the wandering poet or straying scholar who has abandoned the Church embodied, as it were, the wishes of his alter-ego, the goal of secular freedom which he strove to reach. Besides, the Penal Age, a period of supposed repression, offered an ironic contrast to the freedom of modern Ireland.

* * *

So far in this study I have sought to clarify the ruling concerns in Clarke's work. There is his dedication to the ideal of a national literature, an ideal that had two principal consequences: first, he evolved a technique that is rooted in native tradition; second, he took as his material the matter of Ireland. Finally, there is the pressure of personal experience, which is best characterized, broadly speaking, as the clash between religious and imaginative or romantic values. In

Pilgrimage these concerns are integrated, and, since it is a meticulously crafted volume, it is Clarke's first important achievement. Nevertheless, it is not usually regarded as such. Kinsella speaks of it dismissively as "exhibits from Irish history . . . a number of [which] are fine individual poems."²⁹ Martin Dodsworth, likewise, finds in the volume the "poetry of retirement and retreat."³⁰ Such casual dismissal arises because the thematic import of the poems has been missed almost completely. They are seen as a continuation of Clarke's romantic interest in the past, which, up to a point, they are. But, in evoking the past, Clarke implies a judgement on the evolution of Irish culture, and, more important, he establishes two opposing sets of values that exemplify permanent tensions in the Irish mind, and that are meant to reflect critically on the present. This analytic purpose becomes clear, as I hope to show, from a proper understanding of the thematic design of the volume.

Following his discovery of Scattery Island in 1924, Clarke immersed his imagination in the culture of the early Irish Church, but the scholarly detail he accumulated did not readily coalesce into images. The necessary precipitation occurred while he was living next-door to a presbytery, a circumstance that, somewhat in support of the point that Clarke's religious obsessions were at the root of his historical explorations,

contributed to the onset of inspiration. One night he "lay listening to the dreamiest sound in the world, the sound of our soft Irish rain" (Black Church, p. 142), while at the same time awaiting the customary sounds of his neighbour:

I had been brooding over the lost mediaeval Ireland of saints and scholars, desperately searching for a keynote, some image, however small, which would set going a whole series of images. Midnight came but there was still silence in the house next door, and I remembered at last that the curate was away. In that inner silence the image for which I had been looking came into my mind --

rainfall
Was quiet as the turning of books
In the holy schools at dawn.³¹

The lines are incorporated in the first stanza of "Pilgrimage", and the images that followed presumably contributed to the rest of the poem. The simile was so fertile, perhaps, because, in creating a link between the lost life of the monasteries and a perennial aspect of Ireland, it actually enacted an instance of historical recovery. "Pilgrimage" and its companion poems repeat this imaginative process, often combining particulars of landscape and climate with images of the past.

Perennial aspects of Ireland, indeed, could serve as a description of the volume. The poems explore the past, but they do not seek to maintain an illusion of historical objectivity. "Pilgrimage", for instance,

describes the stone walls of Galway: it seems unlikely that historical naivety led Clarke to place these recent additions to the Irish landscape in the medieval period. Likewise, the Young Woman of Beare, speaking from the sixteenth century, advises girls to "keep from dance hall". Past and present are deliberately blurred, breaching the historical convention, to remind us that we are dealing with a fictive past, created loosely from history, but created in order to reflect enduring concerns. Clarke's notes often reinforce the point: in relation to "Pilgrimage" and "The Cardplayer", respectively, he mentions that pilgrimages are still made to Croagh Patrick and to Lough Derg as in the Middle Ages, and, in a note to "The Young Woman of Beare", he recalls a contemporary instance of a "poor crone" in Wicklow who "refused even the consolations of religion, for she remembered with great anger her own times of merriment and the strong mortals she had held."³² The ongoing drama of conscience is foremost in his mind, guiding him in his choice of subjects, and colouring the interpretations of history which the poems embody.

The opening poem, "Pilgrimage", sounds the keynote for the volume, a journey of a spiritual nature into the past. The immediate objective, however, is to evoke the culture of the medieval Church, and the poem provides us with a tour of some of the principal centres of its

civilization: the Aran Islands, Clonmacnoise, Cashel, Croagh Patrick, and Scattery Island are successively described. The implied point of view is that of medieval pilgrims from overseas, visitors, like Clarke and the reader, come to discover for themselves the Irish Church.

But the poem does more than simply describe features of the Irish Church. It seeks, through the resources of style, to recover something of a lost tradition of art. The poems of the volume are, as John Montague has remarked, "as elaborately worked as a medieval manuscript":³³ puns are frequent, images are oblique and suggestive rather than descriptive, and, in general, the densely figurative language demands the reader's lingering attention, as though he were examining, for instance, a page from the Book of Kells. Moreover, weaving assonantal patterns complement the intricacy of detail: the rhythmic movement of the stanzas is delayed, almost static in its effect, thus involving the reader's attention both aurally and visually. It is a style, in fact, that seeks to emulate the decorative and non-representational quality of monastic art. "Pilgrimage", whose subject is principally the culture of the monasteries, exemplifies this style, and it seeks, moreover, to apprehend the spirit behind the forms.

The involved style that results is not always satisfactory:

When the far south glittered
 Behind the grey beaded plains
 (CP, p. 153)

The opening lines, Clarke informs us in a note, describe the "plains of Galway [which] are covered with countless field-walls of loose stones and boulders forming a strange pre-historic landscape, fascinating when the light of day is seen through the myriad chinks" (CP, p. 547). The intention behind the lines is to imply (as with "rainfall . . . quiet as the turning of books") a relationship between the monastic culture and the environment in which it flourished: "glittered" could be said to suggest the luminous art of the monks, while "beaded" (beads) carries a suggestion both of jewel-work and repetitious prayer. But, without Clarke's gloss, one could not have guessed at the vivid sense-impression that prompted the images. It is a characteristic fault: too often simple impressions are obscured by elaborate figurative language.

None the less, Clarke's preference for imagery that is suggestive rather than visually precise is usually more successful in achieving a complex and unified result. In the second stanza, as the pilgrims travel inland, a rain-saturated landscape gives way to one of sudden changes, "hail and honey", an image that marks climatic alterations, but also suggests a combination of austerity and joy. Thus, it leads into the description of

Clonmacnoise:

O Clonmacnoise was crossed
 With light: those cloistered scholars
 Whose knowledge of the gospel
 Is cast as metal in pure voices,
 Were all rejoicing daily,
 And cunning hands with cold and jewels
 Brought chalices to flame.

The lines evoke many of the physical aspects and activities of the monastery: high-crosses, cloisters, metalwork, manuscript-illumination, chanting. In yoking the elements together figuratively, Clarke manages a succinct evocation, while, simultaneously, suggesting the tense inner life that inspires the artistic activity. The phrase "crossed/With light" implies that the light of Christ inspired the high crosses, but it also suggests the paradox of Christianity, its marriage of "hail and honey", of suffering and joy. The suggestion of austerity and discipline is continued in "cloistered" and "cold", but they give rise, as the surrounding images reveal, to ordered artistic celebration. The surprising use of "cold" is particularly neat: the rhyme with "gold" echoes clearly when we reach "flame". "I think of him as an artist in fine metal, as an enameller",³⁴ John Hewitt wrote of Clarke, and it is certainly an appropriate description in this context: the detail is intricate, almost decorative, but it is precise and luminous.

Enamelled, intricate, illuminated: the terms that "Pilgrimage" attracts imply a static quality to the poem,

and indeed Clarke seems deliberately to have avoided a linear, dynamic movement. The subject of a pilgrimage, an itinerary with a series of high-points, lends itself to narrative treatment. The poem, however, does not follow a logical narrative line. The pilgrims proceed quite logically from Clonmacnoise southwards to Cashel, but in the fifth stanza we find them on a penitential visit to Croagh Patrick, in the West of Ireland, a site they could conveniently have visited while journeying from Aran to Clonmacnoise; and in the last stanza they depart, quite anomalously, down the Shannon estuary. Clarke could readily have made their itinerary logical by placing the fifth stanza second. That he did not do so indicates a disregard, not so much for the feet of his fictive pilgrims, as for a narrative structure. He preferred a thematically neat development that highlighted the conflicting aspects of the Irish Church. He evoked first the artistic splendours of Clonmacnoise and Cashel, and then he turned to the asperities of Croagh Patrick and Scattery Island:

Black congregations moved
 Around the booths of prayer
 To hear a saint reprove them.

In such lines Clarke reflects the ascetic spirit of the Christian society, a spirit that was manifested historically in the extreme reform movement, opposed to artistry and scholarship, which flourished in the eighth

and ninth centuries. The tone of the poem is neutral in presenting this side of the Christian tradition. Yet, the contrast in the last stanza between the "wine merchants", napping contentedly, and the monks praying on the island suggests the opposition between secular and religious values, a potential for conflict which subsequent poems develop.

Clarke's structuring of "Pilgrimage", indeed, serves to further this thematic development, for we move from the "barren isle" of Scatterry, where "Culdees" (literally, spouses of God) live under rigorous rule, to "a brown isle of Lough Corrib" in "Celibacy", the poem that follows. Thus, the focus narrows to the ascetic spirit of the Irish Church. Employing the persona of a hermit, or Culdee, who has isolated himself on a wintry island, Clarke dramatizes the struggle with sexual desire. The hermit fights temptation nightly in the form of a phantom woman. In this, the poem draws on the theory, proposed by Kuno Meyer and adapted for humorous purposes by George Moore in A Story Teller's Holiday, that the early clerics sought the company of women in order to mortify the flesh.³⁵ Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé (The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee), an ascetic text with which Clarke was familiar, tells of a saint who slept nightly with two naked maidens, "that the battle with the Devil might be greater for him."³⁶

Clarke forgoes the opportunities for ridicule which the subject offers, or, more precisely, he goes for a deeper irony in which the humorous aspects of the situation are implicated. He modernizes the tradition of the virgo subintroducta by giving it psychological overtones, in effect generalizing it, so that the hermit's struggle with temptation becomes a metaphor for the conflict between flesh and spirit. The hermit does not deliberately tantalize himself with his companion; rather, he uses all methods of mortification to rid himself of her. He has isolated himself on a cold and desolate island, but she pursues him relentlessly: "still that woman stayed, / For eye obeys the mind." The temptress is presented, in fact, as a projection of his own sexuality, and his struggle to be rid of her amounts to a violent effort to eradicate part of his nature. Nettles, briars, and fasts are his weapon against her:

Three nights, I fell, I groaned
 On the flagstone of help
 To pluck her from my body;
 For servant ribbed with hunger
 May climb his rungs to God.

In commenting on the first three of these lines in chapter one, I suggested that they contain a discreet allusion to Christ's Harrowing of Hell. The figure of the last two lines also requires elucidation: the servant seeks to rise from his fallen state by means of his ribcage, which, in

his emaciated condition, could be said to resemble a ladder, Jacob's perhaps. But there is also a play on the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, a myth that insists that woman is complementary to man's nature. In trying to "pluck her" from his body, the hermit is engaged in a futile and unnatural act.

The futility of the culdee's self-denying exercises is dramatized in the remainder of the poem. In the third stanza the temptress takes a most appealing form:

I saw what seemed an Angel:
Dews dripped from those bright feet.

The language here and in the two following lines anticipates the lyrical evocation of the Muse in the latter half of the volume. The vision which the hermit sees is, in a sense, an aisling, a manifestation of natural and creative beauty. Even so, she is anathema to the hermit, who recognizes "her deceit". But she is more powerful than he suspects, and he appears to succumb:

tired
All night by tempting flesh,
I wrestled her in hair-shirt.

The lines, however, are ambiguous. There is a further allusion to Jacob, to his wrestling with the angel, and we may interpret the Culdee's action as a heroic act of self-denial. The ambiguity is dramatic, for the celibate is in an emaciated and demented condition, so he may not know whether he has resisted or yielded to temptation.

The enigmatic lines, "She sank until I saw /The bright roots of her scalp", reflect his hallucinatory state of mind.

Other demons, such as "the dragons of the Gospel", can be "cast" out "by bell and crook", but the temptress cannot be exorcised. Scothin, the cleric in The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee, resorted to a bath of cold water whenever his blood beat too hotly between the maidens.³⁷ Clarke's celibate adopts a similar strategy: he takes a swim in the icy lake, where the "arrow-headed airs" "darken on the water". But, "fiery as the frost", the woman, doubling his mortification, pursues him still. There is no escape from the flesh.

The ascetic aspect of the Irish Church is introduced in "Pilgrimage"; in "Celibacy" the harsh practices of asceticism are dramatized, and, although the point of view is that of a hermit, the reader is made aware of the violence involved in the denial of natural instinct. In the third poem of the volume, "The Confession of Queen Gormlai", the conflict with sexual desire is presented from the perspective of a woman who belongs to the secular world. In terms of the thematic development of the volume, she represents the experience of sexuality which the culdee rejects. She is also the embodiment of his phantom-temptress.

Clarke was fascinated by the life of Queen

Gormlai, and in The Singing-men at Cashel, he re-creates her life in detail in order to illustrate the drama of conscience. The poem, which was written earlier, contains the principal elements elaborated on in the romance. The basic subject-matter in both cases is Gormlai's three marriages, and poem and story treat them successively. The point of view, however, is not the same, and there is a consequent difference in thematic emphasis. In the romance we first meet the heroine as the bride of Cormac, and we follow her experiences in chronological order; the book culminates with her marriage to Nial Glundubh, with whom she is in love, so the story ends on a hopeful note, with a tentative resolution. In the poem, however, Gormlai remembers her life in old age, long after the death of Nial. The historical Gormlai, as Clarke notes, actually "made many pitiful and learned ditties" following the death of her third husband (CP, p. 547)³⁸, and one of them, like "The Confession of Queen Gormlai", is addressed to a monk. Also, she wrote a long poem on her death-bed, which contains, according to Eugene O'Curry, an account of the "death of her husband . . . a sketch of the more fortunate or happy part of her life; a character of Nial, of Cearbhall, and of Cormac."³⁹ Clarke may not have read this poem but he probably read O'Curry's synopsis of it. He also read of a "distressing vision which caused her lonely death", as told in The Annals of

Clonmacnoise, and which he surmised, symbolized "a conscience wounded by others" (CP, p. 548):

She dreamed that she saw King Niall Glunduffe;
whereupon she got up and sate in her bed to behold
him; whom he for anger would forsake, and leave
the chamber; and as he was departing in that angry
motion (as she thought), she gave a snatch after
him by the mantle, to keep him with her, and fell
upon the bedstick of her bed, that it pierced her
breast, even to the very heart, which received no
cure until she died thereof.⁴⁰

It is in the light of these traditions concerning the end of Gormlai's life that Clarke re-constructed her "confession". A victim of religious scruples, we meet her in a mountain "hovel", overtaken by grief, guilt, and a sense of mortal futility.

At the outset of her monologue, Gormlai refuses confession ("Monk, do not lift the hood / From black to hearing white"), for she remembers her youth and beauty. She recalls, in stanzas three to five, her early experiences as the wife of Cormac, with whom she lived in queenly ease, surrounded by artists, scholars, and musicians. In retrospect, however, she fears she lived "in too much pride". Stanzas six to eight tell of her initiation into the conflict between mortal joy and the religious ideal. She discovers her husband "bared . . . upon the flagstone", struggling zealously, like the Culdee, against sexual desire, a struggle that leads him to have their marriage annulled. Stanzas nine to thirteen

recount her marriage to Carroll, the opposite to Cormac in that he is an uncultured warrior-king. He banishes Gormlai's "musicians / And careful scribe", roughly insists on his marriage rights, and he makes war on Cormac, who is killed in battle. The marriage ends in a violent quarrel, and Gormlai elopes with her kinsman, Nial. The remainder of the monologue tells, first, of their flight through the Irish countryside, then, of their domestic life, and, finally, of Nial's death fighting the Norsemen. In recalling this part of her experience, Gormlai is afflicted by further conscientious fears, for she now believes that her pursuit of mortal happiness was sinful. Yet, despite her guilty reflexes, she cannot fully repent of the joy and love she has known. A victim of equally strong impulses, she finds no solution to her dilemma, which is summed up in her final words: "I am impure with love."

Such a summary of the poem's substance is necessary, perhaps, because it is with difficulty that its narrative progression emerges, and, without reference to Clarke's sources and to The Singing-men at Cashel, many details remain puzzling. Clarke, in fact, incorporated several stanzas (4, 5, 16, and 17) into the romance, and there, arising out of the dramatic situation, they express Gormlai's emotions aptly.⁴¹ The poem, however, fails to accommodate elements of plot and motivation that seem

necessary to explain Gormlai's guilty anxieties about her three marriages. Despite the central importance of the subject to Clarke, it is, indeed, one of the least successful poems in the volume. Some passages, such as the lines on Carroll in stanzas ten and eleven, are vigorous, and a few stanzas, such as the fifth, are remarkable for their richly worked detail:

Starred airs were beaten fine
 As silver when the craftsmen
 Came; clergy graced the wine-cup
 And scholars played at draughts.
 But I laughed with grave Cormac
 Above the candle-rows
 And heard the string leap back
 To men and women dancing.

(CP, p. 157)

The simile of the first two lines implies that the tunes played at the feast were as intricately embellished as the designs of Celtic art. But "starred" brings out a pun on "airs", thus conveying the outdoor scene. Further puns, on "graced" and "draughts", contribute to the economy of description. In general the verbal compression has wit and relevance: the "string[s] leap" as the people dance; even "grave Cormac" shares in the mirth. One might add that the rhythmic patterns invite the reader to attend to the verbal complexity: notable, in this respect, is the assonantal thread spun through the stanza from "starred" to "dancing".

Such an involved style, however, is difficult to

sustain over twenty-four stanzas, and, in this instance, the successful passages are too few to raise the poem to distinction. Moreover, the piecing together of intricate, end-stopped stanzas, each a separate sense-unit, seems at odds with a subject that is dramatic and episodic. Cormac and Nial achieve little concrete realization within the form, and, more important, Gormlai, despite the acuteness of her suffering, does not emerge as a passionate voice. The nature of the material demands a less figurative, more dynamic movement.

This is not to criticize the poem for failing to fulfil the expectations one brings to a dramatic monologue. It is in fact a "lyrical monologue", a genre especially attractive to Clarke because of its prevalence in Old Irish poetry. In this form, the words of a poem are attributed to a character, but there is no attempt to achieve dramatic verisimilitude by, for instance, having the speaker use colloquial language. Also, the device of unintentional self-revelation, germane to the dramatic monologue, is absent or insignificant. In Gaelic examples each stanza, as in "The Confession of Queen Gormlai", is a sense-unit, and the metrical patterns are those Clarke liked to emulate. Despite the restrictive nature of the form, it is not necessarily dull: Eve, the Devil, and the Hag of Beare find passionate expression within its confines in Old Irish poetry. But, fortunately,

comparison with Gaelic examples is not needed to point up the inadequacies of "The Confession of Queen Gormlai" for in "The Young Woman of Beare", which we will soon examine, Clarke achieved greater mastery of his chosen form.

The mood of Pilgrimage relaxes with the two short lyrics that separate "The Confession of Queen Gormlai" from "The Young Woman of Beare". "The Scholar" has already been examined for its metrical qualities in Chapter I. It is based on An Mac Leighinn ('The Son of Learning'), a poem from the seventeenth or eighteenth century in loose bardic measure. Despite its lateness, it recalls the simple appreciation of nature that is one of the distinctive achievements of the monastic Church.⁴² The structural function of "The Scholar" within the volume, accordingly, is to suggest a positive aspect of the religious tradition. Free of the burden of conscience, the scholar takes a sensuous delight in what he sees and writes:

The showery airs grow softer,
He profits from his ploughland
For the share of the schoolmen
Is a pen in hand.

Accompanying the change of mood, there is a welcome ease of style. The point here depends on the pun on "share": the scholar ploughs profitably with his pen.

We return to the conflict between natural and Christian religion in "The Cardplayer", but now in an

exuberant mood, signalled by a racy trisyllabic rhythm. The persona of this slight but effective poem embodies a devil-may-care attitude towards the drama of conscience. The poem, in fact, is excerpted from the verse-play, The Son of Learning, where it is sung by Mac Conglinne, a wandering poet who mocks piety and the clergy. For him sin and repentance are adventures of equal merit: "after the drinking" he will gladly "cross [his] soul" at "the Red Lake", that is St. Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg. Faithful to the pre-Christian, heroic spirit, he stakes his money "on kings that walked out with Queen Maeve", careless of the deaths they would meet, and he recalls the Sons of Uisliu, tragic heroes, who defied authority for the sake of Deirdre. He rejects the "game" of Christianity with its "black ace" (of sin and death) to pursue his pagan muse without fear or guilt. The poem effectively draws its metaphors from cardplaying to suggest the gambling instinct that sustains his quest. His reward is a vision of the Muse: "paler than a sword, I saw before me / The face for which a kingdom fell."

Continuing this mood, "The Young Woman of Beare", the erotic monologue of a sixteenth-century courtesan, approaches the drama of conscience in a spirit of unrepentant sensuality. It is parallel in subject-matter, theme, and form to "The Confession of Queen Gormlai". Like Gormlai, the speaker travels around Ireland; she has

a succession of lovers as Gormlai has of husbands; she too is aware of the hostility of the Church to her behaviour. However, "The Young Woman of Beare" is by far the better poem. This is due in part, as we shall see, to the manner in which it branches out allusively in several directions, so that the speaker's words acquire shades of parody, allegory, irony, and psychological subtlety. But, in a more obvious way, the poem succeeds as a narrative. The new mood of erotic celebration inspires Clarke's use of metaphor and pun: "a big-booted captain / Has poured the purse of silver / That glitters in my lap" (CP, p. 165). In general, the style is less figurative, the movement of the verse freer, and, at least in the following example, the use of end-stopped stanzas does not prove prohibitive:

Heavily on his elbow,
 He turns from a caress
 To see -- as my arms open --
 The red spurs of my breast.
 I draw fair pleats around me
 And stay his eye at pleasure,
 Show but a white knee-cap
 Or an immodest smile --
 Until his sudden hand
 Has dared the silks that bind me.

See! See, as from a lathe
 My polished body turning!
 He bares me at the waist
 And now blue clothes uncurl
 Upon a white haunch. I let
 The last bright stitch fall down

(CP, p. 165)

In such lines, Clarke anticipates the unrestrained sexual mood of his last poems, when he produced, in the words of

Thomas Kinsella, "wickedly glittering narratives . . . poetry as pure entertainment".⁴³

But to appreciate fully the spirit of the poem, we must take into account its allusive range. The title recalls the Old Woman of Beare, a semi-mythological figure in folk-lore, famed for her fecundity and great age. As mentioned earlier, she is the speaker of a remarkable ninth-century lyric, which, according to James Carney, could have been written by Queen Gormlai. Writing in a context quite removed from Clarke's poetry, Carney described the Old Irish poem as the "passionate statement" of a poet, who "having outlived youth and beauty... [had been] mercilessly thrown into an asceticism to which her intellect acceded, but against which every other natural instinct rebelled."⁴⁴ Clarke's rejuvenated Woman of Beare retracts the contrite submission of her literary ancestor, and, in some passages, parodies her sorrow:

It is my grief that time
Cannot appease my hunger;
I flourish where desire is
And still, still I am young.
(CP, p. 168)

Within the thematic structure of Pilgrimage, the relationship of the Young Woman to "The Confession of Queen Gormlai" is similar: she answers Gormlai's repentant sexuality with a sensual passion in which "conscience is lost in flame".

Clarke further complicates the allusive context by

transposing the Woman of Beare to the sixteenth century. References to the Geraldine Rebellion and to the Presidency of Munster situate the poem in the early part of Elizabeth's reign, a time when Protestant England was engaged in an attempt to subdue the powerful Catholic families that still dominated Ireland outside the Pale. It was a period of European influence, as the native aristocracy maintained seditious contact with Catholic allies on the continent. The Woman of Beare finds the mixed and troubled milieu congenial to her profession of courtesan: among her lovers she numbers a "big-booted" captain, a Flemish merchant, a member of a Gaelicized Norman family, MacWilliam, and the President of Munster, a servant of the Crown. In characterizing his persona in this way, Clarke draws on the contemporary Gaelic convention of political allegory, and, specifically, he makes use of the bardic conceit of Ireland as a harlot who sleeps with successive invaders. Her sexual exploits in the poem culminate when she rides into the Pale, where she assumes the role of pornocrat, cavorting with the President of Munster and the "lawyers that break land." The allegorical import is that Ireland, grown wayward, yields to heretical England. In contrast to bardic practice, however, the poem celebrates the Woman of Beare's licentious partiality to the foe; and her action signifies not so much the betrayal of Ireland as its

emancipation from religious tyranny.

The literary, historical, and structural contexts, then, combine to establish the speaker as the archetype of Irish sexuality, rejuvenated and treacherous in a period of political misfortune and foreign influence. However, while the poem works on an allegorical level, it is equally important as a realistic character-study. The Woman of Beare is given a fairly precise setting. Details in the opening section of seven stanzas, such as "lane", "archway", "market hall", "dramshop", realize the Elizabethan ambience, wherein we find the speaker luxuriating among "silken piles", appropriately in "yellow lamplight". She even performs a skilful striptease. But it is as a psychological examination of the drama of conscience that her characterization is of most interest. Around her are the voices of disapproval, the militant stir of religion. The "praying people hurry" to church; the "clergy pray" against her; the "women at green stall . . . scorn" her. Insecure in her isolation, the authority of religion affects her, and, indicative of the hold which it retains on her consciousness, is her use of the missionary's language of sin and repentance: "bad thoughts", "the Judgement", "immodest smile". Her attitude to moral deviance, in fact, is ambivalent, for misgivings regularly interrupt her dominant mood of uninhibited sensuality:

Together in the dark --
 Sin-fast -- we can enjoy
 What is allowed in marriage.
 The jingle of that coin
 Is still the same, though stolen:
 But are they not unthrifty
 Who spend it in a shame
 That brings ill and repentance...?
 (CP, p. 166)

In the opening lines of both the second and third sections she refers to her life as if she were offering it as a moral exemplum on the fate of the fallen woman. She issues cautionary injunctions: "Young girls, keep from dance-hall/And dark side of the road", "Women, obey the mission --/Be modest in your clothes". Yet, when she resumes her erotic reminiscences, "fear [becomes] less than joy", and her spirits revive. Nevertheless, her moral asides are only partly sardonic, for the final section of the poem marks an intensification of her uneasiness in the face of ecclesiastical disapproval:

I fear, alone, that lords
 Of diocese are coped
 With gold, their staven hands
 Upraised again to save
 All those I have corrupted:
 I fear, lost and too late,
 The prelates of the Church.
 (CP, p. 170)

Moreover, in her wish to damn other souls along with her own, we see a hint of the Woman of Beare in her negative aspect, as a malevolent hag whose sexuality is destructive. She does not now speak of herself as "the bright temptation", a muse releasing men from clerical

chains, but as "the dark temptation", the female counterpart to Satan, whose merely perverse motive is to "trouble souls". She sees herself much as the speaker of "Celibacy" regards his temptress. Thus, she reveals the full ambivalence of her character: although she revolts from clerical morality, she cannot see beyond that morality, and, indeed, it is her consciousness of sin that is the common factor in her inconsistent roles of harlot, preacher and hag.

"The Young Woman of Beare", then, occupies a central position in the volume, not only literally, but in terms of its overall evolution. It evokes an era between the Celtic-Romanesque and the Penal Age, which followed the English conquest. Half allegory, half character-study, it recalls "The Confession of Queen Gormlai" and anticipates "The Marriage Night". Partly emancipated from the constraints of religion, the speaker stands mid-way between Queen Gormlai and woman in the role of Muse, as she is evoked in the following poems.

In terms of the historical design of the volume, the remaining poems allude chronologically to events in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. "South Westerly Gale" adverts to the débâcle of the Armada; "The Marriage Night" recalls allegorically the Battle of Kinsale (1601); "The Planter's Daughter" nods gracefully towards the Plantation of Ulster. Politically, this was a

disastrous period for Gaelic Ireland. The alliance with Catholic Europe failed to stop the determined conquests, first, of Elizabeth's armies, and later of Cromwell and William of Orange: in effect, the Gaelic order was destroyed. The historical burden, however, does not press heavily on the poems. Their primary ambience is literary, and, in this respect, Clarke acknowledges his debt to Corkery's The Hidden Ireland, which dwells, in particular, on the vogue of the aisling. Clarke adopts the conventions of the period: as in "The Young Woman of Beare" he uses allegory, and he now symbolizes Ireland as a beautiful maiden; references to "timbered wine" and "backgammon" recall the cultured life of the Big House as described by Corkery; as in Jacobite songs the gaze is directed south-west for the hope-filled "ships upon the wave". The volume ends with a formal aisling.

Enthusiasing about the Jacobite lyric, Corkery wrote: "In this verse, the sorrow that banishes sleep from the eyes means nothing to us . . . it is the subtle, irresistible witchcraft of their music, and not what they say, that steals away the listener's brains."⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, then, in emulating this mode, Clarke concentrates on elegant phrasing and word-music at the expense of thematic tension, so that the drama of conscience ceases to be a conspicuous concern. With respect to craft, the poems are often superior to their

more burdened companions. "The Marriage Night" contains such precise, visual description as "the fiery dice / Of wineships at the harbour" and "topsails . . . scrolled in early water". And the aisling form, the traditional test of the Jacobite poet's skill, provides Clarke with an opportunity for a virtuoso display:

Coil of her hair, in cluster and ringlet,
 Had brightened round her forehead and those curls --
 Closer than she could bind them on a finger --
 Were changing gleam and glitter. O she turned
 So gracefully aside, I thought her clothes
 Were flame and shadow while she slowly walked,
 Or that each breast was proud because it rode
 The cold air as the wave stayed by the swan.

(CP, p. 174)

In Gaelic examples the pattern of assonance is linear, that is each line of a stanza (sometimes of a poem) holds to a set sequence of accented vowels. Clarke's sound-pattern is free, but, nevertheless, intricate. Three main threads of assonance are interwoven: her, cluster, ringlet, brightened, her forehead, closer, them, finger, were, glitter, her, were, breast; hair, changing, gracefully, flame, air, wave, stayed; those, Closer, O, So, clothes, shadow, slowly, rode, cold. Alliteration is also used ("c's", "g's" and "s's"), so that scarcely a word is adrift from the musical organization. Clarke's ear for an appropriate variation is illustrated by "proud", standing apart from the sequence of assonanting "o's", yet delicately linked to "rode" by consonance. The sound fits the sense well: a swift succession of

syllables, as of changing lights, modulates into the stately movement of the closing lines, which, moreover, in their novel but precise observation, revivify a wearied image.

The poem proceeds in the following stanza with a conventional interrogation of the Lady, an occasion for mythological allusion. In addressing her as "The white coin all could spend", however, Clarke associates her with the Young Woman of Beare, thus revealing the unobtrusive working of his thematic design. In fact, even though the end of the volume marks a lessening of tension, it is consistent with the thematic development we have been tracing. Symbolically, these poems embody a resolution to the drama of conscience. Woman, variously denied or afflicted in preceding poems, now graduates into Ireland as the Muse, "the bright temptation", whom the poet addresses without a troubled conscience in a period in which, Clarke noted, "culture submitted to iconoclasm".⁴⁶ Incarnate in the person of the planter's daughter, she is praised as the "Sunday in every week". Imagination triumphs over religion.

The emancipation of the imagination is enacted in "The Marriage Night", an allegory on the political defeat of Gaelic Ireland. Cunningly devised, discreet in its implications, the poem contains a singular historical viewpoint. It represents the alliance of Ireland and

Catholic Europe against Protestantism as a marriage, which, had it succeeded, would have ushered in a new hegemony for the native Church. In lines pointedly reminiscent of the description of Cashel in "Pilgrimage", Clarke evokes the moment when the dream of restored greatness seemed imminent:

All saw in that cathedral
 The great Earls kneel with her;
 The open book was carried,
 They got up at the gospel.
 In joy the clergy prayed,
 The white-clad acolytes
 Were chaining, and unchaining,
 Fire-hearted frankincense.

The pomp and ceremony of the occasion are rendered in sensuous detail, and, in view of the magnificence of the prospect, one might expect the collapse of the dream to move the poet to lament. Given Clarke's tendency to invoke contemporary Gaelic voices, it might be expected that he would break into passionate outcry in the manner of O'Hussey or O'Bruadair. Unstated, however, is his ambivalent attitude to the triumph of religion, his antagonism to the constraints it would have imposed on individual freedom. So, in alluding to the Battle of Kinsale, the sense of loss is remote, close to the manner of late Jacobite poets, such as Sean "Clárach" MacDonnell or Owen Roe O'Sullivan, for whom the symbols of defeat had become romantic and conventional:

But in deceit of smoke
 And fire, the spoilers came:

Tower and unmortar'd wall broke
 Rich flight to street and gate.

The sense of disaster is strong until the fourth line, where, as we reach the rhythmic climax, defeat becomes a "Rich flight". The unexpected adjective suggests that imaginative enrichment followed from the breaking of the religious alliance. The ignominy of defeat is further mitigated in the concluding lines, a romantic tableau of Erin in distress:

O she has curbed her bright head
 Upon the chancel rail
 With shame, and by her side
 Those heretics have lain.

The cadence is graceful, eliding pain; the force of "heretics" is ironic: we recall the "big-booted captain" and the President of Munster who lay with the Woman of Beare. To throw into relief the singular emphasis of the lines, one might compare John Montague's "Lament for the O'Neills", a poem that responds to the same historical and imaginative moment:

With an intricate
 & mournful mastery
 the thin bow glides & slides,
 assuaging like a bardic poem,
 our tribal pain --

Disappearance & death
 of a world, as down Lough Swilly
 the great ship, encumbered with nobles,
 swells its sails for Europe:
 The Flight of the Earls.⁴⁷

Montague's lines accommodate both the tribal loss and the

psychic compensation that transformed the dispersal of the native chieftains into the Flight of the Earls, an image of proud defeat. In contrast, Clarke's lines linger romantically on the picturesque image of Ireland as a betrayed maiden, and, in the context of the thematic design of the volume, they imply, not tragic ruin, but the liberation of the true spirit of the country into imaginative freedom. Proceeding from this interpretation of history, "The Planter's Daughter" and "Aisling", lyrics appropriately free of thematic tension, represent an Ireland where romantic love flourishes in the absence of religious constraint.

In choosing to end his exploration of the past with a phase of history in which, as he saw it, imaginative values triumphed over those of religion, Clarke imagines an ideal Ireland, one which, we may infer, he wished the emergent Irish state would emulate. Addressing Ireland as the Muse in "Aisling", the speaker frames his hopes for the future in the form of a question:

'Shall I, too, find at dark of rain,' I cried,
 'Neighbours around a fire cast up by the ocean
 And in that shining mansion hear the rise
 Of companies, or bide among my own --
 Pleasing a noble ear? O must I wander
 Without praise, without wine, in rich strange lands?'
 (CP, p. 175)

The "secret woman", however, disappears with an enigmatic "smile", not with an encouraging prophecy, the traditional climax of an aisling. One hesitates to ascribe too

literal an interpretation to a poem that rides so lightly on the melting of its conventional form, but it seems clear enough that Clarke, writing in exile, is expressing personal hopes indirectly and not too confidently.

But the volume stops short of confronting conditions as they exist in modern Ireland, and it also avoids direct expression of Clarke's own experience of the drama of conscience. Pilgrimage may seem evasive in this respect, and Clarke would concede some justice in the charge. Looking back in 1961, he considered it "romantic in mood", and, including it hesitantly in Later Poems, he apologized that it was written "when the future of our new State seemed so hopeful that Irish writers could delay for a while in the past" (CP, p. 545). This, however, is not to displace Pilgrimage from a central position in Clarke's canon. It establishes the opposing set of values involved in the drama of conscience, and Night and Morning (1938) continues the debate in, essentially, the same terms, bringing it forward to the present time and treating it in a confessional mode. The two volumes, together, constitute a comprehensive analysis of the drama of conscience, relating past and present, and tracing the ordeal of the poet to its racial roots. At the same time, it would be a misrepresentation to regard the relationship between the volumes as simply complementary. Pilgrimage moves from the constraint of "Celibacy" to the release of

"The Cardplayer", from woman as victim in "The Confession of Queen Gormlai" to a lyrical celebration of beauty in the final poems.⁴⁸ Clarke returned to the debate between religious and imaginative values in a different mood, under the pressure of an insoluble mental conflict, that, in effect, negated the optimistic curve of Pilgrimage.

NOTES

Chapter II

¹Clarke's note to The Flame (London, 1930).

²Introduction to a re-issue of Standish O'Grady, The Coming of Cuculain (Dublin: Talbot Press; London: Fisher Unwin, n.d.), pp. xxi, x-xi.

³Essays and Introductions, pp. 511-12; Autobiographies, p. 220.

⁴See above, p. 15. Clarke's reading of O'Grady was belated, probably some time after The Sword of the West: "I was disappointed by those prose elaborations of the sagas when I read them. In their rhetorical style, they belonged to another generation and I had opened them too late. But I understood the imaginative excitement as of shadowy palimpsests, which they aroused in the mind of A.E. in those far-off, hidden years, of his youth" (Penny, p. 51).

⁵Quoted by Clarke from O'Grady's History of Ireland (Penny, p. 50).

⁶Essays and Introductions, p. 513.

⁷"The Passing of the Shee", The Plays and Poems of J.M. Synge, ed. T.R. Henn (London, 1963), p. 295.

⁸Richard Ellmann quotes Yeats' record of their interview in The Identity of Yeats (London, 1954), pp. 86-9; and in James Joyce (New York, 1959), pp. 106-8.

⁹The Backward Look (London, 1957), pp. 194 ff.

¹⁰Irish Statesman, III (Nov. 1, 1924), 237.

¹¹Ibid., 238.

¹²Irish Statesman, III (Nov. 15, 1924), 301.

¹³Silva Gadelica, ed. and trans. Standish Hayes O'Grady (London, 1892), II, 311-24. See also "The Conception of Mongán and Dub-Lacha's Love for Mongán" in The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal, ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer

(London, 1895), I, 70-84. "The Son of Lir" (CP, pp. 126-7), especially, was inspired by these tales. Compare its last stanza with: "My use and wont is to be in Islay one day, another in Cantyre; a day in Man, a day in Rathlin, and yet another in Slievecarn; for a ranting rambling roving blade am I . . . I'll sit or I'll not sit; for nought do I do but that which be pleasing to myself" (O'Grady, p. 312); and "I go home, / The pale pure morning draws near: / MONINNAN Son of LER / Is the name of him who came to thee" (Meyer, p. 45).

¹⁴Buile Suibhne Geilt (The Frenzy of Sweeny), ed. and trans. J. G. O'Keefe (London, 1913).

¹⁵"The Black Church", Dublin Magazine, XIV (Oct.-Dec., 1939), 11. Clarke does not acknowledge literary influences in accounting for his interest in the Celtic-Romanesque. But Patrick Campbell had tried to persuade Clarke of the imaginative possibilities of medieval Ireland in 1917 (see above, p. 37). When Clarke visited Yeats two years later, the older poet spoke of his conception of a neo-Catholic school, as he was outlining it in an essay at the time: "I think I would go . . . upon both of our great pilgrimages; to Croagh Patrick and to Lough Derg . . . Europe has nothing older than our pilgrimages . . . I would claim that stony mountain for all Christian and pagan faith in Ireland" ["If I Were Four-and-Twenty", Irish Statesman, I (Aug. 23, 1919), 212; reprinted in Explorations (London, 1962), pp. 263-80]. Clarke's account of his interview with Yeats is curious: "He spoke of Jammes, Péguy, and Claudel, and said much that I could not follow at the time, for I had been cast into a mild trance by the gleam of the great signet ring upon his waving hand" (Penny, p. 83). Clarke thought his proposal "religious novelty" (*ibid.*), and, reviewing If I Were Four-and-Twenty years later, wrote: "Yeats would have approached religion as he approached fairy lore and legend when he was four-and-twenty, as a form of romantic literary expression, not as a complicated personal experience" [review signed "A. C.", Dublin Magazine, XVI (Jan.-March, 1941), 64]. Yeats' powers of hypnotic suggestion may have been greater than Clarke cared to admit. It is true, nevertheless, that the younger poet's exploration of Christian Ireland is not, ultimately, "a form of romantic literary expression".

¹⁶The phrase, "drama of racial conscience", first appears in a note to "The Young Woman of Beare", Pilgrimage and Other Poems (London, 1929), p. 44.

¹⁷There are numerous general studies of early

Christian Ireland, among the most useful being: Ludwig Bieler, Ireland: Harbinger of the Middle Ages (London, 1963); Maire and Liam De Paor, Early Christian Ireland (London, 1958); Myles Dillon, Early Irish Literature (Chicago, 1948). In this capsule account, I have relied most on the essays in: Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, The Celtic Realms (London, 1967); and The Larousse Encyclopedia of Byzantine and Medieval Art, ed. René Huyghe (London, 1963).

Two of Clarke's sources for the history and art of the period were: George T. Stokes, Ireland and the Celtic Church (London, 1886); and Margaret Stokes, Early Christian Art in Ireland (London, 1887). See Maurice Harmon, "Notes Towards a Biography", Irish University Review, IV (Spring, 1974), p. 19.

18 A Study of History (London, 1934), II, 427.

19 Ibid., 433, 424.

20 See note 17.

21 Early Christian Art in Ireland, p. 194.

22 Ibid., p. 182.

23 Ireland: Harbinger of the Middle Ages, p. 144.

24 See Françoise Henry, Irish Art in the Romanesque Period, 1020-1170 (London, 1970). Henry considers Cormac's Chapel "the least characteristic, and . . . the least Irish" achievement of the Irish-Romanesque (p. xiii).

25 Early Christian Art in Ireland, p. 7.

26 Collected Poems (1936), p. 313.

27 "Irish Poetry Today", Dublin Magazine, X (Jan.-March, 1935), 32.

28 Ibid., 31.

29 "Introduction" to Selected Poems, pp. xii-xiii. Kinsella's instinct for good poems, however, leads him to include seven of the ten poems in Pilgrimage in his selection.

30 "To Forge the Irish Conscience", Times Literary Supplement (Dec. 13, 1974), p. 1406.

31 "The Black Church", op. cit., 9-10. A slightly revised account is given in Black Church, pp. 142-3.

32 Pilgrimage and Other Poems, p. 44; Later Poems, pp. 89, 90.

33 "Kinsella's Clarke", review of Selected Poems, Irish Times (June 27, 1976), p. 9.

34 Review of Later Poems, signed "J. H. H.", Threshold, V (Autumn-Winter, 1961-2), 78.

35 Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry (London, 1911), p. 113.

36 Fēlire Óengusso Céili Dé, ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes (London, 1905), p. 41.

37 Ibid. "Celibacy", especially the second stanza, seems to owe something to an Old Irish poem attributed to Áed Allán:

She undertook what is not easy
fasting . . .
She endured against scant nourishment
hard were her girdles.

A ladder for the assaults of Heaven,
pure was her heart against fools.
In the bosom of the Lord, under a radiant crown,
Samthann cast away tribulations.

From the Martyrology of Tallaght, eds. Richard I. Best and H. J. Lawlor (London, 1931), p. 125. The poem was previously translated by John O'Donovan in his edition of The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland (2nd ed.; Dublin, 1856), I, 337.

38 Clarke's note derives ultimately from The Annals of Clonmacnoise, trans. into English A. D. 1627 by Conell Mageoghagan, ed. Denis Murphy (Dublin, 1896), p. 145. Clarke would have become acquainted with Gormlai's story in George Sigerson's Bards of the Gael and Gall (London, 1897), which includes a translation of one of her poems, "Niall's Dirge", p. 179, and an account of her life, pp. 414-16; and in Douglas Hyde's The Story of Early Gaelic Literature (London, 1894), which contains a similar translation and biographical account, pp. 69-70, both of which are also in his Literary History of Ireland (New York, 1899), pp. 425-7. The fullest account of her history, however, is to be found in Eugene O'Curry's Lectures on Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History (Dublin, 1878), pp. 131-35. Since Clarke's note uses

O'Curry's partially modernized spelling of Mageoghagan, we may take it that O'Curry was the source he had at hand.

Other sources for the life and work of Gormlai are: Miscellan^y presented to Kuno Meyer, eds. Osborn Bergin and Carl Marstrander (Halle, 1912), which contains "Poems attributed to Gormlaith", pp. 343-68; The Dean of Lismore's Book, ed. Rev. Thomas McLauchlan (Edinburgh, 1862), which includes three poems attributed to Gormlai; Gormlaith ingen Flaith ('Gormlaith, daughter of Flann'), an anecdote in The Book of Leinster, eds. R. I. Best, Osborn Bergin and M.A. O'Brien (Dublin, 1954), I, pp. 257-9.

³⁹Lectures on the Manuscript Materials, pp. 134-5. The 'long poem' is, in fact, a series of short poems, which are preserved in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, O'Gara Ms. 23F 16, pp. 21-3.

⁴⁰The Annals of Clonmacnoise, p. 155; Lectures on the Manuscript Materials, p. 135. I have used O'Curry's spelling.

⁴¹The Singing-men at Cashel (London, 1936), pp. 123, 124, 316.

⁴²Clarke appears to have thought An Mac Leighlinn was of a much earlier date. The poem, indeed, is remarkably similar in sentiment to early monastic lyrics.

⁴³"Introduction" to Selected Poems, p. xi.

⁴⁴Medieval Irish Lyrics (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), p. xxv.

⁴⁵The Hidden Ireland (2nd. ed; Dublin, 1967), pp. 132, 137.

⁴⁶Pilgrimage and Other Poems, p. 45.

⁴⁷The Rough Field (Dublin, 1972), p. 34.

⁴⁸In my discussion I have used the text of Pilgrimage as it appears in the first edition and as it is reprinted in CP. In two intervening collections, however, Clarke included "Wandering Men" (CP, pp. 177-8) in Pilgrimage. In Collected Poems (1936) it is placed between "The Confession of Queen Gormlai" and "The Young Woman of Beare", replacing "The Scholar" and "The Cardplayer" which appear in the verse-play, "The Son of Learning". In Later Poems, it appears as the last poem of Pilgrimage.

"Wandering Man" serves as a logical component of the volume. The implied speakers are wandering poets, thus offering a contrast to the pilgrims of the title-poem. They are entertained miraculously at night by "Great Brigid". In Irish tradition, Brigid appears both as a Christian saint and as a pagan Goddess. Her latter role is emphasised in the poem, thus suggesting the vacillation between Christian and pagan values, and implying, moreover, a revival of the pagan spirit in the later medieval period. She is addressed as a "sky-woman", a literal translation of spéirbhean, a standard epithet for the visionary woman of the aisling. "Wandering Men", however, adds nothing that has not already been implied in the volume, and its position after "Aisling" in Later Poems is somewhat anticlimactic. Its eventual exclusion emphasises Clarke's sense of the integrity of the original sequence.

III

THE DRAMA OF CONSCIENCE: VERSE-PLAYS AND NOVELS

"For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit
against the flesh."
(St. Paul, Galatians 5:17)

In the twenties and thirties, Austin Clarke's imaginative activities expanded to include verse-drama and fiction. His work in these areas is almost completely neglected. While, in an overall estimate of his achievement, it is proper to give precedence to his poetry, the degree of neglect scarcely reflects the energy which Clarke devoted to the theatre and to fiction. Between 1925 and 1952, a period during which he published three slim volumes of poetry, he wrote ten verse-plays and three prose-romances. More important, the merit of the best of the plays and each of the novels is such that they deserve more than the glancing praise that they sometimes get. Maurice Harmon regards The Singing-men at Cashel as a "dense flawed masterpiece", and he praises the "acceptance of doubt, hesitation and complex honesty so visible in the plays," the manner in which Clarke "brings things not to superb resolutions but to delicate equations that tip either way."¹ Vivian Mercier, the only critic to examine Clarke's work in each major genre, considers

The Sun Dances at Easter to be one of the best examples of Irish comic genius: "I can think of no other contemporary book, not even At Swim-Two-Birds, which better illustrates the continuity of the Irish comic tradition."²

An extended consideration of Clarke's work in the theatre and in fiction would, I believe, sustain these judgements. The perspective of the present chapter, however, is necessarily somewhat limited: two plays, The Son of Learning (1927) and The Flame (1930), and two novels, The Bright Temptation (1932) and The Singing-men at Cashel (1936), will be discussed. This partial treatment should not greatly falsify Clarke's achievement in fiction, for, while The Sun Dances at Easter (1952) deserves Mercier's tribute, it triumphs with thematic elements already thoroughly formulated. Less justice can be done to Clarke's dramatic enterprise, as it was after 1938 that he actually worked in a theatre and with a trained company of verse-speakers, conditions that enabled him to attempt a variety of dramatic modes. But the emphasis will be on the thematic, rather than the purely theatrical interest of the plays, and, in this respect, a fairly complete picture should emerge, for Clarke's later drama displays little in the way of thematic development.

Clarke's poetry cannot be strictly segregated from his plays and fictions. As we have seen in discussing "The Confession of Queen Gormlai", there is a good deal of

traffic between the genres. Besides, not only did Clarke incorporate poems in the plays and novels, but often the poems were first conceived in fictional or dramatic situations, and it can be illuminating to refer them to their original contexts. In fact, a common thematic concern permeates the three genres. Clarke's conception of the drama of conscience gave prehensile strength and purpose to his exploration of the past, in that he sought out tales and historical situations that illustrated the tension between pagan and Christian values in the Irish mind. In giving them narrative and dramatic form, he sustained the validity of his central theme; in effect, he consolidated the essential vision of his poems. The secondary genres, accordingly, are useful to the critic of the poetry, for much the same reason that they preoccupied the author: in them, Clarke's major concerns are amplified and given their fullest definition.

While it is true that Clarke's interest in the drama of conscience eventually controlled his use of Gaelic material, his approach to the older literature was more exploratory at the outset. It was a process of discovery that led him to his governing theme. One of the tales that served this function was Aislinge Meic Conglinne (The Vision of MacConglinne), "an uproarious satire on hagiography, ecclesiastical mendicancy, and royal gluttony",³ composed by "a minstrel genius who had

a special grudge against the Church."⁴ The hero, Anier Mac Conglinne, abandons his religious studies to become a poet. He travels to Cork to meet King Cathal who has become possessed by a demon of gluttony. Resting in the Abbey of Cork, the poet is not properly fed by the monks, so he composes a satire on their poor hospitality. In revenge, the Abbot sentences him to be crucified. But on the eve of the appointed execution, the poet, still hungry, has a vision of a land of such abundance that everything in it -- lakes, mountains, houses, clothes -- is made of food. He then proposes to the Abbot that he will cure Cathal by telling him the dream, stipulating the Abbot's favourite cloak as payment. He sets off for a nearby palace where Cathal is due to arrive. After two nights of fasting, he prepares a lavish meal, and, with the King securely bound, he tantalizes him with the food, and at the same time recites his appetizing vision. Thus, he coaxes the demon from the King's mouth, traps it under a cauldron, and has the palace burned. Not only does he win the cloak, much to the Abbot's chagrin, but he is pardoned by the King and richly rewarded.

The merit of the tale as it survives inheres in its exuberant parodies of contemporary literary conventions. Recurrent motifs in saga and hagiography, such as 'visions' (aislingi), 'voyages' (immrama), and 'adventures' (echtraí), are given farcical treatment.

Moreover, the whole intent is blasphemous. Mac Conglinne fills the role of a mock-Christ, and his basic gospel of man's search for nutrition counters the Christian doctrine of salvation through self-denial. As such, the tale was a valuable source for Clarke. He based his first play, The Son of Learning, on it; Mac Conglinne re-appears in The Singing-men at Cashel, in which he functions as a parodic foil to the conscience-stricken heroine. In the course of both play and novel, the vagrant poet composes or recites several poems, "Induction", "Praise", "The Scholar", "The Cardplayer", "Wandering Men" and "Repentance". His spirit is also evident in "The Straying Student". Mac Conglinne, in fact, is the prototype of Clarke's favourite persona, an irreverent, anticlerical voice that embodies triumph over the constraints of conscience, a state of exuberant emancipation from religion which Clarke desired, but which he found difficult to express with the confidence of a personal voice.

In adapting the tale in The Son of Learning Clarke dispenses with its parodic elements, a necessary loss since these largely derived their point from medieval conventions of story-telling. Only in one instance does he echo the parodic playfulness of the original. In a moment of remorse, Cathal decides to confess his faults, but the language of the soul is confounded by that of the senses:

Thoughts

Have tripped my words and I must say an act
Of nutrition.

Bowing his head, in a contrite tone Through . . .

The DEMON tempts him my dumpling.

Through

My dumpling. Through my most suety dumpling.

Despairing I cannot tell

My puddings, count the mutton-juicy, thick
And yellow-fatted, gravy-dripping joints.
(Plays, p. 36)⁵

For the most part, Clarke suggests the atmosphere of his source by emphasising its farcical elements. He crowds the stage with beggars and comical monks, and he enlivens the action with buffoonery and slapstick. The repertoire of stage-business includes dances, somersaults and conjuring tricks.

In relation to the central action, Clarke makes a number of significant changes, two of which are prompted by the exigencies of a dramatic treatment. He transfers all of the action to the Abbey of "Corc", and he has the King and the monks engaged in a fast against the Demon when Mac Conglinne arrives. Thus, the king's cure becomes the focus of contention between the poet and the monks. Mac Conglinne tempts the King from his fast with succulent descriptions of food, and the latter, who "love[s] the marrow of sweet words" (p. 28), decides that it is enough that the monks fast for him. The Scholaf further persuades the King to lend him his gold torc, symbol of

royal authority. Then, as Mercier writes, the poet "lords it over both Church and State",⁶ dismissing the monks to their fast, and, with the King bound to a chair, he orders up a feast for himself. Clarke complicates the plot at this point by emphasising the role of Ligach, Cathal's betrothed, who becomes a source of conflict between King and poet, as they contend for her favour. Relishing his part in every sense, the Scholar proceeds to exorcise the Demon much as in the original tale, but the dénouement reflects Clarke's ironic conception of the theme. At the moment of exorcism, the Scholar "leaps backward, knocking over the last candle. Black out. A rumbling of thunder outside. A blaze on hearth. Wild burst of harp music outside, diminishing with distance" (p. 51). When the lights return, the King is cured but stupefied; both the Scholar and the Demon have vanished: "The audience may believe that the demon has carried off the scholar, or that the mumbo-jumbo they have just witnessed is his finest conjuring trick of all."⁷ The balance, however, tips in favour of the latter interpretation, and we can feel sure that the Scholar has not been possessed by the Demon, but that he possesses the gold torc "worth a kingdom" (p. 53). "It / Is melted now", remarks the King in resignation, when he learns that he surrendered it to the Scholar (ibid.). In the final moments, in fact, the irony is weighted against the characters onstage. The

befuddled King credits the monks with his cure, and, forgetting Ligach's flirtations, he decides to be married on the spot.

Given the nature of his material, Clarke could hardly have avoided dramatizing the conflict between the religious and the poetic viewpoints to some extent. The terms of the conflict are made explicit on a couple of occasions. Finding the monastery in uproar, the Abbot asserts the authority of the Church:

The law
Of Church in land has made the mind of man,
That is the troubled body of the soul,
Obedient, but the holy order, work
And prayer, the mortar of this house, are mocked
To-night.

(P. 21)

A little later, vying for the King's attention, he seeks to put the Scholar down: "Secular stories / Are most unsuitable. The King is on / Retreat" (p. 28). As the above account of the plot indicates, however, the tension between religious and secular values does not monopolize the action. Confrontations between Abbot and Scholar, in fact, last only a few minutes. In the middle of the second act the focus of the conflict switches to the rivalry between King and Scholar over Ligach. The play, then, stands in roughly the same relation to Clarke's dramatic and fictional canon as The Cattle-drive in Connaught to the poetry. It precedes the crystallization of the drama of conscience as Clarke's pre-eminent theme,

and, while illustrating the difference between Christian and pagan values, it does not bring the conflict between them into sharp focus.⁸

The absence of a controlling idea was what bothered Yeats about Clarke's first play when he rejected it on behalf of the Abbey theatre:

I return Austin Clarke's play. It has imagination, a sense of turbulent grotesque life, but it would not play. An audience would not understand the central idea and so it would lack coherence. I think that Austin Clarke has had two rival art forms competing with one another (1) the verse drama (2) the picturesque prose drama. I think the play left to itself would have changed from (1) to (2) I suppose the central idea is hunger as contrasted with the poet's dream or some dream but I am not sure. A work of art can have only one subject and there must be perfect clarity -- at least to the subconscious mind -- in the representation of the idea.⁹

It was unfortunate that Yeats addressed these discouraging remarks to the only Irish writer who sought seriously to continue the tradition of poetic drama at the Abbey. But Yeats undoubtedly had a point. The Son of Learning is not so much "picturesque" as picaresque. The supposed villain is seen in conflict successively with the Abbot, the King, Ligach, and, to an extent, the Demon, but, while the progress towards exorcism gives the play a narrative impetus, there is no psychological or symbolic continuity between episodes. If we ask why the Scholar cures Cathal, we find no satisfactory answer, other than that it is an opportunity for him to display his skill and daring.

With his second play, The Flame, Clarke abandoned

extravagance for austerity, and an episodic plot for a minimal action controlled by a single theme, the interplay of pagan and Christian impulses in the mind of a young nun. The scene is in the convent of St. Brigid in Kildare during the early medieval period. The play exploits the ambiguous significance of Brigid in Irish tradition. Once the Celtic goddess of inspiration and healing, she was euhemerized during the Christian era as St. Brigid, or else her role became confused with that of a Christian saint of the same name. At Kildare, which may have been a pagan sanctuary originally, a perpetual flame was tended in honour of St. Brigid, and it burned until Norman times when the new Archbishop of Dublin had it extinguished. The blending of the pagan and Christian traditions is meant to be indicated by the set, which, in contrast to "the Celtic-Romanesque manner of the play, should suggest the massiveness of the early cyclopean architecture" (p. 57).

The heroine, *Attracta*, still in her novitiate, tends to the flame in the company of an old and purblind nun. The two are posed against a background "of pure golden light" (*ibid.*), significant of some supernatural reality. Immediately, the contrast between youth and age, between desire and resignation, between the flesh and the spirit, is dramatically suggested. For the older nun, life has resolved itself into a simple war of the spirit

on the flesh, and, since "The soul is found in crook / Of knee and neck" (p. 59), she is serenely vigilant before the flame. The young girl, however, cannot pray, and it becomes clear that her nature is in revolt. She has dreamt of the death of Absalom, and her dream is at once an expression of her instinctive urges and a prophecy of her own fate. The sun replaces the flame as the source of light in her dream, but it dims even as she watches it in wonder. Running in terror to the community of nuns, she finds them turned to dust beneath their habits. The old nun upholds Absalom's fate as the consequence of vanity, but the novice senses that her dream signifies the tragic extinction of her own natural life through asceticism. She turns longingly in imagination to the sensuous world beyond the convent-walls:

Never
 To look across Kildare in sun and know
 The far flocks move along the mountain slope
 Before soft cries that drive them until grass
 Is hushed with cloud.

(p. 63).

Attracta's instincts are still very much alive, not only in her dreams but in the "voices" that she hears, for they intimate a secular life where her youth and beauty would be fulfilled. As the Abbess observes, "Sound and stir / Of Ireland, glitter of assemblies, fill / Her mind" (p. 72).

The novice, in fact, has allowed her own hair to grow in secret disobedience of the convent rule. As the

play attains one of its lyrical highpoints, we see that her action is of symbolic importance both in respect of her own rebellion, and in terms of the general import of the play:

I know it is not wrong,
 For it has grown so shiny in the moonlight
 Yet it is not like the moon; and not a soul
 Can tell how I have treasured, tempered with
 My happy tears and measured it upon
 My fingers in the night until it weighed
 So quickly, the bright balance of my hands
 Could hold no more.

(pp. 65-66)

The golden hair has replaced the flame in Attracta's mind as the object of her care, and, in opposition to the flesh-denying charge of the flame, it has come to symbolize her desire for love, company, the world of colour and action. "Who is shining there?" (p. 66), the half-blind nun asks when Attracta unveils her head, thus drawing attention to the symbolic opposition of flame and hair.

The novice's disobedience precipitates the central action. When the Abbess discovers the secret hair, she realizes accurately that it represents the unbroken instinct of the young woman: "I must cut down that spirit in her hair" (p. 74). The climax of the action, the forceful cutting of the hair, may be acted in one of two ways, either realistically, with "struggles and screams" on the part of the novice, or "the action may be silent and conventionalized" (p. 74). The latter direction,

perhaps, best suits the muted tone of the play, and best fits the characterization of the nuns, for they are generally portrayed as kindly to the novice. It is only in the face of her disobedient will that they bond into a uniform, pitiless wall of authority. A symbolic action would convey the sense of an abstract, inhuman force which, operating through the community, violates the novice.

In the final minutes, in fact, symbolic action becomes increasingly important. As the hair is cut, the flame sinks to "an angry red glow" (p. 74), causing consternation among the nuns. Then Attracta, her defiance broken, approaches the dying flame:

Holy Brigid, save
 Me from the flame, for I am full of fear
 Because there is a great pain in my head
 That makes my body small. Hide me with pity,
 Hide me in your blue mantle that was spread
 By miracle until it covered half
 The plain that I will find a fold there, warm
 As bed in winter and too far for dream.

(pp. 75-6)

The flame disappears, and, in apparent response to Attracta's prayer, "for a few minutes lovely hues of blue seem to interweave themselves in the air with a rustling sound, as though the holy mantle were descending, enfolding and enwrapping her" (p. 76). Simultaneously, the novice lapses into unconsciousness. Two interpretations are possible. On the one hand, we may take it that the flame's response signifies the initiation

of the novice, now repentant, into the protective life of the order. St. Brigid, as it were, bestows upon her the mantle of virginity from Heaven. The action has all the appearance of a death-scene, for the novice has died to the natural world, and this, in Christian terms, is perfectly acceptable since her reward will be eternal life. Such is the view of the Abbess: "There is no evil left; and she will wake / Again" (p. 76). On the other hand, the Abbess' interpretation ignores both the seemingly angry response of the flame to the cutting of the hair, and its failure to revive in answer to the prayers of the nuns. Moreover, the scene emphasises the pathos of Attracta's defeat, thus appealing to the sympathy of the audience on her behalf. We are guided towards an interpretation contrary to that of the Abbess, in effect, towards a pagan one. Attracta, devoted to life and to the sun, is the true votary of Brigid the Goddess, who responds sympathetically to her plight, granting her the "pity" which the Christian nuns withhold.

But the closing moments compound the ambiguities. The tending of the flame, as the nuns finally realize, has been neglected due to the confusion which Attracta has caused. A spark, however, still lives at the bottom of the shrine, and, fed with oil, the flame regains its former glow. The nuns immediately proclaim a Christian miracle, the answer to their prayers. But, since a

rational explanation is readily available, their conclusion seems facile and self-congratulatory. Furthermore, a rational explanation could now be given to the preceding action as well: as the oil ran out, the flame first turned red, and then flickered out with "lovely hues of blue". This explanation, however, puts a strain on coincidence, and the possibility remains that we have witnessed a manifestation of a supernatural pagan power. The confused, oracular speech of the old nun raises questions about the real significance of the flame. She recalls a similar night long ago when "Evil spirits beat themselves / Against the shrine. . . They rose . . . it sank. We prayed . . . / It shone" (p. 77). Her words suggest that there was a supernatural battle for control of the flame, between the forces of good and evil in her terms, between pagan and Christian powers if we wish to take it so. It seems that *Attracta's* tragedy, or salvation, has occasioned a repeat of the supernatural drama. But who has won? Does the renewed flame burn in honour of Brigid the saint or Brigid the goddess? Or has the flame been, and does it continue to be, of both Christian and pagan significance? Or is it simply without transcendent meaning?

The ending is an enigma, deliberately so: Clarke described his play as "casuistical" (*Plays*, p. 399). But the difficulties are not at odds with the dramatic form.

Rather, in a manner reminiscent of Ben Jonson at his subtlest, Clarke implicates the audience in the act of interpretation. It would be tempting for a Catholic audience to rejoice in the final spectacle of the community ranged in prayer before the shrine, and, as the flame becomes once more "remote and calm" (p. 79), to rest in the complacent belief that order has been restored by miracle. But, rather like the demons that peek around the capitals of the medieval Gospels, Clarke's inlay of irony and ambiguity disrupts the harmonious surface, drawing additional attention to the inner tensions, the uncertainties of faith, and to the burden which Christian belief, especially, places on the mind. Neither, however, does the play assert a contrary rationalist viewpoint; rather, in its resistance to a single interpretation, it questions all dogmatic certainties.

The Flame is a representative example of Clarke's dramatic art at its best, equalled, perhaps, only by the radio-play, As the Crow Flies. It is written with a clear eye on the stage, and the intelligent use of lighting, in particular, helps to give the drama a strong visual impact. The shrine provides a visual focus throughout, a focus, moreover, that is integral to the symbolism and to the conflict. With respect to verse-craft, the play is also one of Clarke's most effective, partly because it is free of the experimentation in verse-forms that tends to

encumber later plays. He uses a loose blank verse metre, alternating between passages of broken dialogue and longer speeches where the verse swells to accommodate the emotional intensity of the heroine. It is the poetic nature of the play, however, that, occasionally causes it to lose its dramatic effectiveness. Some of Clarke's metaphors are factitious. The older nun, for instance, is fond of stock wisdom, but her aphorisms seem to be wrought by the author's pen, rather than by her own humdrum mind: "But idle thought is an unknotted thread / Forgetful of the needle" (p. 59). Such a figure, even though precise, is likely to trip the understanding of the listener, distracting him from the even progress of the action. The use of complex, effectively undramatic, language is, indeed, Clarke's most persistent failing as a practical dramatist, belying his otherwise keen awareness of stagecraft.

* * *

Attending a performance of Oscar Wilde's early play The Duchess of Padua, Clarke had an experience which would have brought home to him the dangers of poetic indulgence in the theatre:

when the fifth act started, the time was coming up to 11 o'clock. I began to worry, for I . . . had to catch the last train to Killiney. The dying Duchess sat up and made a long speech and I thought the play was drawing to a close but in a minute she sat up again and began to make another speech. I left my seat in the front and tip-toed down the central

aisle. I thought I heard stealthy sounds and glanced back. To my horror, I found that the entire audience was creeping out after me.¹⁰

Clarke made comparatively modest demands on the attention of his audience. An admirer of the Noh plays of Yeats and the kindred plays of Gordon Bottomley,¹¹ he confined himself to a minimum of scenes, seldom extending his material beyond two acts, and, typically, he devised plots that showed religious tensions at work in a central character or pair of characters. So he avoided theatrical disasters, but his plays, as a result, are limited in the scope which they provide for the expression of his thematic concerns. The cultural conflicts in the medieval or modern contexts that underlie the drama of conscience are implied rather than realized. Given his early attraction to narrative, then, it is hardly surprising that he should also explore the possibilities of the novel, a form that allows the proliferation of surface detail, and that allows a theme to develop uninhibited by the exigencies of performance. In contrast to the frugal means of his plays, Clarke furnishes his novels with complicated plots, designed to hold a comprehensive range of medieval detail, and he exploits to the full the use of relevant digressions from the main action.

His first novel, The Bright Temptation, is a skilful and humorous synthesis of a variety of traditional matter, structured in the form of a historical romance set

in the period of the Danish invasions. Clarke reconstructs the monastic site of Clonmacnoise (Cluanmore in the novel), weaves into the narrative details from Gaelic poems and sagas, and revives picturesque types from folk-tales and hagiography. For example, the formidable 'saint' of the novel, Bec-mac-De, is described in terms The Tain applies to Cuchullin: "The three colours of ecclesiastical wrath, the red, the purple, and the purple-black warred in his cheeks. The twists of his beard straightened themselves; his tonsure took the light; his sinews strained and creaked" (p. 226).¹² The description of a saint in words appropriate to a pagan warrior, moreover, reveals a satiric intention, and, indeed, Clarke spikes his narrative throughout with barbs aimed at the early Christian culture, and, by implication, at the resurgence of narrow-minded attitudes in modern Ireland. When a "noble Irish wolfhound" comes upon the hero in his pelt, the dog keeps its "head modestly averted" (p. 22), thus testifying to the good effects of religious training on the Irish animal; in contrast, when the hero accidentally views the naked body of the heroine, his eyes rest at last on "the lost treasure of Ireland" (p. 178). Such touches had a particular relevance in 1932, for the Censorship Act had come into force. The Bright Temptation was hastily added to the banned list.

It was the topical interest of the novel that

caught Yeats' approving eye, and he commended it to Olivia Shakespear as "a charming and humorous defiance of the censorship and its ideals."¹³ The Bright Temptation, however, is rather more than a diverting blend of historical romance and light satire. Clarke is concerned once more with the conflict between pagan and Christian impulses in the medieval imagination, but now, given the latitude of his genre, he attempts a fuller exposition of the cultural and psychological factors involved. The hero encounters in turn differing aspects of the religious and secular spheres, and, in this way, the cultural conflicts of the society, as Clarke understood them, are brought to light. He seeks, besides, to probe the psychology of the medieval imagination, and, to this end, he assimilates into the narrative recurrent motifs from Irish tradition. The major components of the plot are based on three medieval romances, The Vision of Mac Conglinne, The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne, and The Frenzy of Sweeny, each of which we have seen Clarke use previously. Now, however, he synthesizes them, using a more indirect method of adaptation: the traditional tales are present as an allusive backdrop to a superimposed story of Clarke's own invention, the adventures of a young student who becomes separated from his monastic community. Moreover, he uses the romance motifs, and adds further non-realistic elements of his own, to project the subconscious life of

his hero. Thus, the seemingly picaresque adventures of the central character acquire both psychological continuity and a typical status; conversely, the traditional tales are interpreted so as to bring out their archetypal significance within the Irish context. The Bright Temptation, accordingly, constitutes Clarke's most complex presentation of the drama of conscience so far, and the following discussion will seek to illustrate, mainly through isolating plot-elements, the polarities involved.

Comedy pervades our introduction to the main themes of the romance in the opening episode. The sudden disruption of the nocturnal peace of Cluanmore awakens startling fears that "the Father of the dragons, banished by Saint Patric" (p. 3), has returned or that Danish invaders have attacked. The real cause of the uproar is less catastrophic, though no less momentous, ultimately, in its implications. The books in the library have fallen down:

The Book of Rights had been overthrown by the Brehon Laws, and the Chronicle of Eusebius knocked down by the arguments of Augustine. The geographical works of Dicuil, who had known the darkness beyond the icy north and the burning canals of the south, were mixed among the early fathers and grammarians. Saint Jerome had fallen farther than the heretics he had refuted, Pomponius had been crushed by Orosius . . . Priscian still hung upon a rack, but Sedulius was outcast among pagan poets.

(pp. 7-8)

The library, it seems, had been the scene of a Battle of

the Books, with Christian authors ranged against pagan and heretical opponents. Since the pagans and heretics have at least gained a draw in the dispute, it would seem that the event is analogous to an irruption into the community of some force inimical to the monastic order. These are the reverberations that prelude the discovery that Aidan, one of the younger students, has vanished. Thus, the hero's departure is linked with the pressure of pagan forces, both from within and without, on the monastic order; and it is associated, moreover, with the imminent overthrow of the monastic culture by Danish raiders. We are also informed that Aidan was considered a promising candidate to erase the memory of Mac Onan, "whose wicked teaching had been a shadow on the renown of Cluanmore" (p. 9), "to such bad purpose had he put the logic which he had learned" there (p. 10). Mac Onan -- his name suggests that his transgressions were not only intellectual -- is a fictional heretic, but his career parallels those of Pelagius and Johannes Scotus Eriugena, both of whom are reputed to have come from the Irish schools. Pelagius opposed Augustine's doctrine of the Fall; and Eriugena, while not denying the Fall, argued against the existence of evil in man and in the natural world. So, we are introduced to the theme of religious revolt, to the motif of the student who strays from the orthodoxy of his training.

All of the novel -- the first nine chapters exclusively -- is a variation on the theme of the straying student. Aidan, however, is associated primarily with imaginative freedom as it is exemplified by The Vision of Mac Conglinne, not with the intellectual revolt of the European exile. The medieval romance tells how

A great longing seized the mind of the scholar, to follow poetry, and to abandon his reading. For wretched to him was his life in the shade of his studies. And he searched in his mind whither he would make his first poetical journey.¹⁴

Aidan resembles Mac Conglinne in that his departure from monastic life is sudden, and in that he discovers his vocation ultimately in poetry. Unlike his prototype, however, he does not wilfully abandon his studies, and he differs from him also in that he shows no appetite, at first, for life outside the holy school:

Aidan could not but think in despair of those quiet meals at Cluanmore, of the pure faces around him there, the prefects at the top of every table, and before each scholar his share of bread and new milk, his little bowl of gruel. There, there, all chanted the Pater Noster and the Alleluia before they sat down...But for that pious chanting, for the simple mastication and quiet swallowing, here were shouts, the grinding, gulping of big-cheeked men.

(p. 52)

He longs for the peace, hierarchic order, even the vegetarian diet, of his former life. Aidan, indeed, seems to be a wandering scholar only by default: it would require a deep transformation of character to make him true to the type. We may suspect, however, that such a

psychological transformation is possible, that his appetite for life is greater than he consciously thinks: "despite his misery he ate what had been given to him" (ibid.).

That the hero's subconscious impulses are quite at odds with his mental awareness is clearly hinted at in the sequence of events that causes his separation from the monastery. Summoned by a voice that he mistakenly supposes is that of an angel, he wanders to the edge of the Shannon. Then, startled by an apparent thunder-clap (in actuality the books tumbling in the library), he finds himself "falling, falling backwards" into the water, and the current, sweeping him downstream, strips him of his nightclothes (p. 15). Ashamed of his nakedness, he later tries to steal a cloak from a crowded hall, only to find himself "falling backwards into darkness" through a hide partition, into the bed of Crede (p. 24). It is hardly fortuitous that the scholar's first fall relieves him of his clothing, and that his second lands him in a compromising situation with a comely housewife. Just prior to his plunge into the Shannon, Aidan's attention is caught by the round tower, "above all, with rounded and clear stone" (p. 14). The river is described as "alive": "it leaped and . . . pulled him down with a terrible strength, but when he clutched at it with his fingers it was slippery" (p. 15). The Freudian undertones are more

appropriate to the context than may first appear: during the nineteenth century, one theory regarding the round towers proposed that they were relics of a pre-Christian phallic cult;¹⁵ a Gaelic folk-tale tells how the Ollpheist, a gigantic water-serpent, formed the Shannon as it made its way angrily seawards in anticipation of St. Patrick's banishment of snakes.¹⁶ The accumulation of symbolic detail suggests that a subconscious revolt against the sexless, spiritual life of the monastery prompts the scholar's departure. More generally, we can say that he now experiences the necessary lapse from innocence into experience: he is swept from the world of childhood by the turbulent river of life.

Beyond the confines of the holy school, Aidan is introduced to the consequences of the Fall. He experiences a world unruled by Christian restraint, where every step he takes brings danger and treachery. He falls captive to three wrangling kerns, who behave as though they were "living in the days of Fionn MacCumhail and his seven battalions" (p. 56). These mock-heroic relics of pagan times seem to the student "terrible as the demons Saint Fursai saw when he was carried, in vision, . . . above the Lake of Fire" (p. 47). Aidan, then, first experiences the pagan sphere as though it were hell, and he contrasts it with the serene, disciplined life of the monastery. The contrast, essentially, is between the

fallen world of the flesh and a spiritual world that aspires towards the condition of heaven.

He is rescued from his misery by Ethna, whose first act is to undo the knots that bind him, a symbolic gesture that suggests her role in his development. She releases him from the bondage of the flesh. Furthermore, she is closely linked, at the symbolic level, with the spirit that first moved the scholar to quit his cell in the monastery. The episode of the release, narrated from Aidan's point of view, gives the impression that the mysterious influence that then awakened him is again present. He hears an angelic summons and senses, in the darkness, that "a bright being was stooping over him" (p. 70). Ethna is, in fact, the bright temptation, who, not only frees the scholar from physical bondage, but, in leading him away from the exclusively spiritual ideal of the holy school, frees him from his mental constraints as well.

Ethna guides Aidan to safety through the hills, away from the threat of the warriors and further away from Cluanmore also. This portion of the romance, roughly the second third of the book, combines the motif of the straying student with that of the escape-tale. Ethna is attracted to Aidan because he reminds her of Diarmuid of the Love Spot (p. 58); she actually recounts to him The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne (pp. 92-5); and she

repeatedly points out to him that they are following the route of the legendary lovers. Thus, Aidan is introduced to the pagan lore of the past, a dimension of Irish tradition that has not been imparted to him in Cluanmore. Besides, the allusive context of the escape-tale indicates that the couple are fleeing the responsibilities of society in pursuit of romantic fulfilment. Ethna, in fact, has just managed to escape from home on the night the clergy have come to make her match.

Ostensibly, she is leading the scholar to a holy glen, but, in actuality, she introduces him to values that are contrary to the Christian principles he has been taught. In so far as the hero partakes of the archetypal role of wandering poet, Ethna is his muse, an embodiment of natural beauty and knowledge, of values that are antithetical to the ideals of the schools: "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?" (pp. 105-6). In her presence, Aidan's scholastic training is subverted, as he becomes aware of life itself as a mysterious text:

He had but known the teaching of celibates and that dark legend of womankind with which young minds in Ireland are still frightened . . . he had turned questingly towards life, for the young mind does not question, but turns as generously to its own instinct

as to those Eastern doctrines of suffering and pain. In the grammar of his innocence she was bright and difficult as those declensions which change and yet are the same. She was lovely as the nominative that is the crown of meaning. His mind was trained and earnest, but her little thoughts were quicker than the steps of logic. Never had he followed in class with such attention, yet ever ahead before him her young mind ran, so that it seemed to him he was following the bright heel of knowledge.

(pp. 106-7)

It seems that Aidan, responding instinctively to the sensuous knowledge of nature, is ready to assume the role of poet. Besides, the couple, instead of coming to the holy glen, shelter, like Diarmuid and Grainne, in a cave, and there discover their love for each other: Aidan's role seems about to correspond with that of the legendary lover also. In his "innocence" and because his mind is "trained and earnest", however, Aidan's perception of Ethna's beauty is idealized, free of carnal desire, and, so, the development of the relationship is arrested.

What emerges at this point, in fact, is that the scholastic mind cannot readily shed its burden of inhibitions. Even as the romantic idyll moves towards its natural culmination, a counter-movement begins. Once Aidan's delight in Ethna manifests itself physically, he feels again the force of religious training: "He had heard . . . how the hermits had to fight a terrible evil in themselves, how they plunged waist deep into nettles, into briars, to keep their flesh from rising. This terrible change was happening to him against his will, and he was

in a torment of shame" (p. 167). The consequences of the scholar's guilt are projected in a third journey, this time in the company of the Prumpolaun, a grotesque giant, who eventually takes him to Glen Bolcan, the resort of the madmen of Ireland. Clarke probably took the name of the giant from Legends of Saints and Sinners, where Hyde suggests that the prumpolaun is "the large common dung beetle . . . which at dusk flies about searching for dirty places to deposit his eggs."¹⁷ But even without Hyde's gloss, it is evident that the ogre symbolizes the hero's physical instincts, exaggerated and distorted by his consciousness of guilt. His nightmares of conscience culminate in a visit to the underworld, represented by Glen Bolcan, where "went tortured things that had been men or women, crazied by scruples of conscience, by injustice, scandal or wrong, flying in fear of themselves" (p. 221). In psychological terms, the lost souls inhabit the scholar's own mind, projections of his terror of damnation and of his revulsion from the body.

These chapters have as their traditional counterpart The Frenzy of Sweeny, in which Glen Bolcan figures prominently. Some of the inhabitants of the glen in the novel have been partly metamorphosed, like Sweeny, into huge birds. Aidan is not specifically identified with the poet-king, but the allusive context makes it clear that the conflicts in his mind bring him to the

verge of insanity. The portrayal of Bec-mac-De, the 'saint' who rescues Aidan from his plight, reinforces the correspondence with the medieval tale. Like Ronan, the cleric with whom Sweeny quarrelled, Bec-Mac-De includes in his spiritual arsenal the curse of madness, which he also has unloosed on a royal enemy:

The sky darkened, the streams roughened, the solitary fled. The king dropped his sword, he ran with a howl into the woods, seeking those glades where the mad congregate under the full moon. He became feathered from head to foot, so powerful was my word, and his abode was in tree-tops that have been twigged by the herons.

(p. 228)

Thus, the dire consequences of religious revolt are impressed on the student. He is restored to Christian orthodoxy, and, despite his longing for Ethna, he obeys the hermit's injunction to return to Cluanmore.

The concluding events, however, serve to precipitate the full emancipation of the hero from the monastic ethic. By the time Aidan reaches the monastery, the Danes, whose arrival was ominously foreshadowed at the outset, have desecrated it, and he finds the invaders engaged in sexual rites in the main church. In terms of the 'historical' framework of the romance, the institutional power of the Christian culture is now broken, thus permitting the revival of older, pagan values. The development of the hero is made to correspond with the new situation. The terror of his near-escape

from death at the hands of the raiders brings about an inner transformation: "The shock had left him numb, and he could not pray; but something was happening to him that he did not understand. Faintly his own youth, from which he had fled, was returning, and his imagination had won its own victory" (pp. 254-5). He now assumes the role of the romantic hero in a true sense, setting out in quest of Ethna "younger, gentler than Diarmuid that night he sought for Grania when she was lost" (p. 255). Moreover, when he chances on a bardic college during his journey, his education as a straying student is completed and he discovers his true vocation:

The Ollave spoke of that secret knowledge, the wisdom of nature, from which man had strayed. Aidan, as he listened, longed to study the divisions of poetic knowledge, commit its commentaries to heart, and learn the Thousand Tales of Ireland. All night in his sleep he seemed to hear music that freed him from the shadowy fears of his early education.

(p. 257)

When he finds his muse the second time, it is with conscious intent. A search-party finds the couple entwined in a cabin on which the "pagan sun" shines: there was "No need of Gospel book . . . to tell them that those youngsters must be sent to Confession as soon as possible and restored to Irish virtue by holy matrimony" (p. 263).

The plot of The Bright Temptation is contrived so as to illustrate conflicting aspects of the medieval Irish

culture. The civilization of the monasteries is not re-created in detail, but we see its ideals of spirituality, discipline, order and learning at work in the mind of the hero. Outside the monastery, and posing a threat to its security, is a secular world of action and turbulent physical life, represented by Aidan's captors and the Danes. The secular and religious spheres represent, respectively, the two sides of the dichotomy of flesh and spirit. The relationship between them, however, is not entirely antithetical: the violence of secular life finds a parallel in the militant asceticism of monasticism, and the extreme spirituality of the latter, moreover, engenders an underworld of terror and madness. Opposed to both is the world represented by Ethna, whose instinctive mind is susceptible to pagan lore, to romantic love and to the beauty of nature. We see in her the ideal of flesh and spirit harmoniously interfused. The hero has contact with each of these facets of experience, and the novel, essentially, traces his passage from a state of mind dominated by the Christian ethic to one where pagan values take over.

In the portrayal of the hero, the novel illustrates the difficulties involved in switching from a religious to a poetic vocation, in turning from Christian to pagan values. The hero has an advantage, to begin with, in that his training has made his mind sensitive to

the inner beauty of things. But, in that monasticism has denied him access to the sensuous forms of life, his initiation into physical love is retarded. Besides, since he has an ingrained distrust of his own instincts, he has to undergo a prolonged rite of passage, involving intimations of insanity and death, before his subconscious fears are sluiced away. Clarke's use of traditional types and motifs enhances his presentation of the hero's trials. They take on typical significance within the Irish context. The phases of his development acquire the status of a parable of the romantic imagination, which, labouring under the burden of religious constraints, has to struggle before it attains freedom in confident allegiance to the muse of natural beauty.

It is Clarke's reliance on romantic motifs and symbolic devices, however, which to some extent lessens the impact of the novel. Its effectiveness is, on the whole, illustrative rather than dramatic. Symbolic roles dominate to the exclusion of more concrete forms of characterization. This is true of the central characters more than of the minor ones. The physical aspect, uncontrollable athletic ability, and imbecilic behaviour of the Prumpstaun, for instance, both sustain his symbolic function and make him a vivid fictional presence. By contrast, the hero exists throughout as a pale, timorous and passive youth. He attains no adequate surface

identity to complement the psychological trials which, through the symbolic devices, we see him undergo. Our sympathy is not invoked on his behalf, simply because his fictional presence is so nebulous. This is not to criticize Clarke for relying exclusively on the devices of romance; rather, we may note that his handling of the genre fails to highlight the dramatic possibilities of his theme, and, in this respect, we may compare The Bright Temptation unfavourably with his second fictional exploration of medieval Ireland.

* * *

The Singing-men at Cashel, Clarke's most important novel concerning medieval Ireland, relies more on the methods of historical fiction to express the drama of conscience. The main plot -- Gormlai's relationships with her three husbands -- is, for the most part, treated realistically. The principal characters emerge as well-rounded personalities and their psychological life is generally revealed by analytic, rather than by symbolic means. Clarke, moreover, is meticulous in his re-creation of the medieval milieu, drawing on an impressive range of contemporary texts: anecdotes from Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé (The Calendar of Oengus the Culdee) and Sanas Chormaic (Cormac's Glossary), John Scotus Eriugena's De Divisione Naturae, Augustine's The City of God, the writings of the Church Fathers, are among the sources that supply the

narrative with its cultural and intellectual context. This is not to say, however, that Clarke aims for scholarly exactness. Cormac's Chapel, built by Cormac MacCarthy in the twelfth century, is present in all its Romanesque grace in the time of Cormac Mac Cuilleánáin, who died in 905. Clarke uses authentic detail, but he collates and adapts freely, sometimes with cunning: from Cormac's Glossary he takes an allegorical anecdote on the poetic imagination; the interpretation of the allegory, which he attributes to Gormlai, is that of the nineteenth-century editor of the text, John O'Donovan.¹⁸ While such historical inconsistencies are frequent, Clarke's essential purpose is, nevertheless, as a reviewer defined it, "to show realistically an Irish woman and a number of Irish men living in days when Ireland was in the grip of a Catholicism such as we cannot imaginatively re-create unless we read the theologians and the lives of the saints".¹⁹ It is his most determined and elaborate attempt to bring the culture of the Irish Church to life. As such, quite apart from its considerable artistic merit, it is an invaluable index to Clarke's imaginative world, a fully delineated illustration of how he imagined the Celtic-Romanesque.

Clarke does not eschew completely the devices of romance in The Singing-men at Cashel; rather, he keeps them in ancillary relation to the realistic action. Some

romance elements are used to enlarge our perception of the principal characters. Gormlai's dream-world is explored to this end. Such, also, is her encounter with the Ban Gluna, a midwife of grotesque appearance and fabulous age, who, in a manner analogous to the role of the Prumpolaun in The Bright Temptation, projects the heroine's subconscious reaction to her sexual experiences. Most of the non-realistic elements, however, are peripheral to the main action. The sub-plot, picaresque in nature, centers on Anier Mac Conglinne, whose career in the novel culminates with a 'visit' to Purgatory, an event that is parallel in symbolic function to Aidan's experiences in Glen Bolcan. Clarke also makes use of the unusual device of a 'flashforward', when, in the tenth chapter of Book Two, he introduces an eleventh-century monk who is engaged in transcribing Searc Nial do Gormflaith ('The Love of Nial for Gormlaith').²⁰ The change of perspective enables Clarke to show how the 'historical' events he has depicted were transformed into romance in oral tradition. The mingling of romance and realism and the relationship of the satellite episodes to the central action pose a critical problem in that they put the unity of the work in question. But, as we shall see, despite the rather quilted narrative technique, thematic integrity is maintained.

In the early chapters, Gormlai is established,

like *Attracta* and *Aidan*, as a character especially vulnerable to the conflicting tendencies that are at work in the medieval culture. Her ignorance of physical matters is emphasized. Although we meet her on the occasion of her marriage to *Cormac*, it becomes apparent that she is unaware of the realities of married life. This is partly because of her unusual education, for she has spent her childhood in a bardic school, so that she is aloof from the easy companionship of the women with whom she has contact. But it is also due to a pervasive reticence concerning sex among her familiars, including her step-mother. The attempt of her attendant, *Murna*, to set her straight on the facts of life breaks down in embarrassment: "when she tried to find the words by which she might explain the blessed act itself, there was none that would not bring shame and confusion" (p. 54). In contrast to her sexual ignorance, *Gormlai* has attained a precocious level of intellectual and imaginative development. She is reputed "the most learned girl in Ireland" (p. 53). Not only has she absorbed traditional learning, but she is already an accomplished poet -- better, in *Mac Conglinne's* opinion, than the women poets of the past (p. 15). Her imagination entertains with impartial delight both the Christian and pagan aspects of tradition. She compares the poems of *Sweeny*, who "had praised what others despised" to those of *Marbhan*, the

hermit-poet, who also "loved all small creatures" (p. 78). She is, then, a character with an ardent and sensitive spiritual life, but, on the threshold of adult experience, she is unprepared for womanhood. Moreover, she is not in a position to foresee the implications of her vocation as poet: she does not perceive, for instance, the religious conflicts that afflicted Sweeny, who foreshadows her fate as a deviant from the Christian norm.

Gormlai's marriage to Cormac affords the opportunity to dramatize the encounter of a sensitive mind with the complexities of the Christian society. From the outset she notes the civilizing effects of religion. She is drawn to the "calm, shaven faces of the clergy" in preference to the laymen who seem "discordant and unprepared" (p. 30); and she contrasts "the calm, remote bearing" of her husband to the "powerful, dark-browed" politicians who consort with her father (p. 38). During the couple's visit to Glenalua, we see her response to the elaborate exactness of ecclesiastical art, when she is permitted to examine the illuminated Gospels of the holy school:

Gormlai was spellbound as she gazed at that vanished book, for she saw it in its pristine colours . . . So intricate were the intertwined patterns, so minutely exquisite the hidden world of designs which it revealed that none could doubt but that it had been composed

by holy men
Who had a hand in Heaven.

(p. 97)21

She is equally awed when taken to see the treasures of the craftsmen:

She drew back with an exclamation from the unearthly radiance within -- as though, displayed before her, were spoils from the War in Heaven.

The tapers went to those chalices and vessels deepening the enchased silver and pale metals so that, among intricate scrollwork, the reptile coil and talon were hardly discernible. But in that conflict the gold filigrees, the bluish gems, the minute inlays of red-purple and mauve enamels were triumphant.

(p. 99, my emphasis)

The passages illustrate "the inner richness of religion" (p. 98), but there are also indications, not consciously noted by Gormlai, of the exclusively spiritual ideal of the monastic imagination. It is significant that the art rejects, in its symbolism and by its preference for abstract design, the beauty of the forms of nature. The martial imagery of the second extract intimates the violent self-abnegation involved in the conquest of natural forces.

Similarly, Gormlai responds naively to the intellectual milieu she finds at Cashel. Her imagination is stimulated by the elaborate, rational disputations of the schoolmen, by what Clarke calls in "Night and Morning" the "echo of learned controversy" (CP, p. 182):

Scholars were gathered in small groups deep in quiet discussion, others paced the great hall in twos or threes, eager or hesitant, so many were the arguments among which they might choose. At times, above the murmuring, here or there, a pure voice rose clearly as though it had found the last music of knowledge.

(p. 113)

Those voices, as in a chant, held her imagination so that she seemed aware of shining intelligences that move forever in a world of ideas Those men might have entered, in trance, the spiritual world. They discussed that moment of instinctive dread, when the soul leaves its mortal shelter and finds itself in darkness. They argued over the means by which the corporeal would be enabled to rise through the air, after the resurrection, and exist in a world of spirit, despite its material density.

(p. 123)

Gormlai's admiration for the subtlety of scholastic discourse is based on humanistic pride, and, for that reason, is contrary to the Christian ethic at its strictest. Theology is directed, not towards the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but towards formalizing man's subservient relationship to God; part of its prescriptive purpose is to limit the intellectual autonomy of the individual. Moreover, the learning of its schoolmen is opposed, in principle, to the sensuous world of poetry, to which Gormlai owes a prior allegiance. Similar to ecclesiastical art, it expresses, in its refinement and substance, the spiritual world exclusively. Depicted on the arch of Cormac's Chapel is the "massed figure of Apollyon and the sagittary that opposed him with drawn barb" (pp. 124-5), which, as Cormac explains, represents the victory of Christianity over paganism.²² Gormlai does not yet question the equation of paganism and the body with evil.

In actuality, beneath the serene surface of the monastic culture, a fierce war upon the flesh is raging.

This is most dramatically apparent in the scene where Gormlai encounters Malachi, the culdee, ironically just after she has viewed the splendid treasures of Glenalua:

Never had she seen so wild and ragged a creature The thorn patched rags and twisted pelts that clad him were scarcely distinguishable from his matted chest but for the ugly paps bared by their rents. The next moment in utter horror she realized that he was human only to the waist. Often on sculptured cross and stone she has seen those serpents which the Talkend banished long ago and so she recognised the snake-sign. She could not see the coils but among the tatters that hung around the stranger's waist, a snake had raised its head, as if about to strike.

(p. 108)

Realizing that this presence is not the Devil but a hermit, Gormlai forces "her lips into a sickly smile" (p. 109). Malachi, for his part, is equally repelled by what he sees, precisely because of the effect that Gormlai's beauty has on him:

When the vision on his prayer-mound smiled at him, the spell that held him snapped. At last after many months of defeat, the Devil had tricked him and caused his flesh to rise. Rage seized him, his eyes lit with hatred, he raised his big hand.

"Deviless! Deviless!"

(p. 112)23

Although Gormlai cannot understand the exact significance of the hermit's behaviour, she senses she has come in contact with "the evil that is hidden in the very midst of life" (*ibid.*). The reader, who has the advantage of interpreting the incident from Malachi's point of view as well, learns that he was possessed in his youth by the "demon" of venereal disease, and that, having been cured

miraculously by a saint, he turned to a life of virtue, with such zeal, indeed, that "none surpassed him in his penitential exercises and mortifications" (p. 111).

Therefore, we realize that he displays the grotesque consequences of sexual repression. Not only does he inflict bizarre punishments on his own body, but woman, since she is the source of his temptation, is transformed into an object to be feared and hated. Living in proximity to the highest level of Christian culture, he reveals its underworld of sexual frenzy, the inevitable shadow to its ideal of perfect spirituality.

Unknown to Gormlai, the campaign against the flesh also rages in the intimacy of her own bedchamber. Cormac approaches the marriage bed for the first time dutifully, not in anticipation of pleasure but in the belief that he has obligations to fulfil. Accustomed to celibacy, he is shocked by the sudden onset of desire:

Never had he known or realized from his reading that desire could be so impatient, so ungovernable in the fury to rid itself of its burden. His pulse beat fast, his forehead tightened with swelling veins, his ears were drumming themselves with confused sounds. He clenched his hands to steady himself for his mind reeled with dim, dishonouring sights. But the effort was vain for his whole mind seemed to have escaped from his will and, frenzied after so many years of restraint, would serve only the fiery upstart which it had enthroned and acknowledged as its new master.

(p. 66)

Cormac manages to put down the revolt of his body by a resolute act of will, "gaining victory inch by inch"

(ibid.). Up to a point, his restraint reflects well on his character, for there is a delicacy to his wish not to alarm his bride. We see him as a vulnerable idealist, yearning regretfully for a pre-lapsarian state in which "man would have sown his seed, and woman received it, as need required without all lust and as their wills desired" (p. 67).²⁴ However, his consequent determination to transcend the physical nature of marriage leads to a perversion of normal human relationships. This becomes apparent when he finally decides to embrace his wife:

As he held her close, she put her arm trustingly around his shoulder. She was hidden in a glow, in a strangeness that perturbed her and yet seemed like the glimmering of knowledge. Vaguely, dimly, she was aware of his flesh against her flesh and knew that this strangeness was in some way a fulfilment of their intimacy.

(p. 134)

The irony of Gormlai's response is extreme, for, in actuality, Cormac's embrace is a denial of the intimacy and affection which such an action normally expresses. The embrace does indeed engender a flow of emotion in him, but for the least complimentary of reasons:

Only after long consideration and prayer had he ventured to submit his nature to a test which might have failed. But his victory over himself was complete. His will had enabled him to pass beyond the desire for self-gratification and he felt a new tenderness and reverence for his wife.

(pp. 134-35)

Gormlai is serving, unwittingly, as Cormac's virgo subintroducta. He values her because she is an excellent

means of mortification.

Gormlai gradually awakens to the reality of the Christian culture and to a recognition of her position in it. She comes to understand that at the root of monasticism is a Manichean distrust of the flesh, and that the same impulse that drives the culdee to nettles and wild berries is at work in the civilized mind of her husband. Prompted by her uneasiness and perplexity, she investigates the manuscripts in Cormac's library, and there discovers the misogynist side of Christian thought:

She had come to a bewildering world of vehement opinions, of strange anger, of stern ordinances. But it was the real world, despite its ugliness and she knew that she must face its facts. Sentences which she could scarcely understand confronted her, horrible words that she knew instinctively referred to some terrible evil at the very root of life. Woman was denounced by the Early Fathers, arraigned as the temptress, the bringer of spiritual evil and disease.
(pp. 162-63)

She further learns that marriage is "an inferior spiritual state" (p. 163), and that, according to Clement of Alexandria, "Fornication is a lapse from one marriage into many" (p. 165). She also reads of St. Scothin who slept with naked maidens for the purpose of mortification.²⁵ The anecdote seemed to her "a mocking commentary on her own marriage" (p. 164). The process of Gormlai's recognition is completed when she discovers Cormac's act of self-flagellation, vivid proof that she has been cast in the role of temptress: the various intuitions, the bits

and pieces of fact that she has acquired, suddenly fit, and she feels "all the force of that which had come between them", realizing that their "ways were apart now, their marriage was destroyed" (p. 192).

Gormlai's first marriage, is, in a sense, her Christian education. Singularly instinctive and carefree to begin with, she is presented with a view of human nature that emphasises the Manichean tendencies of orthodox, Augustinian theology. Man's natural condition is evil; the intellectual faculties, since they may lead to pride, are to be distrusted; sexuality, as the most recalcitrant obstacle to the spiritual ideal, must be tamed, and, if possible, suppressed. The Christian viewpoint is imposed, contrary to her native impulses. One of the points that the novel makes, however, is that the authority of religion, impressed upon her at a sensitive stage in her development, is such that her mind assumes a psychological burden that it cannot readily cast off. Religious terrors infiltrate her subconscious:

For weeks she had difficulty in composing herself to rest. She imagined herself slowly descending into unknown regions. Far down in that darkness was that other self which had only appeared since she came to Cashel -- a darker self that she scarcely recognized, and yet could not deny, a self troubled by intimations and a guilt of which she herself was innocent.

(p. 177)

She is drawn, in nightmare, into the "catacombs" of self-sacrifice; the hooded Christ-like figure, whose offer

of a chalice she refuses, turns out to be a faceless "mass of leprous corruption" (p. 180); she foresees herself as finally damned as a punishment for taking three husbands. Gormlai's dream-life is invaded by the imagery of sin and condemnation. Consequently, although she recoils from the flesh-denying demands of monasticism, she never recovers her earlier faith in the "fair world of mind and event" that she found in pagan legend, the "secret world of poetry which she guarded in her imagination" (p. 161). She rejects Cormac's proposal that, as he is to be ordained, she should become an Abbess. But, as we are reminded periodically in the novel, her final attitude will be that she mis-spent her life in the pursuit of mortal pride.

Her experiences following the annulment of her marriage to Cormac reinforce the hold which religion has gained on her mind. As the wife of Carrol, Gormlai encounters a secular way of life in which violent, sensual appetites reign without any dimension of spiritual aspiration. Her experiences now give credence to the doctrine that man's physical nature is a fallen state, and the ideal of monasticism, in comparison, appears attractive. Faced with "the ugliness of existence" (p. 230), the pain and humiliation of unwanted sexual intimacy, she comes to regard Cormac's spirituality in a favourable light:

I know now, alas! all that you tried to save me from in your wisdom and nobility. I know what your gentle pure thoughts shrank from even in contemplation, all the degradation that belongs to night Oh why could I not have told that the soul must subdue the body by means of pain in order to purify it?

(p. 226)

Responding to an ascetic impulse in herself, she longs for the life she has rejected, the contemplative order of a convent where she might have found "an illumination of mind, which could only occur when the senses . . . were bidden to keep their place" (pp. 227-8).

The irony of her new insight into the monastic ideal, however, is that it renders her present dilemma more acute. Her own instincts now tell her that she is being "subjected to some terrible wrong" (p. 234) as the object of Carrol's lust, and that she should revolt. At the same time, the Christian ethic demands that she submit to the misery of her marriage: as her confessor instructs her, it is a woman's "duty to keep [her] husband from concupiscence" (p. 291), and she must not put "the claims of natural affection above those of duty" (p. 292). The conflict in her mind is presented allegorically, as a debate between her Tempter and her Guardian Angel. The contention of the two spirits for possession of Gormlai's soul is pivotal, bringing into dramatic relief the opposing codes by which she might live. Iafar Niger offers her the possibility of fulfilment in human terms. He urges her to keep faith with her younger self, the

student of poetry who loved the natural world, finding there material for the imagination: "'Gone are the fair visions that came to your bed, my beloved' sang Iafer. 'In your own imagination you held a nobler vision of the world. Only in the poetic schools will you find truth'" (p. 235). Caol, on the other hand, offers her the prospect of eternal happiness at the expense of earthly joy. The angel speaks with the voice of the Church, with the accumulated authority of centuries of careful moral discrimination; and the experience of womanhood, moreover, seems to support his views. Yet, the Tempter speaks to her other self, that side of her mind that cannot quite reject the happier prospect of life that she found in poem and story. We see her caught in a paralyzing psychomachia, besieged by conflicting viewpoints, both equally strong.

It is through her romantic relationship with Nial that Gormlai feels the tempting possibility of choosing life for its own sake. Their encounters invariably take place in settings that preserve something of the pre-Christian past. Their first meeting in the novel, on the morning following Gormlai's first marriage, occurs at the well of Nemna, which has "never been blessed by the clergy", where "It was said by many the ancient influence of pagan rites lingered" (p. 79). Similarly, the crucial tryst, during which Gormlai discovers Nial's love for her,

takes place on the Hill of Allen, where Fionn had seen the "Ever-young" (p. 266). The pin which Nial presents as a token is said to have been "brought from the secret lands" (p. 285). There are numerous details that serve to cast around the lovers an aura of pagan enchantment. Under the influence of the pagan imagination, Gormlai is tempted to follow the example of Deirdre and Grainne by eloping with her lover in defiance of external restraints.

Furthermore, at this point Gormlai contemplates the pre-Christian lore, not merely as a residue of discredited superstition, but as containing religious truths of its own; and its doctrines, besides, seem to offer a solution to her dilemma in that they eliminate the dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual:

Had not those great teachers of the past taught that matter was holy as the mind, that hill and wood were an external manifestation of the immortal regions? The faith of Fintan and of Amergin was stealing into her imagination once more and she forgot the misery, the tormenting doubts that darkened it. She was among the proud, she did not fear the exhilaration which had returned so strangely to her this night.

(p. 276)

In the arms of Nial, her mind finds "of its own accord knowledge of that truth for which it searched" (p. 278). Gormlai's perceptions are not, as the narrator points out in refuting them, especially novel. In regarding nature as essentially good, and in following natural impulses in order to discover the truth, she shares the beliefs of Eriugena, "the greatest mind which ever came from the

Christian schools of Ireland" (p. 279), who argued that, since all Creation proceeded from God, then the natural world could not be evil: "We are ourselves an integral part of the divine process or manifestation: Evil, therefore, can only be an illusion or negation of good, from which we must all escape eventually through knowledge of good" (ibid).²⁶ Eriugena's thought accommodates the pagan world of imagination and love, and gives a humanistic emphasis to reason. Such doctrine, however, with its Pelagian tendency, is contrary to Augustinian Christianity, as the orthodox narrator lets us know: "In our exalted moods we discover imaginatively in ourselves an essential goodness and it is only by the insistent lessons of Revelation that we succeed in remembering our fallen state" (p. 278).

The lessons of Revelation are deeply imprinted in Gormlai's mind, and she quells her initial impulse to elope. Reflecting on the strength of the temptation, she reverts, indeed, to a Manichean view of herself, convinced that "there was some evil influence in womankind itself" (p. 283). So, even though the novel concludes with her marriage to Nial, it is apparent that she remains susceptible to the drama of conscience. The final episode gathers together at Ardnaree, as at the outset, the various representatives of the secular and ecclesiastical orders, so there is an atmosphere of festive completion.

Gormlai's life comes round at last to happiness, and she receives the blessings of society. But her eventual union with Nial is fortuitous, not due to a social or personal transformation: she separates from Carrol because of his brutal war on Cormac; she consents to marry Nial only after the death of Carrol. Besides, her fulfilment is shadowed by prefigurations of her subsequent guilt. We are reminded that the marriage is frowned upon by the scrupulous, by those who believe, with one of the Early Fathers, that re-marriage is but "a decent adultery" (p. 165).

Gormlai emerges as a character unable to find a secure basis for happiness by relying on her own powers of intellect and imagination. One may wonder, then, why the narrative ends at a comparatively happy moment in her life. The throwaway comment of the narrator, "So far, then, the love-story of Nial and Gormlai" (p. 382), seems to acknowledge that the story is incomplete. By means of ancillary episodes, however, the theme has been developed further, reaching a more optimistic conclusion than in the character-study of Gormlai. So, the seemingly arbitrary point of ending is structurally appropriate. Besides, the portrayal of Gormlai, in that it subserves a larger design, has, in fact, reached a satisfactory point of completion.

One element in the overall design of the novel is

Clarke's purpose of relating the experiences of his heroine to recurrent themes in Gaelic tales. This purpose is partly fulfilled through the numerous allusions to characters analogous to Gormlai, such as Liadain, Sweeny, Grainne, Deirdre, Muircertach Mac Erca, each of whose stories embodies the theme of romantic quest or religious revolt, or a combination of both. But it is the 'flashforward' episode of Book Two that is most important in this respect. We learn how the 'historical' facts in Gormlai's life were transformed into Searc Nial do Gormflaith, a romance modelled on "the old Elopement Tales" (p. 316). There is some irony in the transformation, for the author of the romance neglects the painful facts, so carefully detailed by the narrator of the novel, in order to create a tale of triumphant love. While the irony remains, the nature of the romance shows how Gormlai, despite personal failure, triumphed in the imagination of others. The general implication of the episode is that she attained a symbolic importance that transcended her personal history: Ceallachan informs us that, because of her efforts, "a literary and poetic revival was taking place throughout Ireland . . . once more the pagan imagination of the past was astir in the minds of men" (p. 315).

The episode also illustrates the continuance of the conflict between the Christian and the pagan

traditions, though now they co-exist on a more equitable footing. Ceallachan declares his distaste for the task of transcribing a secular story. However, as he reads through the manuscript, he becomes "Engrossed in the story himself" (p. 317), especially when it approaches its sensual climax: "He peered into the darkened pages; already he seemed to hear the guilty lovers whispering, sighing in that moonlit chamber: his mind was quick with startling fancies" (pp. 321-22). When he realizes his aberration, he "went upon his knees" (ibid.). Ceallachan, indeed, is a sort of mirror-image of the narrator, who is also engaged, somewhat reluctantly, in collating ancient manuscripts, and whose attitude to his materials is equally ironic. He maintains throughout a Manichean severity towards the flesh, even though the end result contradicts his stance. He signs himself off as "a poor clerk [trying] to keep body and soul together" (p. 382). Keeping body and soul together, in the sense of resolving the conflict between the flesh and the spirit, is precisely the theme of the novel.

Searc Nial do Gormflaith affords a more positive perspective on Gormlai, but it is principally through the sub-plot that a resolution to her conflicts is suggested. The relationship between Mac Conglinne's rakish progress and the heroine's troubled self-discovery, however, is not immediately apparent. The actual narrative links between

the two plots are tenuous. Gormlai is never even aware of the scholar's existence or of his interest in her. Anier, for his part, follows Gormlai's career only in a wayward fashion, and his single contribution to her destiny is small, but decisive: he informs Nial of her departure from Carrol's household, thus bringing him to her rescue. That there should be no interaction on the mundane level between the heroine and the wandering poet, however, is essential to the nature of their relationship. She is a remote, almost mythical figure for the poet:

The noise of the crowd left Anier's hearing, the changing sights went from his eye, as he saw her for the first time. Clearly, as in a little space of quiet, he saw the daughter of Flann. Her face was pale, her dark hair bound across her brow by a thin circlet of goldHe almost imagined, as he saw that dreamful face, that she was in the fair light of a poetic college, listening to the equal music of verse.

(p. 28)

She appears to him as his muse or aisling. In contrast to her role as temptress from the monastic viewpoint, she leads him to his vocation, an ideal of the female spirit of Ireland inspiring him to maintain his fidelity to poetry. Again, we see Gormlai in a positive symbolic role, one of which she is unaware. We may take it that it was Mac Conglinne, or another wandering poet of which he is the type, who transformed the historical events of her life into a romance fashioned after the manner of The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne.

The sub-plot has a further significance in that it gives a parodic commentary on the main action. While the heroine painfully experiences conflicts of conscience, Mac Conglinne is free of religious scruple, and his irrepressible delight in life gives him a devil-may-care attitude to matters of conscience. This is brought out in the episode where the poet, dressed in the garb of a cleric, hears the confession of Lasarina. They use the occasion to make love. Anier's role of scholar-priest comments humorously on Cormac's relationship with his wife, while his blithe sacrilege contrasts with Gormlai's visit to her confessor, which has the effect of deterring her from adultery.

Finally, proceeding from its comic function, the sub-plot suggests how the drama of conscience may be resolved. Mac Conglinne's adventures in the novel culminate with his pilgrimage to Lough Derg, the location of the entrance to Purgatory. Undertaken for a dare, the pilgrimage becomes the ultimate spiritual experience, a journey into the underworld. We are told that "the conflict between his soul and body . . . [became] dangerous" (p. 370). Indeed, body and soul appear to part company, for, at least in a symbolic sense, the poet undergoes death and rebirth, a process whereby he is cleansed of hidden guilt and subconscious fears:

He was perfect now as Adam, who awakened suddenly into life, with adult mind and new senses unspoiled by the twilight years and errors of childhood. He knew at last that the common sunlight is indeed that radiance which, temperate yet glorious, shines through the circular courts of Heavens, that even when we are at our daily tasks we move in that celestial light.

(p. 375)

The poet's experiences constitute a rite of passage from which he emerges with the full health of the imagination. Thus, he achieves a psychological transformation, full emancipation from the terrors of religion in the knowledge that the physical and the spiritual are one. He attains a comic buoyancy, rebounding "from the terror and pain that are at the roots of existence" (p. 376), and he looks forward to the extravagant accounts he will give of his adventures in Hell. It remains true, however, that Mac Conglinne is a semi-symbolic character in the novel, and that Clarke chooses to place the greater weight of his fictional resources behind portraying Gormlai's less fortunate experiences.

The same basic plot elements underlie The Singing-men at Cashel as were evident in The Bright Temptation. Gormlai's first marriage is analogous to Aidans's monastic education; her marriage to Carrol parallels Aidan's sudden fall into the secular world; her relationship with Nial parallels the romantic idyll of the earlier novel; finally, the negative repercussions of ascetic doctrine, which drove Aidan to Glen Bolcan, affect

Gormlai's psychological life, inhibiting her instinctive loyalty to pagan values. The main difference is that the plot now takes on the flesh and blood of medieval life. The conflict of values is related to the art and thought of the Irish Church, and the central characters are historical figures, revived in realistic detail. The role as victim in the drama of conscience passes from a type of the Irish imaginative mind to a woman, who, though she acquires a typical status, emerges primarily as a realistic character.

Gormlai inherits the role of victim from Aidan, but she fails to transcend her situation in her personal life. The role of victor passes to Mac Conglinne. It is noteworthy that the characters who triumph over the conflicts of conscience belong to the romance genre, while the character who is treated realistically fails. One hesitates to equate the world of romance with wish-fulfilment, while identifying realism with the actual experience of the author. None the less, the equation is justifiable in this instance. As we shall see in Night and Morning, Clarke strives towards the freedom of apostasy, towards a confident faith in earthly fulfilment alone. He is frustrated in his attempt, however, by the persistence of guilt, doubt, and especially, by a paralysing awareness of mortality. Gormlai and Mac Conglinne, therefore, correspond to a division within his

self. The former approximates his actual experience, while Mac Conglinne embodies his desire for emancipation from religion. We may see him, essentially, as seeking to pass from a state of psychological subjection to one of imaginative freedom. We may add that Clarke's work eventually enacts such a transition, culminating in a comic celebration of sensual life.

As an overall perspective on Clarke's career, it is useful to see his diversification into fiction and drama as an integral stage in his development. Typically, he contrives plots which serve, as with the structural design of Pilgrimage, to illustrate a polarity between imaginative values, associated with the survival of pagan traditions, and religious values, which have at their root a Manichean distrust of the natural world. A central character (or characters), inexperienced and of idealistic temperament, is introduced to the extremes of Manicheism both in the monastic and secular spheres. He also experiences, through contact with the pagan imagination, the possibility of physical and spiritual harmony. But, while instinctively attracted to the pagan viewpoint, he feels the pressure of cultural norms, and, vulnerable in his isolation and innocence to the authority of the Church, he finds himself in subconscious subjection to the religious ethic. We see Clarke move beyond a presentation of the drama of conscience in cultural and historical

terms towards a psychological drama. Moreover, in The Flame and more profoundly in The Singing-men at Cashel, he ceases to assert the victory of imaginative values over those of religion. In this respect, Clarke's major novel marks a transition between Pilgrimage and Night and Morning, a volume in which the drama of conscience is depicted, principally, as a war within the psyche of the poet.

NOTES

Chapter III

1 "Introduction", Irish University Review, IV (Spring, 1974), 10.

2 The Irish Comic Tradition (London, 1962), p. 46.

3 Tom Peete Cross and Clarke Harris Slover, eds., Ancient Irish Tales (New York, 1936), p. 551.

4 Wilhelm Wellner, Aislinge Meic Conglinne: The Vision of MacConglinne, ed. with trans. (based on W. M. Hennessy's) by Kuno Meyer; intro. by Wilhelm Wellner (London, 1892), p. [xiii].

5 Page references are to Austin Clarke, Collected Plays (Dublin, 1963). Future references will include the short-title, Plays, only where there is a possibility of ambiguity.

6 "Austin Clarke: The Poet in the Theatre", Life and Letters, LIII (April-June, 1947), 13.

7 Ibid.

8 The Son of Learning was published in 1927, but Clarke's references to it (Penny, p. 159; Black Church, pp. 144-5) indicate that an early version was written in 1921. Two of the lyrics in the play are included in The Cattedrive in Connaught.

9 Quoted in Penny, p. 203. The rejection, which Clarke says "depressed [him] very much", may have provoked his unilateral quarrel with Yeats.

10 The Celtic Twilight and the Nineties, pp. 71-2.

11 See, for example, Clarke's comments on the two writers in "The Problem of Verse Drama To-Day", London Mercury, XXXIII (1935-6), 37.

12 Compare: "The warp-spasm overtook him: it seemed each hair was hammered into his head, so sharply they shot upright. You would swear a fire-speck tipped each hair. He squeezed one eye narrower than the eye of a needle; he opened the other wider than the mouth of a

goblet. He bared his jaws to the ear; he peeled back his lips to the eye-teeth till his gullet showed. The hero-halo rose up from the crown of his head." Trans. Thomas Kinsella, The Tain (London, 1970), p. 77.

Page references are to The Bright Temptation (2nd ed.; Dublin, 1965).

13 The Letters of W.B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), p. 795.

14 Aislinge Meic Conglinne, op. cit., p. 8.

15 See Henry O'Brien, The Round Towers of Ireland (2nd ed.; London, 1834). According to Maurice Harmon, Clarke was "Disturbed by theory of phallic symbolism" in O'Brien's book, because he remembered the effort he made as a child to carve a round tower. See "Notes Towards a Biography", Irish University Review, IV (Spring, 1974), 14-15.

16 "The Great Worm of the Shannon", Legends of Saints and Sinners, collected and trans. by Douglas Hyde (Dublin: Talbot Press, n.d. [1st ed. 1915]), pp. 258-63. Clarke adapted the folk-tale in "The Last Irish Snake", CP, pp. 451-3.

17 Legends of Saints and Sinners, p. 276.

18 Sanas Chormaic; Cormac's Glossary, trans. and annotated by John O'Donovan; ed. with notes and indices by Whitley Stokes (Calcutta, 1868), pp. 135-8; The Singing-men at Cashel (London, 1936), pp. 118-20. Future page references to the novel will be incorporated into the text.

19 R. A. S. - J., "The Spirit, the Flesh and the Devil", London Mercury, XXXIII (1935-6), 650.

20 Such a romance, usually known as Serc Gormflaith do Nial, is believed to have existed, as it is mentioned in the Book of Leinster, but it has not survived.

21 The phrase in verse is adapted from "Secrecy", CP, p. 119. Clarke seems to have Giraldus Cambrënsis' description of the lost Book of Kildare in mind here: "if you . . . are able to penetrate the secrets of the art displayed in these pictures, you will find them so delicate and exquisite, so finely drawn, and the work of interlacing so elaborate, while the colours with which they are illuminated are so blended, and still so fresh, that you will be ready to assert that all this is the work

of angelic, and not human, skill." See The Topography of Ireland, xxxviii, in The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis, trans. Thomas Forester; revised and ed. by Thomas Wright (reprint of 1863 ed.; New York, 1968), p. 99.

22 Apollyon is the king of "the bottomless pit", Revelation 9 : 11.

23 Gormlai's encounter with the culdee is described in language similar to Clarke's recollection of his terrified response to the monk at Mount Argus. See above, pp. 96-7.

24 Cormac is paraphrasing Saint Augustine, The City of God, XIV, 24.

25 See above, p. 108.

26 Eriugena treats the problem of evil at length in Periphyseon (or De Divisione Naturae), V, 26-35. Having made a fourfold division of nature, he gives an account of the procession of all of creation from God, and of its eventual return to union with the divine cause. Since God cannot beget evil, Eriugena argues that man's nature, and all of creation, is essentially good. Moreover, since man is a rational being, he is necessarily drawn towards goodness and truth, and it is only through the irrational impulses of a rational creature, through the perverse exercise of free-will, that evil arises. Ultimately, Eriugena's system confers salvation on all, even on those who lead wicked lives, through the agency of God's mercy: "no human being will be deprived of those natural goods in whose possession that being has been created, no matter whether in this life he was good or wicked. In this way the indescribable and incomprehensible effusion of divine goodness and mercy over all human nature will be made manifest" (V, 39). Trans. by Ludwig Bieler in his Ireland: Harbinger of the Middle Ages, (London, 1963), p. 128.

Clarke's sympathy for Eriugena's thought is apparent, especially, in A Sermon on Swift (1968), and, in the title-poem, he perceives an affinity between the medieval theologian and the eighteenth-century humanitarian:

Here in his secret belief
For sure: the doctrine of Eriugena,
Scribing his way from West to East, from bang
Of monastery door, click o' the latch,
His sandals worn out, unsoled, a voice proclaiming
The World's mad business -- Eternal Absolution.
(CP, p. 460)

IV

PSYCHOMACHIA

I have endured
The enmity of my own mind.
("No Recompense", CP, p. 190)

Introducing Austin Clarke's major themes in the course of the second chapter, I pointed to the personal experiences and conflicts that determined his exploration of the Irish imagination. The works we have considered have each had an historical frame of reference; they have presented the drama of conscience in racial terms, and are, ostensibly, without autobiographical content. However, it is obvious that the themes and situations that tend to recur have parallels in Clarke's life: religious revolt, celibate marriage, and the threat of insanity were three crucial and related experiences for him, as they are also for *Attracta*, *Aidan*, and *Gormlai*, and for his favourite traditional types, *Sweeny* and *Mac Conglinne*. To illustrate the latent autobiographical element in Clarke's "historical" explorations, one could point to the numerous correspondences between passages in Twice Round the Black Church and passages in the novels. A conspicuous instance is *Gormlai's* confrontation with *Malachi*, the *culdee*, which closely resembles Clarke's recollection of a childhood encounter with a monk.¹ With Night and Morning, a

volume that treats the drama of conscience in a confessional mode, the autobiographical burden of Clarke's thematic concerns becomes explicit.

In exploring the drama of conscience at a personal level, Clarke's poems continue to maintain an opposition between two sets of values, but the emphasis now shifts more pervasively to the psychological nature of the conflict. Pilgrimage and the plays and novels we have considered clearly favour imaginative values above those of religion; the poems celebrate the breakdown of institutional Catholicism in Ireland during the Penal Age; Attracta, Aidan and Gormlai are portrayed as victims of a culture dominated by authoritarian religion. But it is one thing to reject the Christian ethic intellectually, quite another matter to overcome subsequent uncertainty and guilt, to eradicate the religious impulse from the mind. What emerges in Night and Morning is that Clarke (and we may take it he is closely represented by the speaker of the poems) engages in a personal struggle to rid himself of the psychological consequences of his Catholic upbringing, but that his effort is frustrated, and, as a result, he cannot sustain a confident faith in the imagination.

◆ This view of Night and Morning goes against the grain of critical opinion, which tends to see in the volume the poetry "of a man beating to be let into a

church that he has despised."² In particular, my approach conflicts with the cogent analyses of several of the poems by Gregory Schirmer. Schirmer defines the theme, essentially, as a conflict between faith and reason: "religious faith, however irreconcilable with man's powers of reason, cannot be wholly rejected, because it, and not reason, recognizes man's crucial and real spiritual needs".³ The theme of the volume, however, is not reducible to the incompatibility of faith and reason. Clarke is concerned with man's total capacity for temporal fulfilment, in the emotional, sexual, and imaginative, as well as the intellectual, spheres; and the broad scope of his theme is evident in a number of poems, such as "Repentance", "The Lucky Coin", "The Straying Student". More important, critics, including Schirmer, have failed to recognize the psychological dimension of the poems: the essential conflict presented in the volume is between the speaker's conscious desires and his subconscious compulsions. The speaker is not so much a man trying to get back into the Church, as one who finds himself, involuntarily, locked inside a Church he thought he had long ago escaped.

A general comparison of Pilgrimage with Night and Morning demonstrates the continuity of Clarke's concerns, and, at the same time, highlights the development that has taken place. The former book presents the drama of racial

conscience by evoking phases of Irish history from early Christian times until the eighteenth century.

Essentially, it explores the debate between Christian and pagan values in objective terms, and, in the choice and sequence of its subjects, it records the victory of the latter. Although the poems in Night and Morning freely avail themselves of historical contexts, their range of reference is for the most part contemporary and intensely personal; essentially, they examine the private ordeal of the poet. The formal parallels between the volumes are so conspicuous that they must be deliberate, intended to invite comparison: both use similar stanzas; both are carefully structured sequences that evolve thematically along related lines; and, in several instances, poems are contiguous in theme and subject-matter. We may say that the two books, taken together, make up a unity, in that the private experience of the poet is seen to fit into a racial pattern. But equally important is the antithetical relationship between the volumes. In re-examining the drama of conscience, in an intensely personal manner, Clarke, in effect, reverses the tentative optimism worked out in the earlier "historical" sequence. So, the formal parallels may be said to highlight a revision of attitude, a turn to despair, in the presentation of the debate between imaginative and religious values. Night and Morning ends, indeed, without resolution, and the theme of

psychological struggle, of psychomachia, continues into the later poetry, where it works most significantly in "Ancient Lights" and Mnemosyne Lay in Dust, two poems I shall return to in my concluding pages.

With Night and Morning, then, Clarke begins an inner pilgrimage, an exploration of private experience. Indeed, the volume is so personal that it very nearly constitutes an abandonment of poetry as a public act. It first appeared in an edition of 250 copies, a booklet of eleven poems, uncompromising in their difficulty, and not accompanied by Clarke's habitual notes. The difficulties of the volume arise in part from an intensification of the verbal compression apparent in "Celibacy" and "The Confession of Queen Gormlai". As Thomas Kinsella observes, with Night and Morning Clarke "plunged into linguistic darkness. The diction is compacted and constricted, full of puns. The elements of grammar and syntax transfer and contort."⁴ Moreover, Clarke's main resource for metaphor and symbol in these poems is the liturgy of the Catholic Church, and his use of religious allusion can be complex, stored with private meaning, ambiguities, and casuistical distinctions. Finally, Clarke has in mind a particular interpretation of the history of Christian thought, and he appears to have a doctrinal position of his own, both of which he assumes are also the property of the reader; or, perhaps, writing

to satisfy a private need, he neglects to establish an adequate frame of reference. The result is that the conceptual scaffolding of the volume has to be established inferentially and in the context of Clarke's other work, and there remain, even so, areas of obscurity, thickets of language from which meaning can be flushed -- if at all -- only by hopeful probing. Nevertheless, Night and Morning is one of Clarke's best books, constituting an advance in intensity and self-analysis over Pilgrimage, and the diligent attention it demands is eventually rewarded.

As with Pilgrimage, a useful strategy in approaching the volume is to read it as a unified whole. Taken as a group, it becomes apparent that the poems return obsessively to a number of concepts that are often puzzling or abstract in isolation, but which become charged with meaning through repetition in a variety of contexts. Pride is mentioned or implied in most of the poems. Mortality is an equally pervasive concept, sometimes named explicitly, more usually evoked through imagery. Often, as in the title of the second poem, "Mortal Pride", the two concepts are coupled. As in "The Confession of Queen Gormlai", pride denotes man's joy in his secular faculties, in his capacity for intellectual, artistic, and sexual fulfilment without recourse to a divine order. More than in the earlier volume, however, the poet distrusts human nature, aware that intellectual

pride is the original sin under the Christian dispensation, and conscious, above all, of the mortal futility of life.

The most frequently used word is "thought", which occurs fourteen times, and if we include related concepts ("mind", "intellect", "reason", "logic", "knowledge", "learning", "argument"), the count trebles. According to Vivian Mercier, in a helpful commentary on the volume, "the word as used by Clarke means intellectual activity, but at times it implies a painful, almost obsessive recapitulation of familiar dilemmas."⁵ It needs to be added that "thought" is distinct from "reason", "logic", "argument", and their synonyms, words which often have a positive force in the poems, and which usually refer to the intellectual activity of Christianity in the medieval centuries. It needs to be distinguished also from "knowledge" and "learning" as they are used in "Repentance", where they denote the achievements of the imagination. The term is best understood, in fact, as referring to the present status of individual intellectual endeavour, which, in relation to Catholicism, is seen to be characterized by conflict, arising from the clash between speculative and imaginative tendencies and the authority of the Church.

The linguistic obsessions of the volume point to its conceptual concerns. Dominating the poet's

consciousness is a dread of damnation, a dread that is intensified by his vivid awareness of mortality. He is, as a result, susceptible to the religious viewpoint. At the same time, he takes pride in the human intellect and imagination. He wishes, accordingly, either to accommodate his humanism within the religious tradition, or, alternatively, to pursue the life of the mind independently. Contemplating the status of the mind within Christianity, he admires the speculative vitality of past centuries, but, faced with the dogmatic Catholicism of his own time and place, he recognizes that intellectual liberty is no longer possible within the Church. The poems do not identify the moment of change, but we may suppose that the implied watershed is the Council of Trent (1546-63), which ended religious debate and controversy for the faithful by establishing a dogmatic system of belief.⁶ The obvious solution, then, is to reject faith. But this is also recognized as impossible. The poet's mind, possessed by an ingrained sense of personal insignificance, is prey to religious fears, so he is unable to sustain a commitment to secular values.

The manner in which this basic conceptual scheme is present structurally in the volume is not immediately obvious. Unlike Pilgrimage, which develops a linear thematic argument together with its chronological

structure, Night and Morning circles the same internal issues without any marked progression from beginning to end. As well as key-words, the poems repeat situations, metaphors, and allusive contexts, to such an extent that lines and even entire stanzas seem interchangeable:

Before the truth was hid in torment,
 With nothing but this mortal pride,
 I dreamed of every joy on earth
 And shamed the angel at my side.
 ("Mortal Pride", CP, p. 182)

When I was younger than the soul
 That wakes me now at night, I saw
 The mortal mind in such a glory --
 All knowledge was in Connaught.
 ("Repentance", CP, p. 186)

At the core of the volume, in fact, is a sense of mental paralysis, as a result of the poet's incompatible needs. The volume does evolve, however, by amplifying and clarifying the nature of this impasse, by elaborating each of the issues involved, and the repetitions help to establish the thematic connections between poems. Since the thematic design that emerges is not conspicuous, it may be useful to indicate its general outline at this stage. The poet's mental agony is omnipresent in the poems, but it is presented directly and most forcibly in the opening three poems and in the last poem. These reveal that, in seeking to escape his dilemma, he entertains a number of contrary impulses: he looks back nostalgically, both to the simple faith of his childhood and to the faith of past centuries before religious

controversy hardened into dogma; but he also recalls the confidence of his youth, when he rejected religion in favour of the mortal mind. Located between the confessional poles of the volume are "objective" poems, a portrait of a woman of simple faith, a conventional song of repentance, two poems that recollect the Penal Age. These serve to embody possible solutions to his problem. His mental agony also engenders antipathy to the present authoritarianism of the Church, and this gives rise to a satiric impulse, which flares out a couple of times late in the volume, notably in "Penal Law".

In the opening poem, "Night and Morning", we find the poet enduring a dark night of the soul. The title suggests a basic symbolism, applicable to the volume as a whole. On the one hand, night signifies the poet's present situation, specifically his subconscious mental state as it reveals itself in his dreamlife. Morning, on the other hand, symbolizes a hoped-for resolution that would reconcile his intellectual and emotional needs. As such, it has a double symbolic signification, because it may mean either the dawn of untroubled apostasy or the innocent light of a return to simple faith. But it may also refer, as in the second stanza of the title-poem, simply to the poet's conscious daily life, when he ceases to be ruled by religious terrors, although he continues to suffer in the recognition of his divided self.

The opening lines establish the poet as a victim of religious nightmare:

I know the injured pride of sleep,
The strippers at the mocking post,
The insult in the house of Caesar

The allusions are to the events of Holy Thursday when Christ was humiliated by the soldiers of Pilate. The poet, in his agony, identifies with Christ. In a sense, he is following the Christian injunction to take up the Cross. Therefore, he can be said to "hold / In brief the miserable act / Of centuries", that is, he imitates in his own life the Passion of Christ, just as it has been enacted for centuries in the celebration of the Mass. The allusion here is specifically to the mystical moment of consecration, when the celebrant holds the host briefly in his hands. The poet's imitation of Christ, however, is involuntary, an affront to his pride, as the opening line makes clear.

The poet and Christ are identified metaphorically in the first sentence of the stanza. The succeeding lines, which are extremely compressed, justify the metaphor. "Thought can but share / Belief" -- the statement is contrary to the orthodox Thomistic view, which holds that faith can be proved by reason. The meaning seems to be that the mind no longer controls faith, that it neither engenders it nor rejects it. So, "the tormented soul", presumably a man in a state of

semi-apostasy, is deprived of the expiation of "confession". He has to live within the isolation of his own mind, in "despair", which he expresses, however, in images "borrowed" from religion. As in this poem, he uses what Clarke later called, in "Emancipation", "the cast-off finery of faith" (CP, p. 203). But since the metaphorical context here is that of the Passion, it is clear that "borrowed robe" alludes to the purple garment which Pilate's soldiers placed on Christ's shoulders to symbolize, mockingly, his temporal power as King of the Jews. The allusion complicates the sense. The poet, too, wears the robe of the world, willingly, in his waking hours, but, in the subconscious life of sleep, he is mocked for his pride: so, he is an inverted reflection of the God he denies.

The second stanza announces the arrival of morning, an event, however, that is paradoxical in its implications. On the one hand, it signals, in terms of the literal development of the poem, the end of the poet's tormented sleep. The "dreadful candle" of religious terror is removed. In the secular light of day, the Christian liturgy loses its mystery: "The very elements" (that is the bread and wine of the Mass) "remain / Appearances upon the altar." On the other hand, "thought still lives in pain", and the liturgical metaphor of Christ's Passion is still active. The "dreadful candle"

probably alludes to the Office of Tenebrae, which is sung during Holy Week, and at the conclusion of which a candle is placed behind the altar to signify Christ's burial.

The "shadows" that "cross the nave" reinforce the sense that this is a metaphorical Good Friday, and that the appointed hour of total darkness is at hand. So, the allusive undertones of the lines strongly imply that the poet's agony continues, that he is not consoled to find, when morning comes, that the Christian mysteries are dead.

Stanzas three and four mark a new departure in the poem. The poet adverts briefly to the nature of obedient faith, which, in the simplicity of its assent, renders all religious debate unnecessary. Then, without transition, he turns nostalgically to the medieval past, in admiration of the uninhibited intellectual and artistic activity that, in the poem's view, characterized the centuries of faith prior to the Counter-Reformation. The change of focus between the second and third stanzas is abrupt, but its poetic logic can be appreciated. In the medieval era, "feathering / Of pens at cock-rise" expressed the simple faith of the monasteries; "all Europe was astir" with the excitement of religious debate. As the metaphors imply, it represents an ideal morning of faith which is acceptable to the humanistic pride of the poet. Among the aspects of medieval Christianity that he admires is "the miracle that raised / A language from the dead", an

observation that is glossed in Forget Me Not: "Dark Ages; Latin rotted, came up from night-soil, / New rush of words; thought mounted them" (CP, p. 241). But what appeals most to him is the unity and man-centred nature of the medieval world. The poem concludes with an eloquent celebration of the conjunction of faith and reason, heaven and earth, man and God, a harmonious world in which human pride is exalted:

Such quality was in all being,
The forks of heaven and this 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.

The stanza embodies the poet's conception of unity of being, located, in this instance, in the medieval world of unquestioning faith.

But in the modern world, dogmatic Catholicism, since it precludes intellectual autonomy, has isolated the individual mind. The following poem, "Mortal Pride", redirects our focus to the present dilemma of the individual who takes pride in human achievement. In the opening line, "thought" is used in two senses: in the first instance, it denotes the mental activity of the speaker; in the second, it refers to the historical body of intellectual and moral debate that culminated -- we may infer -- with the Council of Trent. The two are in conflict, "crossed", thus implying once more the

identification between the poet and Christ. The poet, however, suffers "to be lost", not to be saved. Confronted with his dilemma, he again feels a nostalgic impulse, not this time for the medieval past, but for his own youth. Then, before "the truth was hid in torment", he had full confidence in "mortal pride", and, disregarding his Guardian Angel, he "dreamed of every joy on earth".

Like the previous poem, "Mortal Bride" turns to a new aspect of the theme in mid-course. The focus switches, rather arbitrarily, from the situation of the poet to that of a married couple, who experience conflict between the impulse to enjoy sexual love and the religious view that sexuality is a means of procreation, not to be enjoyed for its own sake. Their dilemma is not presented dramatically; rather, it is suggested, somewhat casuistically, in a series of puns. The husband cannot be "in a state of bliss", that is if he is to remain in a state of grace; the couple cannot learn the "ancient catechism" of love, if they obey the teaching of the Church. There is also a quibble on "sacrament", which refers literally to the sacrament of matrimony. But, in colloquial speech, a person is said to 'forget the sacraments' when he ceases to practise his religion. The import of the pun is that the husband must either abandon the physical aspects of marriage or give up religion: he

cannot be both a good lover and a good Catholic. The couplet that caps this quibbling stanza is exceedingly obtuse. It is possibly best glossed as follows: the accumulated moral argument of the past outweighs our brief experience, and, hardened now into dogma, it damns us. We are committed to a joyless temporal life, or, if we rebel, to eternal punishment.

"Mortal Pride" introduces a new element to the debate, the possibility of secular happiness, an aspect of the theme that is pursued more fully in "Repentance" and the two poems that follow it. However, while "Mortal Pride" is a logical component of the argument, it is perhaps the least satisfactory poem in the volume. Its punning, abstract manner makes no appeal to the senses. In contrast, "Tenebrae", the equally difficult poem that follows, exploits the suggestive potential of Catholic ritual, so that it has a sombre evocative power, and, because of its inner consistency of symbol and image, it has a cumulative impact even before its train of thought is extricated.

In the second stanza of "Night and Morning", the poet, alluding to Good Friday, acknowledged his loss of faith and implied that God had died in the Nietzschean rather than the Christian sense. "Tenebrae" returns to the same allusive context, and expresses fully the torment of apostasy. The title refers to the office of Holy Week

which is sung in commemoration of the darkness that covered the earth at Christ's death. A triangular candelabrum of fifteen candles is placed on the altar, and, in the course of the ceremony, fourteen of the candles are extinguished, each signifying a station of the Cross. The remaining candle is placed behind the altar until the conclusion of the service to symbolize the death and entombment of Christ. Also, during Holy Week the chalice is draped with a dark veil. These are the details of Catholic ritual that are evoked in the opening lines of the poem. The solemn images, however, are not so much an expression of religious emotion as they are a figurative representation of the poet's own Christ-like agony:

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

The poet may wish to pray, but he cannot because of his reasonable objections to faith. The liturgical metaphors enact the betrayal of rational man rather than that of Christ.

So far the poems have not accounted for the poet's inability to shake off the oppressive weight of religion by following his reason. In the second stanza, however, the psychological cause of his subjection to religion is revealed:

O when the forehead is too young,
 Those centuries of mortal anguish,

Dabbed by a consecrated thumb
 That crumbles into dust, will bring
 Despair with all that we can know.

The syntax needs some clarification. In terms of the literal sense, the second line should follow "dust": it is the forehead of the child that is dabbed by the priest in the ritual of Ash Wednesday, the first day of the lenten preparation for Easter. However, there are some imaginative gains in the dislocation. Not only does the priest's thumb crumble to dust, but the child's forehead and the centuries, in being "Dabbed", are marked for the same fate. In a sense, "Those centuries of mortal anguish" is a periphrasis for "ashes", which, as a liturgical symbol, signifies the Christian insistence on the vanity of flesh. Read "ashes" for the second line, and the syntax makes sense: "When the forehead is too young, / Ashes, / "Dabbed by a" Moreover, the order of phrases suggests that it is especially the ritual impress of a cross of ash on the forehead, accompanied by the words, "Remember, man, dust thou then art, and into dust thou shalt return", that "bring[s] / Despair with all that we can know". This happened, the stanza argues, when the individual was "too young", killing his capacity for joy before it had had time to grow, and before he had the experience to reject what was being impressed upon his

consciousness:

And there is nothing left to sing,
Remembering our innocence.

The import of "innocence" is ambiguous as well as ironic: it is ironic in that there is no true innocence to remember, since it was nipped by the priest, but the literal meaning of the line remains in force, because it was the child's lack of experience that made him so vulnerable. It is, then, specifically an overwhelming and ineradicable consciousness of mortality, inculcated at an impressionable age, that pre-empts any proud certainty on the part of the poet that human life is enough.

The third stanza reveals the poet at the pitch of his crisis. As a number of commentators have pointed out, the speaker identifies with Martin Luther,⁷ who, in nailing his theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, upheld individual liberty against the authority of Rome:

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

The metaphorical association of the poet's anger with Luther's, however, does not indicate doctrinal agreement. The poet's position is one of excruciating paradox. Even as he posts his "angry notice" of revolt, he is possessed by superstitious fear. The act of self-emancipation itself carries suggestions of self-crucifixion: he breaks

the nails of the Cross (in one sense), freeing himself from the Christian faith, but, simultaneously, he transfixes his mind. His struggle indeed is not so much against external authority, as it is against the imprisonment of his own self:

Close as the thought that suffers him,
The habit every man in time
Must wear beneath his ironed shirt.

The very constraint of the syntax, perhaps, reflects the speaker's sense of confinement: beneath the "ironed shirt" of secular life (which is itself confining), he wears, because of his awareness of human futility, a clerical "habit", the hair-shirt of religious thought. It is, in fact, the fabric of the self, not only making him suffer, but, defining the very nature of his existence, it "suffers him" to be.

The third stanza, then, defines the existential nature of the speaker's apostasy, and it asserts that it is the condition of "every man in time". The final stanza moves towards a more explicit statement of his philosophical position. He rejects the "open mind" of agnosticism or indifference, and he turns disdainfully from materialism, from the toys of secular life, "the sun that makes a show / Of half the world". But he also rejects the Christian vision:

[I] still deny
The pain that lives within the past,
The flame sinking upon the spike,
Darkness that man must dread at last.

However, even as the grammar denies the Christian viewpoint, the lines enact syntactically the sense of earthly futility that is at the centre of Christian belief. The image of the candle re-emerges, and, as in the liturgy, its dying flame signifies the extinction of mortal life, and, in this case, there is no consolatory promise of resurrection, of spiritual birth at the expense of physical death. The poet's attitude, then, is one of hopeless revolt against religion in the face of his clear awareness of mortality. Though this is not Clarke's final position, it is the one that is consistently present in the despairing world of Night and Morning, and it is restated in the final poem, "The Jewels". Nevertheless, the attitude of revolt is vital, and in the poems that intervene between "Tenebrae" and the concluding group, he explores possible solutions to his dilemma.

"Martha Blake" initiates the exploration by portraying a woman of simple faith. For most of the stanzas, it presents an objective and sympathetic portrait of such remarkable sensitivity that the poem demands some preliminary discussion apart from its role in the religious debate of the volume. In a narrative style that is refreshingly unconstrained, it describes how she rises early, attends Mass, and partakes of Holy Communion. The eight-line stanzas approximate a regular pattern (iambic tetrameter interspersed with three-foot lines, rhyming

ABABCDCD), but Clarke's careful variations reveal his mastery of rhythmic resources, and this feature of the poem, combined with the sensitivity of the portrait, has earned it a high reputation and drawn to it some rewarding critical attention. Donald Davie, taking a hint from Denis Donoghue that in Clarke's verse "the pain is given in the cadence", has lingered over the opening stanza:

Before the day is everywhere
 And the timid warmth of sleep
 Is delicate on limb, she dares
 The silence of the street
 Until the double bells are thrown back
 For Mass and echoes bound
 In the chapel yard, O then her soul
 Makes bold in the arms of sound.

Davie writes:

Here the 'pain' -- to the reader's inner ear -- comes in the fifth line, where the extra syllable at the end, 'back', disturbs cruelly the expectation of easy pleasure built up through the liquid three-four time of the lines that precede it, and unsettles the otherwise very rich pleasure of the lines that follow, bringing the positively plummy bell-note of the perfect rhyme, 'sound'/'bound'. When we notice that 'back' chimes with 'Mass', and that there is vowel-rhyme between 'thrown', 'echoes', and 'soul', we perceive that 'cross-rhyme or vowel-rhyming . . . on or off accent', precisely to the degree that they can please the ear, can also pain it, whenever expected pleasures are harshly denied. And thus the assonantal interlacings that Clarke invented for English verse turn out to be not just structural devices, nor a source of delightful grace-notes, but expressive also.⁸

Another English critic, Christopher Ricks, has attended in delight to the sixth stanza:

in one of his finest poems, 'Martha Blake', he superbly spins an anagram where we should expect a

rhyme. The two preceding stanzas have given us at this point tongue/sung, and them/hem.

But now she feels within her breast
Such calm that she is silent,
For soul can never be immodest
Where body may not listen.

Not them answered by hem, but silent metamorphosed into listen. Such a trouvaille effortlessly contrasts those two rich words.⁹

Such delicately achieved effects exemplify the overall quality of the poem. Clarke has a remarkably intimate feeling for his subject, both for the religious emotions of his character and for the particulars of the Mass, and his technical resources enable him to attend to both at once:

She trembles for the Son of Man,
While the priest is murmuring
What she can scarcely tell, her heart
Is making such a stir;
But when he picks a particle
And she puts out her tongue,
That joy is the glittering of candles
And benediction sung.

The lines build their effect quietly: "trembles" and "murmuring", both in their associations and their sound, create a feeling of tremulous anticipation, so that when we reach "making such a stir", the beating of Martha's heart is almost audible. Then, the repetition of consonants and vowels in "picks a particle" renders the action of the priest precisely, an action that contrasts with the awkwardness of "puts out her tongue". But at the moment of Communion, the rhythm swells, and the elevation

of the woman's spirit above the physical plane is given in metaphors that she would naturally use; the transmutation of the mundane into the divine is hailed by the rhyming of "tongue" and "sung", a harmony that Davie would call "positively plummy".

Yet, even this stanza intimates the presence of those religious tensions that have so far dominated the volume. Martha Blake "can scarcely tell" the Latin words of the priest, reminding us that her faith is as simplistic as it is spiritually fulfilling; "stir" recalls for us, perhaps, the phrase "all Europe was astir" in "Night and Morning", thus prompting us to the realization that the poem, in describing the morning activities of a devout Catholic, is tethered to the symbolic implications of the title of the volume. "Martha Blake", in fact, takes its place quite logically in the religious debate of Night and Morning. Her character presents a contrast to the tormented, casuistical speaker of the preceding poems. She embodies an alternative to his tortured apostasy, and we may say that the poet, in entering into her experience, entertains the possibility of a return to the morning of simple faith.

But, sympathetic as the portrait is, the poem is clear in its rejection of faith. As early as the second stanza, the poet recognizes the limitations of Martha Blake, the distance between her mind and his:

But in the shadow of the nave
 Her well-taught knees are humble,
 She does not see through any saint
 That stands in the sun
 With veins of lead, with painful crown.

She lacks the pride so important to the poet. Moreover, she does not "see through", as her observer does, the plaster saint that "stands in the sun", and which, thereby, stands between her and the world; nor does she see that while the "painful crown" does not hurt the statue, as an icon of the Christian obligation, it may hurt the beholder. Indeed, she would not use an impersonal pronoun to refer to the statue.¹⁰

The distance, then, between portraitist and subject is clearly indicated. In the seventh stanza the speaker enters the poem directly for the first time to reject the possibility of his sharing Martha's faith:

On a holy day of obligation
 I saw her first in prayer,
 But mortal eye had been too late
 For all that thought could dare.

Key-words, "mortal" and "thought", re-appear, causing some clouding of the sense. To paraphrase lines three and four: although intellectually he "could" (and "could" is an important alternative to "would") make a leap of faith, he does not wish to now because of his mortal vision. There is a certain poignancy in his rejection, a sense that in being "too late" he has lost the necessary naivety, but there is also a gesture of defiance in it. The following

quatrain alludes to the fall of Satan, and it is clear that the speaker chooses "pride and intellect" above the "flame in heart" of Christianity, the emotional and mortifying religion of which Martha Blake partakes. The portrait, indeed, concludes almost dismissively. She "needs a miracle" to begin the day; she is "ignorant" of the temptation of life, the joyful possibilities that religion denies:

The hidden grace that people
Hurrying to business
Look after in the street.¹¹

Although the poet clearly rejects faith in "Martha Blake", the following poem, "Repentance", reverses this attitude. However, even though there is nothing internally in this poem to suggest that the speaker is other than the "I" of the previous poems, its sentiments should not be taken as expressing the stance of the prevailing voice in the volume. In a note included in Later Poems (1961), Clarke remarks that "The Confession poem was a recognised literary form in Gaelic", and he quotes an authority as saying, "such confessions, often conventional in expression, are not to be interpreted too strictly."¹² Besides, before its inclusion in Night and Morning, "Repentance" was incorporated into The Singing-men at Cashel, where it is recited by Mac Conglinne, who attributes it to "a pious layman in Connaught". His host, Mac Morna, judges it "A fine poem,

truly religious, most edifying in its intense gloom" (p. 342). It is best, then, to regard it as spoken by a persona, and, as such, it explores a conjectural state of mind.

In the first stanza of "Mortal Pride", the poet adverted nostalgically to his youth when his joy in the human imagination was untroubled by religious fears. The speaker of "Repentance", turning from "the soul / That wakes [him] now at night", recalls a similar period in his life:

I saw
The mortal mind in such a glory --
All knowledge was in Connaught.

Such was his innocent confidence that he "forgot the scale of thought" and the terrifying vision of Revelation: "Judgement hour / That hides the sun in the waters." However, when scaling Croagh Patrick -- also in Connaught --, he became aware of Ireland's Christian past, and, simultaneously, he remembered the religious terrors of his boyhood:

I felt
Repentance gushing from the rock;
For I had made a bad confession
Once, feared to name in ugly box
The growing pains of flesh.

Such a sudden re-conversion to the religious viewpoint is a recurrent element in Clarke's work. As with Aidan and Gormlai, Christian precept has maintained a subterranean existence in his consciousness, and it surfaces

unexpectedly in his adult life. Thus, his allegiance to imaginative values is subverted.

In the third stanza, we find him attending Mass, but, unlike Martha Blake in the previous poem, he is a reluctant participant, regretting that his consciousness is dominated by "the sorrowful mysteries / Of earth" rather than by the "earthward light" of the imagination. Yet, despite his distaste for the Christian vision, he cannot free himself from religious dread:

Knuckle and knee is all we know
When the mind is half despairing.

The poem concludes with a retraction of his pride in mortal knowledge, an act of repentance, however, that, in the final version of the text, is couched in somewhat ambiguous language. The original published version of the first four lines of the final stanza read:

No story handed down in Connaught
Can cheat a man at thirty seven,
Keep the fire in, turn his head
From thinking of that book in Heaven.¹³

As such, the lines conveyed an unambiguous sense of middle-aged contrition. The revised second and third lines read: "Can cheat a man, nor any learning / Keep the fire in, turn his folly". The lines can now be taken as an admission of involuntary dread of the afterlife: "folly" has a double force, possibly referring to the foolishness of mortal knowledge, but more clearly denoting the speaker's foolish awareness of eternal life. The

closing lines, consequently, are also ambivalent:

Could I unbutton mad thought, quick-save
 My skin, if I were caught at last
 Without my soul and dragged to torment,
 Ear-drumming in that dreadful place
 Where the sun hides in the waters?

The lines vividly convey the speaker's terror of death and damnation, but there is, at the same time, a suggestion of eschatological dare-devilry: if it is possible to "quick-save" the soul, why not postpone repentance until the final moment?

In that the persona of "Repentance" feels the conflict between earthly and spiritual values, he expresses the dilemma of the poet, but in that he feels the necessity for contrition, however belatedly, he represents, in relation to the poet, a possible solution to the torment of conscience. The two poems that follow also explore a suppositious state of mind, the possibility of total secular emancipation from religious fears. "The Lucky Coin" begins by adverting to the modern religious problem ("His soul can make a man afraid / And yet thought will endure"), but then proceeds to evoke the Penal Age, which, as in Pilgrimage, signifies a state of imaginative liberation. The first stanza establishes a contrast between the pennies that a greedy clergy collect on Sunday and a "coin of different shape" that never "danced on chapel plate". This "lucky coin", in fact, seems to be identical to the "white coin all could spend" of

"Aisling", where it symbolized the creative sensuality of the Muse. Similarly, here, it symbolizes the earthly joy of a more vigorous Ireland:

That lucky coin, I heard men tell it,
Had glittered once in Galway
And crowds were elbowing the spirit

The particular atmosphere evoked is that of The Love Songs of Connacht. It is a world characterized by the pursuit of love and poetry. In the Penal days, with Catholicism on the run, the "sweet in tongue" flourished on Mount Nephin, which Clarke notes was "our Venusberg",¹⁴ and lovers "forgot on the mountain-side / The stern law of the clergy".

But in the final stanza the poem returns to the present, and to a recognition that the imaginative and sexual freedom of merry Ireland is no longer possible:

Not one of us will ever find
That coin of different shape
For it was lost before our rising

It was lost before we were born, and also before the 1916 Rising, which gave birth to the modern Irish State. The poem ends with an ironic comment on the dubious blessing of political freedom: "How shall we praise the men that freed us / From everything but thought."

"The Straying Student" also returns to the allusive ambience of the Penal centuries. The implied persona is a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century poet who has been educated for the priesthood in Salamanca, one of

the Irish seminaries on the continent. Thus, he combines two of Clarke's favourite personae, the wandering poet and the spoiled-priest, and, as such, he is ideally suited to express the sensibility of a romantic poet labouring under the burden of religious training. He is, as Maurice Craig observes, "an adumbration . . . of the scholastic mind in uneasy half-emancipation, and is the necessary complement of the bright temptation."¹⁵

Unlike the persona of "Repentance", he has the courage to pursue his desire for mortal knowledge. In the first stanza, to the "despair" of his parents, he leaves Mass, drawn by a visionary woman who has come from overseas:

Long had she lived in Rome when Popes were bad,
The wealth of every age she makes her own,
Yet smiled on me in eager admiration,
And for a summer taught me all I know,
Banishing shame with her great laugh that rang
As if a pillar caught it back alone.

She is presented very much as the European counterpart of the Woman of Beare, as an archetypal antagonist to the life-denying tradition of the Church. She symbolizes worldliness, sensuality, the comedy of the earth. She banishes the poet's shame, teaching him, in the third stanza, "the prouder counsel of her throat" and granting him sexual fulfilment. In a sense, perhaps, as Maurice Harmon suggests, she represents the adventurous spirit of the Renaissance,¹⁶ filling the mind with the "bold"

"light" of "Greece", and, displacing the "logic" of the Church, she teaches an intuitive, pagan knowledge:

She laid her hand at darkfall on my page.
That I might read the heavens in a glance
And I knew every star the Moors have named.

Subsuming all her associations, however, is her role as Muse, and the poet, in discovering her, attains the ideal of romantic fulfilment for which the poet of Night and Morning yearns. Her secular authority opposes that of the Church; her instinctive, natural knowledge is the alternative to the casuistical "thought" that afflicts the crippled apostate; and the vision of mortal comedy which she inspires transcends the dread of death.

In keeping with the excitement of discovery and release, the poem attains a rare eloquence, a free-flowing rhetorical movement that is quite a contrast to the involuted manner of neighbouring poems. Yet, in achieving a singing rhythm, Clarke does not dispense with technical obstacles. On the contrary, the poem is one of his strictest, in that, apart from the use of assonantal rhyme, it seeks to maintain a difficult pattern of linear assonance, that is, the accented syllables of each line approximate a fixed sequence of vowel-sounds. The basic pattern is established in the opening lines:

A B B A C
On a ho/ly day / when sails / were blowing / southward,

A B B A C
A bis/hop sang / the Mass / at In/ishmore.

The poem keeps to this strict pattern in only six of its lines (1, 2, 3, 5, 11, 14). None the less, the pattern is approximated in a majority of lines, and it exists as an underlying paradigm in all the stanzas except the last. For instance, the seventh line modulates the order, ABCCA, if we scan "had" as the accented syllable in the first foot; the eighth line is AABBC, the ninth ABBCD.

From "Night and Morning" to the "Straying Student", the volume evolves thematically in a manner that parallels Pilgrimage, moving from a religious context, in which the drama of conscience is active, to a secular context, which suggests a resolution to the thematic tensions. However, unlike the earlier volume, Night and Morning does not culminate with the emancipated atmosphere of the Penal Age. On the contrary, the remaining poems trace a downward curve, returning to the present, and, as the poet drops his historical masks, he moves to a restatement of his insoluble dilemma. The counter-movement, in fact, begins with the final stanza of "The Straying Student", a stanza that abandons the basic rhythmic movement of the preceding lines.¹⁷ The speaker admits that "Awake or in [his] sleep," night and morning, he has "no peace", and there are symptoms of mortality: "my breath has gone". He acknowledges the insecurity of his dependance on the Muse:

I tremble 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.¹⁸

The lines indicate more clearly than any so far that the poet's quarrel with the authority of the Church is not solely doctrinal, that, because he finds himself irrationally subject to humbling fears, he is bitterly opposed to the institutional practices that have affected his mind. The four poems that follow illustrate in various ways the detrimental effects of religious training. The title of the first of them, "Penal Law", refers to the repressive legislation that the English government imposed on the Catholic Church in Ireland, and, in particular, to the law against Catholic schools which forced Irish children to seek an improvised education in the so-called "hedge-schools". Here, the title deftly reflects on the Church itself for its policy of censorship and general suppression of physical love:

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.

Like their ancestors seeking an education, the lovers must learn surreptitiously and without text the sacred art of love. The epigram neatly applies the metaphor of the confessional to their situation, thus suggesting both the intimacy and holiness of their lessons. A second epigram, however, counters this happy vengeance, by showing how

religious images can interrupt and dismay the lyrical school of love:

Suddenly in the dark wood
 She turned from my arms and cried
 As if her soul were lost,
 And O too late I knew,
 Although the blame was mine,
 Her voice could not be softer
 When she told it in confession.

Even as the opening evokes the scene of the lovers' tryst, it alludes to the first words of the Commedia, thus ushering in all the terrifying imagery of damnation.¹⁹ The closing couplet again introduces the confessional figuratively, but this time to disrupt the romantic moment.

However, as a number of poems have indicated, the most negative effect of early religious training is the seeds of terror it implants in the subconscious, so that "door-chill, body's heat, anger of vein / Bring madness in our sleep" ("No Recompense"). The poem proceeds to reject mortal fame as an adequate compensation for the despair and "enmity" of "mind" which the poet has endured. In dramatic illustration of the possibility of insanity, "Summer Lightning" presents grotesque snapshots of the inmates of an asylum. The poem is evidently based on Clarke's own experience in a mental institution, and when he wrote Mnemosyne Lay in Dust (1966), a 'confessional' account of his illness, he included "Summer Lightning" as the eighth section. In the context of Night and Morning, it reveals the threat of insanity as one of the extremes

that are at issue in the psychomachia that the volume records. Moreover, the poem reveals that the patients in the asylum are inmates of the poet's own nightmare-life, personifications of his subconscious terrors:

When sleep has shot the bolt and bar,
 And reason fails at midnight,
 Dreading that every thought at last
 Must stand in our own light
 Forever, sinning without end:
 I pity, in their pride
 And agony of wrong, the men
 In whom God's likeness died.

The mad men are seen as lost souls, "sinning without end" in a Dantesque hell. Like the poet's, their condition is due to "pride", and, like him, they are portrayed as distorted reflections of the crucified Christ.

Proceeding from the underworld of irrational misery, "The Jewels" depicts the poet's continued subjection to ingrained religious fear, a subjection that is all the more alarming now that the risk of insanity is apparent. The poem attains the intensity and complex lucidity of "Tenebrae" in places, but obscurity of reference in the first and third stanzas lessens its impact, and I am not convinced of its overall coherence. The following interpretation of the first stanza is tentative.

The poem opens with an image of a collapsing tradition too heavy for human strength: "The crumbling centuries are thrust / In hands that are too frail for

them". The language recalls the second stanza of "Tenebrae", where the centuries-old history of "mortal anguish" was passed on to the child in the ritual of Ash Wednesday. The same idea is being presented here, but it is an eucharistic metaphor, perhaps, that is at work ("crumbling", "hands"), giving the sense that the priesthood, breakers of the Eucharist, is inadequate to the task of passing on the Christian mysteries. So, the poet, and those like him, who struggle ineffectually ("squabble") against mortality, are hypocritical in their fidelity to a debased religion. Yet, mindful of man's desperate spiritual need, the poet is prepared to accept the word of God even if it comes from a corrupt source: "Whether the breath is foul or sweet / The truth is still the same."

The fine second stanza accounts for the poet's apparent turnabout:

If ordinary thought prevail
 In all this knocking of the ribs
 And the dead heat of mortal haste,
 Why should I hesitate at morning
 Or wake a memory of myself . . . ?

The detail is complex: "knocking" suggests the beating of the heart, and also, possibly, the beating of the breast in prayer or grief. Christopher Ricks has observed that "Hesitate" draws both heat and haste into itself, and not just as a sound-effect";²⁰ the poet is fearful of the fever, the transience of life, for all in the human race

lose when they reach death. "Ordinary thought", that is a purely human capacity for understanding, is seen as inadequate in the face of mortality, and the speaker "wakes a memory of himself", that is he awakes from his nightly ordeal a shade of his prouder self. But he also recollects "a memory" of his nightmare:

All eyes, terrible as the jewels
And carbons of the consciousness
That waste the night in falsehood?

The lines are best explained by reference to D. H.

Lawrence's well-known letter to Edward Garnett:

There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon)²¹

One is tempted to think Clarke borrowed his metaphor unconsciously from Lawrence. However he happened on it, the figure denotes the ineradicable hold which religious training can take on the subconscious. In keeping with the context, the poet's carbon is wax or oil, perhaps, for it burns ("waste") like a candle or a sanctuary light through the night.

The third stanza implies a transition to morning, or, at least, a change of focus to the conscious attitudes of the poet:

The sanctuary lamp is lowered
 In witness of our ignorance.

The sanctuary lamp, which burns to signify Christ's presence in the tabernacle, is extinguished on Good Friday in recognition of His death, and Clarke may be alluding obscurely to that practice. The lines convey, in any case, that the poet does not believe in Christ's presence on the altar. He responds angrily to his youthful exposure to religion, "Greed of religion makes us old / Before our time", and the stanza proceeds with further bitter statements, which are clear in their mordant significance, but obscure in their specific meaning. They are directed, possibly, against the Church's moral casuistry ("We are undone / Within the winking of an eyelid"), and her claim to infallibility in revealing the truth ("The very heavens are assailed"). The metaphors imply the actions of a wrathful God, and, in the last line, Christ's principle of love is transformed, through the medium of a hell-fire preacher, into the anger of a stormful Jove or fiery Yahweh: "Love darts and thunders from the rail."

The poem and the volume end with a clear re-statement of the paradoxical dilemma of the poet. Faith took hold of the mind "before the age of reason", in childhood, and, in terms of the European mind, before rationalism first proved God's existence, and then

questioned it. The poet has inherited the "misery" of the Christian tradition, an involuntary and vivid awareness of human mortality, "Hurrying years cannot mistake / The smile for the decaying teeth", so he is barred from a vision of mortal glory. But he has lost the Christian consolation, the certainty of faith. He turns to religion in the end, not with any hope of recovering faith, but in a gesture of poignant hopelessness:

But O to think, when I was younger
 And could not tell the difference,
 God lay upon this tongue.

Night and Morning presents the conflict of a man proud of his own powers who is, simultaneously, crippled by an awareness of human futility. On the one hand, he believes in man's capacity for intellectual, imaginative and emotional fulfilment in the temporal world; on the other, he inherits a Catholic tradition that insists on man's a-temporal destiny, and, since it regards the Church as sole interpreter of God's word, it limits individual autonomy. The religious view holds sway over his subconscious mind. Possessed of a self that is divided between conscious apostasy and psychological dependency on Christianity, he wishes either to recover faith or else to escape completely from its humbling chains. He contemplates periods in his personal or in the historical past when either of these aims was possible: the Middle Ages, the romantic confidence of youth, the romanticism of

the Penal Age, are each evoked in positive terms, as phases capable of accommodating his belief in human possibilities. Through identification with the carefree apostasy of a wandering poet, he expresses a sense of romantic release, a release, however, that is immediately crippled by his awareness of mortality. So, he returns to the present, to a recognition again of the insolubility of his dilemma. At the end, severed from both the Muse and the Church, he sees no possibility for either temporal or eternal fulfilment.

Clearly, with the writing of these poems, Clarke had reached an impasse. All of his important work to this point had asserted pagan or humanistic values over those of religion. Now, we may say that the poems present the situation of a man who lacks both the consolation of traditional faith and the confidence of romantic aspiration. We may, indeed, be provoked to see a similarity between Clarke at this point and the despairing element in much modern literature -- not, however, that he moves towards depicting the absurdity of the human condition in the contemporary world. But there is one noteworthy development within Night and Morning, in that a satiric strain emerges in the concluding poems. Clarke, as it were, moves away from poetry as self-analysis and imaginative discovery, towards a pragmatic use of the poem, as a weapon directed against the forces he holds

responsible for his psychological condition. While this development is not conspicuous in the volume, the seeds of Clarke's subsequent saeva indignatio are clearly present.

NOTES

Chapter IV

- 1 See above, pp. 96-7.
- 2 Martin Dodsworth, "To forge the Irish Conscience", Times Literary Supplement (December 13, 1974), p. 1607. Night and Morning, Dodsworth believes, is Clarke's "best work, because it explores ineradicable ambiguity in the sources of his own feeling, especially about religion." Maurice Harmon regards Clarke at this period "as a heretic within the Catholic Church." See "The Later Poetry of Austin Clarke", in The Celtic Cross, eds. Ray B. Browne, William John Roscelli and Richard Loftus (Purdue University Studies, 1964), p. 46.
- 3 Gregory A. Schirmer, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke" (Ph. D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1978), p. 123. This statement is made in the context of "Martha Blake", but it seems a fair representation of Schirmer's approach to the volume as a whole.
- 4 "Introduction" to Austin Clarke, Selected Poems, p. x.
- 5 "Mortal Anguish, Mortal Pride", Irish University Review, IV (Spring, 1974), p. 98.
- 6 Maurice Harmon writes: "He has natural affinities with the greater intellectual liberty that was possible for the individual before the Council of Trent" ("The Later Poetry of Austin Clarke", p. 42).
- 7 Maurice Harmon, "The Later Poetry of Austin Clarke", p. 46; Thomas Kinsella, "Introduction", Selected Poems, p. xiii; Gregory Schirmer, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke", p. lll.
- 8 "Austin Clarke and Padraic Fallon", in Two Decades of Irish Writing, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle, Cheshire, 1975), p. 45.
- 9 A Tribute to Austin Clarke on his Seventieth Birthday, eds. John Montague and Liam Miller (Dublin, 1966), p. 19.
- 10 Gregory Schirmer is worth quoting at length on Clarke's handling of point of view in the poem: "Clarke manipulates the point of view to enable the reader

to see both sides of the conflict between a religious faith that depends on emotion and distrusts intellect and a humanistic faith in reason that, to say the least, distrusts such a religion. Seen from the point of view of Martha Blake, religion seems to meet genuine spiritual needs; seen from the point of view of an outsider, religion seems to be a sham and a means of experiencing vicariously the genuine pleasures of human relations and human sexuality that it denies man. The poem offers both points of view, separately and, at times, simultaneously" ("The Poetry of Austin Clarke", p. 118).

11 Schirmer, acknowledging a suggestion from Donald Davie, maintains that these lines are ambiguous: "It may be that Martha, not the people in the street, has the hidden grace, the grace that she received at Mass. Although she does not realize that her sense of fulfilment is actually visible (she is "ignorant of all the rest"), people in the street notice it and "Look after" it as they hurry to the meaningless world of their daily business" (*ibid.* pp. 122-23). The choice of words, especially "ignorant", seems to me to be against such a reading.

12 Later Poems, p. 91.

13 Then entitled, "The Song of Repentance", Dublin Magazine, X (Jan. - March, 1935), 2.

14 Later Poems, p. 91.

15 "The Poetry of Austin Clarke", The Bell, IV (Sept., 1942), 418.

16 "The Later Poetry of Austin Clarke", p. 47.

17 Gregory Schirmer notes that "Clarke said he broke up the pattern deliberately to reflect the sense of doubt and despair with which the poem ends" ("The Poetry of Austin Clarke", p. 126). Schirmer's source: "The Writers: Austin Clarke", R.T.E. Television, 29 Jan., 1968.

18 Schirmer writes eloquently of these lines: "the student trembles in this stanza not nearly so much in fear of the power of ecclesiastical discipline as in the more powerful fear that all his newly won freedom and power, having undercut his religion, also leaves him cut off from satisfying his spiritual needs. His mortality, the coffin that he must carry with him, reminds him of the limitations of what the woman has taught him: it has no bearing on the spiritual dimension of life, and ignores the possibility that life may go on beyond the grave."

This is the real reason for the "dread" that the student feels in confronting "all that the clergy teach the young", (ibid., p. 129). Schirmer, in effect, transfers blame for the poet's despair from the clergy to the woman, a suggestion that has interesting implications: we may speculate that Clarke, deprived both of religious and Romantic faith, approaches a post-Romantic position. However, the assertion that the woman has no "spiritual dimension" is clearly unjustifiable. On the contrary, she combines the physical and the spiritual, knowledge and sensuality, intellect and instinct, and thus represents that integration for which the speaker yearns.

19 For this point, I am indebted to Brian John.

20 A Tribute to Austin Clarke on his Seventieth Birthday, p. 19.

21 The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York, 1962), I, 282.

CONTINUITIES AND CONCLUSION

"to whom was not denied
the mysterious late excellence which is the crown
of our trials & our last bride."¹

Thomas Kinsella writes of Austin Clarke: "He has dealt with certain fundamental human matters, manhandling his spirit from the shallows into the depths and then upward into a serene light."² We may say that this study has traced the downward curve, the deepening thematic significance, of Clarke's involvement with Irish tradition. We have seen that his work has its genesis in the Revival, in a widespread effort towards national recovery that motivated writers to explore the inheritance of the past. Clarke, influenced in particular by the ideals of Thomas MacDonagh, took on the task of expressing the imagination of Ireland in a style appropriate to her traditions. This led him, after some initial experimentation with the "Irish Mode" in narrative and lyric, to introduce the devices of Gaelic verse into English, and we can say that his major technical accomplishment, well illustrated by the poems of his early career, is to have developed assonantal verse as a medium for complex expression. But even as Clarke mastered assonance, he began to respond to the actuality of modern Ireland, and he sought to come to terms with his own position in a society hostile to imaginative and intellectual freedom. As early as The

Vengeance of Fionn, the conflict between the individual aspiration and the social norm is perceptible in his work. It is with his "discovery" of the culture of the early Irish Church, however, that Clarke's essential theme comes to light, crystallizing as the conflict between the Christian and pagan traditions of Ireland. Clarke characterized this conflict, as it affects the individual mind, as the drama of conscience. Pilgrimage, a volume in which Clarke's stylistic and thematic concerns come together successfully for the first time, reveals the tension between Christian and pagan values in the course of Irish history. Carried into drama and fiction, the conflict of conscience is related in detail to the culture of the medieval Irish Church, and Clarke, in his creation of character, analyzes the psychological nature of his theme. The personal and psychological aspects of the conflict of values come to the fore in Night and Morning, a volume that explores the discrepancy between Clarke's conscious apostasy and his subconscious subjection to Christianity. The poems reveal his despondent search for an integrated self.

The major works reinforce and complete each other, so that a comprehensive analysis of Irish tradition emerges, and the poet is presented as the voice of conscience, as the inheritor of a racial dilemma. Besides, the relevance of Clarke's thematic concerns extends beyond the Irish situation, for they can be seen to partake of the age-old

conflict between the spirit and the flesh in Western thought: the dichotomy between Augustinian and Pelagian attitudes comes to mind readily in the context of Clarke's work, but we may add Socrates and Aristophanes, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Caliban and Ariel, as a few of the time-honored antagonists in the debate. In a modern context, Clarke can be seen as a romantic poet labouring to replace traditional faith with the truth of the imagination. Thus, we may say that, in fathoming ever deeper levels of Irish tradition, he deals with important and permanent themes, "fundamental human matters".

In view of the formidable size and difficulty of Clarke's complete canon, I have chosen to end this study with Night and Morning, a book that marks a conspicuous break in the poet's career. For the following twelve years, he concentrated on writing for the theatre, continuing to present the drama of conscience in a series of verse-plays, without, however, enlarging the significance of his theme. He began to write with renewed energy again in the early fifties, publishing The Sun Dances at Easter (1951) and Ancient Lights (1955). The latter initiates a decidedly new phase in his development. Clarke's subjects become topical and more explicitly autobiographical, and the satiric tendency in his work comes into prominence. Thereafter, he devoted his energies almost exclusively to poetry, producing, with prolific regularity, collections that are remarkable for their vitality and range of interests.

However, while the forties represent a definite hiatus in Clarke's career, there is, in terms of thematic evolution, no marked disjunction between the early and the later work. Most obviously, he continues to draw inspiration from the Gaelic past. Two of his major collections from the later period, Flight to Africa (1963) and The Echo at Coole (1968), contain sections devoted to adaptations of Gaelic material, and numerous translations and renovations are scattered throughout the other volumes. The vitality of his continued rapport with the past is well illustrated by "Song of the Books", a poem that is a summation of his interest in the Penal Age. It borrows its title from Amhrán na Leabhar by Tomás Rua O'Sullivan, an eighteenth-century poet who laments the loss of his books in a storm at sea. Clarke, like a composer appropriating a folk-tune, embellishes the subject and weaves in strands from other Gaelic poems; and he enlarges the significance of the central incident so that it is made to symbolize the disappearance of a vigorous culture:

Hail hurled through Cumeen Duv. Phantoms
 From Cahirciveen were in the passes.
 Below a shout
 Was whisper and behind a boulder
 A marabout
 Could scarcely hide his bony shoulder.
 Soon every snout
 Was gone. A century of gods
 And nymphs from Inch to Blacksod Bay:
 Old knowledge scattered from the noddle
 In whirlabout.

(CP, p.319)

The poem celebrates the imaginative freedom of the Penal period, and laments its passing; as such, it is closely related to the concluding poems of Pilgrimage. The most notable difference is one of tone: the lyrical evocation of "The Marriage Night" has given way to staccato and to earthier description. The diction here, in fact, typifies Clarke's penchant in his later verse for forgotten or erudite words, a connoisseurship that is, usually, not just a mark of eccentricity; "marabout", for hermit, delivers succinctly Clarke's point that Irish asceticism has its roots in the African desert; "snout" has suggestions of priapism that are appropriate to his conception of the Penal Age; "noddle", for head, has the right connotations in a poem that pays homage to the curious learning, the medley of classical and native lore, that furnished the minds of the vagrant poets of the eighteenth century.

The persistence of the Celtic Romanesque in the later poetry may be illustrated by "The Loss of Strength", a poem that, rather like "Song of the Books", resumes many of Clarke's major concerns. It is a difficult work, written in a nervous, highly allusive manner, a sort of poetic shorthand. Most pertinent in the present context, however, is that it reveals the consistency of Clarke's view of Irish history:

Too great a vine, they say, can sour
The best of clay. No pair of sinners
But learned saints had overpowered

Our country. Malachi the Thin
 And Bernard of Clairvaux. Prodigious
 In zeal, these cooled and burned our porridge.
 (Later came breakspear, strong bow backing)
 The arch sprang wide for their Cistercians.
 O bread was wersh and well was brack.
 War rattled at us in hammered shirts.
 An Englishman had been Pontiff.
 They marched to Mellifont.

(CP, p.216)

The "pair of sinners" are Dermot MacMurrough and Dervorgilla, who, in popular conceptions of Irish history, are given a somewhat Homeric status. MacMurrough abducted Dervorgilla, and, in the ensuing conflict, he was defeated by her husband, O'Rourke. MacMurrough then appealed to the Normans for help, thus opening the way for Strongbow's invasion of Ireland. Clarke, however, identifies the villain in Irish history as St. Malachi, who brought the Cistercian Order to Ireland, thus helping to extend Roman rule over the Irish Church, a fundamental change in native Christianity that was merely consolidated when the Normans came bearing a bull from Pope Adrian IV. This interpretation of Irish history takes its place in a poem that enacts an elaborate analogy between medieval and modern Ireland, seeking to present the negative, strangling effect of religion on native vigour. In general, we can say that the Celtic-Romanesque and, to a greater extent, the Penal Age, persist as important points of reference in Clarke's later work.

The most notable development in Clarke's poetry after

1955 is its satiric intent, a development, however, that is clearly a logical step in view of his previous work. As early as Pilgrimage, his dissatisfaction with the contemporary conditions of Ireland is evident, and in some of the poems, as well as in passages in the novels, he comments, in a vein of Menippean irony, on Irish mores. The satiric tone in Night and Morning is angrier, and poems such as "Penal Law" and "The Jewels" reveal his opposition to institutional religion. The later poems, mining this vein, find their occasion in the particular instance:

The hasty sin of the young after a dance,
Awkward in clothes against a wall or crick-necked
In car, gives many a nun her tidy bed,
Full board and launderette. God-fearing State
Provides three pounds a week, our conscience money,
For every infant severed from the breast.

("Living on Sin", CP, p.271)

Thus, Clarke attacks the practice whereby unmarried mothers were pressured into surrendering their babies to orphanages run by religious orders. Similar satires are directed against the State ban on contraceptives; the use of corporal punishment in schools; the greed of property-developers and clergy; censorship; clerical opposition to social reform; and a litany of other matters which testify to the unholy alliance of priest and politician. Some of the poems seem trivial or uncharitable, but overall, it is fair to say that Clarke's satires accumulate as a sustained and comprehensive indictment of social conditions in Ireland during the period of their composition.

Clarke's savage indignation is all the more incisive because it is consistent with his general understanding of Irish tradition. The specific targets he selects bear witness to the overall view of his work, that Ireland has broken faith with the better aspects of her past. Furthermore, his opposition of humanistic values to those of Catholicism adds a dimension of moral vision to his rage. "Three Poems about Children", which commemorates the death of sixty orphans in a fire, is a good example of a satire that is deepened in meaning when considered in the context of Clarke's work as a whole. The sequence opens, "Better the book against the rock,/ The misery of roofless faith" (CP, p.196), evoking the Penal Age, thus establishing a contrast between a life-sustaining era and the Catholicism of the present. The sequence proceeds, in the final section, to employ the Swiftian strategy of adopting the opponent's point of view, so as to reveal its viciousness:

Has not a Bishop declared
That flame-wrapped babes are spared
Our life-time of temptation?
Leap, mind, in consolation
For heart can only lodge
Itself, plucked out by logic.
Those children, charred in Cavan,
Passed straight through Hell to Heaven.
(CP, p. 197)

The lines expose the ultimate logic of a faith that conceives of earthly life as essentially evil. The orphans experience, literally, the hell of existence. Their

fate exemplifies, in an extreme instance, the consequences of a religious viewpoint imposed on the world of childhood. The poem opposes to clerical "logic" the values of the "heart", invoking compassion and "pity", a word that deals insistently through Clarke's satires, against the casuistry of the bishop. Clarke's indignation derives from his allegiance to humanistic values, and, even as he strikes out in anger, he asserts the sacredness of temporal life.

The essential line of development that links his early and later work is the struggle to achieve, within himself, a buoyant faith in human existence. This struggle is central to a number of later poems that explore an inner world of symbol and memory, the most important of them being "Ancient Lights" and Mnemosyne Lay in Dust (1966). Both are exceedingly difficult poems, among the most compressed that Clarke wrote, and they present problems of interpretation that cannot be coped with here. Nevertheless, since their general import is not in doubt, they will serve to indicate the nature of Clarke's continuing psychomachia. "Ancient Lights" recalls the religious experiences of childhood, specifically the terrors of the confessional, where the child "put on flesh", introduced, too soon, to an adult world of sex and guilt. The poem opposes a daylit world of activity and freedom to the gloom and confinement of religion. Emerging from the church in the

fourth stanza, the boy is blessed by a natural epiphany: "Nature read in a flutter/ An evening lesson above my head" (CP, p. 199). The lesson involves the fate of a "cage-bird" which is attacked and killed by sparrows, but the exact significance of the incident is not at all clear.⁴ It seems that the child, through instinctive empathy with the victim, experiences, at once, a premonition of his own fate and an intimation of the creative act: "Pity/ Could raise some littleness from dust." In the sixth stanza; the poet considers, hopelessly at first, his present state of arrested apostasy, but then he turns decisively aside from the "Night's jakes" of his religious fears. He recalls, instead, another childhood memory, one closely associated with the episode of the birds, when he experienced a sense of release, of absolution:

Still, still I remember awful downpour
 Cabbington Mountjoy Street, spun loneliness
 Veiling almost the Protestant church,
 Two backyards from my very home,
 I dared to shelter at locked door.
 There, walled by heresy, my fears
 Were solved. I had absolved myself:
 Feast-day effulgence, as though I gained
 For life a plenary indulgence.

Thus, Clarke asserts his renewal of faith in secular life. He regains through an act of imaginative recovery the childhood certainty that he has escaped the terror of religion.

Mnemosyne Lay in Dust also records a journey into a private past, this time into the darkest areas of the self

in order to confront the terror and pain at the roots of life. The poem recounts Clarke's period of confinement in St. Patrick's mental hospital in 1919. Detailing the ignominy, the fears and the delusions of insanity, it deals autobiographically with a subject Clarke had previously treated in his characterization of Sweeny, Aidan, and Mac Conglinne. The crucial process of recovery begins with the twelfth section of the sequence:

Nature
 Remembering a young believer
 And knowing his weakness
 Could never stand to reason
 Gave him from the lovely hand
 Of his despairing mother,
 A dish of strawberries
 To tempt
 And humble the fast
 That had laid him nearer than they were
 Along her clay.

(CP, p.344)

Both "Ancient Lights" and Mnemosyne Lay in Dust reveal nature as a beneficent power that ministers secretly to the imagination and to the mind in extremity. Thus, Clarke expressed, through the agency of memory, a process of self-recovery, a renewal of his belief in the essential goodness of life that dispelled the doubts and despondency of Night and Morning.

Undoubtedly, Clarke attained a final sense of imaginative health, expressed exuberantly in his late narrative poems, "The Healing of Mis" and Tiresias. Mis may be regarded as the female counterpart of Sweeny in Clarke's canon: driven mad in battle, she wanders the hills

for three centuries in loneliness and filth. But, unlike the poet-king, she regains her youth and beauty. Her cure: music and sex. Tiresias, conceived in a similar spirit, works consciously against a vision of the world as a moral and cultural wasteland. Clarke re-created the Greek seer as a cheerful character whose prophetic foreboding is more than balanced by his recollections of bi-sexual pleasantries. The last poems celebrate life as mortal comedy, affirming the essential goodness of nature, even in its strangest manifestations, as a harmony of matter and spirit sufficient unto itself.

Clarke's later poetry, then, describes an upward curve towards "serene light". Searching the way ahead from Night and Morning, I have sought to indicate the main landmarks along the route towards his paradiso. But it is a painstaking and circuitous journey, carried forward in a variety of poetic modes, and strewn with some formidable critical obstacles. It presents, none the less, a prospect of artistic and personal triumph. To borrow the closing words of "The Healing of Mis": "Blessing/ Victory to him who relates [that] story!"

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

¹John Berryman, "An Elegy for W.C.W., the lovely man", Selected Poems (1938-1968) (London, 1972), p.149.

²"Introduction", Selected Poems, p. xi.

³The text of stanza five of "Ancient Lights" in the Collected Poems is corrupt. An accurate text is to be found in the first edition of Ancient Lights and in Selected Poems, pp. 27-9, to which the reader is referred.

⁴Kinsella finds the poem "inscrutable" at this point (Selected Poems, p. xiv). Donald Davie writes: "over the years since [1956], neither I nor any one I have consulted has been able to say what it is that happens in the crucial fourth and fifth stanzas. Some sort of natural epiphany, undoubtedly; but just what sort, and just how? ("Austin Clarke and Padraic Fallon", op. cit., p. 47).

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