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AUSTIN CLARKE: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

by

SUSAN EVE HIRSHFELD

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
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of the requirements for the degree of
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1972

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

In these days of our new materialistic Irish state, poetry will have a harder, less picturesque task. But the loss of Yeats and all that boundless activity, in a country where the mind is feared and avoided, leaves silence which it is painful to contemplate.

Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats"

Austin Clarke is the most significant Irish poet since William Butler Yeats. Although Clarke was writing twenty years before Yeats's death (he even had a Collected Poems published in 1936), and in that sense is almost his contemporary, the bulk of his work was written after 1939, the year that Yeats died. But living or dead, the shadow of Yeats lay heavily on Clarke. Much of Clarke's achievement may be seen as the struggle to find his own poetic voice and to express his political and cultural concerns.

To understand how Clarke's poetic impulse developed and matured in his local cultural context, even a brief recapitulation and bringing into focus of the well-known situation until Yeats's death and the less well-known situation of Irish writers in these last thirty years will be helpful. Except for Yeats those writers who moved into international prominence have been exiles: Joyce, Beckett and O'Casey. Clarke, too, was in England for many years, but the image of him is of one who stayed at home. The following is an attempt to explain what home was like in those years and before.

The Literary Revival in Ireland, Ernest Boyd notes in Ireland's Literary Renaissance,¹ centered on the creation of a national literature

in the English language. The purpose of this Revival was to create a new national literature for Ireland, not in Gaelic, but in the language which had been imposed upon her--in both form and content. The literary renaissance was characterized not only by the revitalization of mythical and historical figures and events of Irish antiquity but also by a restoration to the literary world of many of the folk songs and stories that had been neglected and consequently lost by the increasing Anglicization of the countryside. The starting point of that revival has often been seen as Standish O'Grady's publication of the History of Ireland-Heroic Period (1879).

O'Grady took the fragments of material furnished by the antiquarians, remolded and absorbed them, reducing the entire history of the heroic period, as revealed in bardic literature, to its artistic components. He transferred its epic proportions, its grandiosity and its spaciousness from Gaelic into English. In the field of translation George Sigerson occupied a position of equal importance: Sigerson's work as both metrist and translator made him another doyen of the Revival. The work of both was complemented by that of Douglas Hyde, translator and literary historian; Hyde's Literary History of Ireland, though written just at the turn of the century (1899), is still a basic text. O'Grady synthesized the content and spirit of bardic literature; Sigerson and Hyde analyzed its form and reproduced its structural characteristics.

The "antiquarian" aspect, however, was only one side of the Revival.² There was also another imperative: the creation of a significant contemporary literature. Earlier in the century that task had been seen as essentially political: literature had almost no existence

except for the work of the Fenians, whose Journal of the Irish People became a center of politico-literary activity, in the so-called '48 movement. But the appearance of Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland in 1888 announced the concerted effort of the younger generation to give a new--and more than political--impulse to Irish poetry. This younger generation included AE (George Russell), Rolleston, Yeats, O'Leary, Tynan and others. Their work was patriotic but not in the old sense of the Fenians of the 1840's; the new writers of the Renaissance substituted legends, fairy tales, and the spirit of the Irish countryside for the largely propagandistic political thrust of the '48 movement.

The Young Irelanders were the first group to see literature both as the expression of the character of the Irish people and as a means of creating national consciousness. These men believed that any truly national literature would develop the sensibilities of Irishmen and strengthen their love for and loyalty to their country. In this emphasis on the development of a national literature, the Young Irelanders were at one with nineteenth-century European romanticism. They thought of their country as one individual with its history and culture as the development of that individual. The movement of revival went through two stages: 1) linguistic, the return to Gaelic as the natural voice of the people and the use of the vernacular in literature; and 2) cultural, the rediscovery of old literature (in Ireland's case chronicles and folk tales) and music. The movement also was the occasion of a new emphasis on simple themes related to the common people and the countryside. As in other developing countries, the demand for statehood soon became a part of the Irish nationalist movement and was followed by the focus on revolutionary themes in literature--i.e. primarily historical

events. In 1892, in the United Ireland, in a review of Todhunter's poetry, Yeats spoke for this generation: "The alliance of politics and literature that marked the '48 movement resulted in so great a popularity for the poets and prose writers who taught the doctrine of nationality that we are accustomed ever since to think of those years as our one period of literary activity. The writers who came after, lacking the great wind of politics to fill their sails, have lived and wrought almost forgotten of the nation."³

The themes of the writers of this new generation continued to encompass nationality, myth and legend as well as religion and revolt, and these were to be standard Irish themes, the lines along which contemporary poetry would develop. But by broadening the narrow boundaries of these themes, poetry was slowly freed from the requirement of direct political involvement.⁴ It is clear that Yeats's ideals not only supported, but were closely interrelated with, other major ideals of the literati of this period: the experiment with subject matter (the return to the myths and folklore of the Heroic Age), and the increase in the general level of artistry (programmatically emphasizing respect for craftsmanship). Although Yeats is seen as part of a group movement here, it should be noted that Yeats's response to mythic materials was far more involved than that of writers who were merely concerned with developing the materials aesthetically: his was at once an act of interpretation and intense personal expression and a synthesis that drew on a broad range of cultural materials.

The poets whose work is represented in Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland were drawn from two different classes of Irish society:

the peasant Catholic and the Protestant ascendancy. Boyd says of this time:

The externals of Irish life immediately demonstrate how slight is the artistic influence of Catholicism in Ireland. Irish Catholics have none of the easy tolerance and freedom of religious majorities elsewhere, but have the narrowness and hardness of a small sect. All the repressive measures of puritanism are heartily enforced, in emulation of the efforts of the Protestant minority. In short, the Protestantism of the Irish Catholic is such as to deprive the Church of precisely those elements which are favourable to literary and intellectual development, and which have rallied so many artists to her support. Nor have those peculiar qualities of genuine Protestantism been substituted, to which Northern races owe their most characteristic virtues. As a result, the Catholic Irishman does not find in his religion the spiritual emotion of a work of art. Consequently, his inspiration has been drawn from sources independent of his religious beliefs. 5

Yet this period was the harbinger of a literary movement which cut across racial and sectarian differences.

Katherine Tynan's verse, for instance, voiced naive faith, a surrender to simple emotions which characterize the religious experiences of the plain man. Even though she was the only important Catholic poet at the time, Catholicism was also present as a force in the writings of Yeats, a Protestant. Philip Marcus, in a study of Yeats's early period and the Irish Renaissance, notes that Yeats used Catholicism in The Secret Rose stories not to evaluate its specific merits and faults, but rather as a vehicle for expressing his central theme.⁶

Together with the introduction of Catholicism into Anglo-Irish literature, agnosticism—often unconscious—entered the new literary movement, through the National Literary Society that Yeats and his friends founded in 1891. Because of the new openness about religious questions in Anglo-Irish literature, AE and his friends were drawn into this movement. Up until 1899 the movement was chiefly poetic, and to a great

extent characterized by emphasis on the atmosphere of Celtic god and myth -- traditionally known as the Celtic twilight.

The second stage of the movement began with the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre. It was concerned with the establishment of what was to become the national drama. Yeats and Edward Martyn, a Catholic, were the leaders in this aspect of the movement. Yeats used Gaelic and mythological folklore material for his verse dramas, Martyn used Irish country life for the source of his plots. Lady Gregory and Padraic Colum joined the new movement and in 1904 the Abbey Theatre was founded.

The imaginative re-creation of history and legend, coupled with the study of life among those classes whose national characteristics are most marked, seemed to Yeats the best foundation on which to build an Irish theatre. Yeats and his followers were determined to make the new literature a sincere expression of the Irish, an expression that would reflect the native culture and characteristics of the Irish stripped of all superimposed Anglican veneer. The drama, the reformers felt, should stem from the heroic matter of the Gaelic legends.

Yeats hoped that the theatre would be a meeting place where, through the coming together of the classes, a consensus of nationhood could be established. His early crusade had three goals: the creation of a new form of literature, a new philosophy and a new Irish nationalism. In Explorations he said: "An impulse toward what is definite and sensuous, and an indifference toward the abstract and general, are the lineaments, as I understand the word, of all that comes not from the learned but out of common antiquity, out of the "folk" as we say...in Irish it is not possible to speak an abstract thought."⁷

At the beginning, it was to peasant Ireland that Yeats and the other revivalists turned for their inspiration. The folk tales, the belief in the supernatural (both Christian and pagan) and, in some instances, the Irish language, were best preserved among the agricultural population. To indicate the cultural continuity between the pre-Christian heroic age and the era of the twentieth-century Irish farmer, the writers often translated the ancient sagas into the speech of contemporary Irish peasants.

These Irish writers were largely romantic and, as we have said, made little conscious attempt to come to grips with contemporary economic, social or political problems. Yet this romantic quality was soon mediated by a sense of responsibility, the necessity for self-criticism that the post-Parnell period instilled in these writers. During the revolutionary period (1916-1922) many Irish poets still used the romantic mode at least in portions of their work (though Yeats, of course, from the Green Helmet on did have a new hardness); however, the revolution produced a new group of writers who approached their material in a different manner. The minds that made this post-revolutionary phase of the Irish literary movement were shaped by the tradition of the rebellion and a sense of expectation, messianic hopes (mingled with fear): translations of the peasant legends of a deliverance into the international prophecy of the millenium. One of their main subjects was the justification of the Irish struggle for political freedom from England; another was an elaboration of the case of their social autonomy and superiority: England stood for commerce and materialism whereas, in their eyes, Ireland stood for imagination and spirituality. Self-criticism was also essential but it took a back seat in many of these years of struggle.

Pearse, MacDonagh and Plunkett were the young rebel-poets immortalized by Easter Week, 1916. Through their act of martyrdom Catholic nationalist literature hoped to triumph. With other members of his generation, Pearse felt that the decadent industrial world could be purified with the help of language, literature, and the ideals of the peasant. The Easter Rising provided the catalyst for national support for Ireland's independence. Writers had helped to bring about the Rising, and it was led by poets among others; therefore, influence on poetry was bound to be among the results. Yeats responded almost at once with his celebrated poem "Easter 1916" heralding the birth of a new beauty that was strange and terrible (Yeats's ironic emphasis on the terror shows his perceptive reaction to this complex change); other poets reacted in like manner with poems which reflected their romantic and idealistic involvement with the national cause.

Yeats and AE so dominated the scene after the Revolution that all the younger men were obscured by them; new and able work was made to seem trivial and immature in comparison with theirs. But events were soon to change the tenor of things in Ireland. AE died in 1935, Yeats in 1939. And World War II began. In the words of Frank O'Connor:

Catastrophe was precipitated by two events that were almost simultaneous - the death of Yeats and the outbreak of the Second World War. Now we had the censorship of books, and the intellectual darkness of the country was almost palpable.⁸

For about half a century, literature in Ireland had been sustained by the drive for national independence and rediscovery of selfhood. The hard question (as for any new nation) was what is to happen after this had been achieved. The internal strife that characterized Ireland⁹ was symbolized by the closing down of Maunsel, a

great publishing house which had published the works of every major figure of the Irish Renaissance with the exception of Yeats. From then until 1951, there was no Irish publisher devoted to issuing literature on a commercial scale except for the Cuala Press which had been begun in 1902 as Dun Emer by Elizabeth Yeats, Yeats's sister. It had a very small output and never exceeded five hundred copies of any edition; since the people who buy limited editions are not the same as the people who send books to the censor for banning, Cuala Press escaped the censor's eye -- but also, unfortunately, the attention of the public. In the late thirties and the forties Irish writers turned to publishers outside their country. This, of course, made Irish work even more suspect in the eyes of the Irish censor when it finally came to their attention as "imported" material.

It was the periodicals that kept up the continuity of Irish writing, and it was a hard struggle. Small literary magazines and journals, in and out of Ireland, were the only hope for new writers to get their works published. The two leading journals were the Dublin Magazine and The Bell. The Dublin Magazine, edited by Seamus O'Sullivan, began in 1923 and it was in it that many of the leading Irish poets of the day (including Yeats and Clarke) had their new verse first published. In 1940 Sean O'Faolain began the publication of The Bell as a shop window for newer writers.

The thirties brought in a new "era of inhibitions."¹⁰ Yeats, in his old age, spoke against these inhibitions with his celebration of the body in the "Crazy Jane" poems. As a reaction to censorship, inhibitions and prohibitions, the Irish Academy was formed in 1932 by Yeats and other Irish men of letters. It had been called into existence by

circumstances which make it an important event in the history of Anglo-Irish letters; the Academy was organized primarily as a protest against the encroachment of the censors and politicians on the independence and integrity of literature. Writers had fallen under suspicion, and the Literary Censorship Act of 1929 made this suspicion overt, drawing on both moral and patriotic elements in an attack on what the artists had represented in Ireland during the first decades of the century. The aim of the Literary Censorship Act was to merge the moral and patriotic -- to protect from corruption an infant nation, born out of so much hardship.

The new Ireland was indeed strange and uncongenial to the writer. Out of the turbulence of the years of revolution and civil war had come a new society in which the old Anglo-Irish Protestant aristocracy, increasingly thought to be both alien in origin and loyalties, was replaced by a bourgeois class. The loss of the leadership of the aristocracy on all fronts -- in politics as well as in cultural matters -- was not compensated for by the rise of predominantly Catholic middle class marked by the great influence of the local unsophisticated Catholic Church. De Valera's leadership encouraged a chauvinistic and isolationist mentality. Economic policies included tariff protection for native industry. Fanatic supporters of Gaelic literature and language over English obtained governmental backing and encouragement: they tried, by using the vehicle of censorship, to protect Ireland from the influence of outside literatures. Several groups, with the blessing of a short-sighted and puritanical Church, wanted to immunize the country from outside contacts. The result was censorship, both official and private; it not only restricted expression but soon hampered the growth and

development of young poets.

Speaking of the Academy, AE said in a letter to Minanlabain, "We will probably be severe critics of censorship. The last book condemned is Austin Clarke's Bright Temptation which I suggested you should read. If you have not, it is late now for Ireland. But it will probably do this beautiful book good elsewhere."¹¹ And so, one can see that AE and Yeats, who did not usually see eye to eye on matters, were united in this cause.

AE, as a social force, exerted much influence because he helped to unify the poets that were young and unknown. In fact, the real effectiveness of his journal, The Irish Statesman, was to bring Irish writers together; and it was probably the feeling that there were purely cultural interests and causes that might be advanced through organization which made him band together with Yeats to project the new Academy. AE, more than Yeats, introduced the writers of the new generation to each other.¹²

There is little doubt that the Irish Catholic Church was and still is the main inspiration behind the practice of censorship, but the Church was aided by the old guard patriots who disliked the press because it had often been hostile to them. It was inevitable that the relation between artist and society became progressively more and more strained and uneasy. The artist, unable to avoid seeing his country's faults, was inhibited from pointing them out to his fellow countrymen. He was, as we have seen, transformed quickly from the hero he had been before the war (viz. Pearse, Macdonagh) to a pariah, at odds with his smug philistine society. As recently as 1965 in Studies, Augustine Martin addressed this very issue:

The creative consciousness of a writer is normally under pressure from two forces: on one hand there is the literary tradition which he has received from the past, remote or proximate, and on the other there is his environment, the society in which he lives and which inevitably becomes his subject matter. Ideally both forces should cooperate: under the control of his own inspiration the tradition ought to furnish him with models, suggest technical possibilities, indicate areas of life and experience which he might explore; and at the same time it ought not to come between him and the living scene which is one way or another to be his material. 13

Yeats and AE, too, had been aware of a cleavage between the life of the artist and that of the rest of society, but theirs had, of course, been a different separateness. Society, if it did not condone or participate in their spiritualism, their mysticism, their communing with the visionary, nevertheless presented at the very worst an apathetic face toward it. And the society of Yeats and AE's time had tried to understand and appreciate, had tried even to popularize. They interpreted the nationalistic spirit that was innate in the works of Yeats and his school as a good although the buds of the hostility that was to flower in the forties and fifties can be seen as far back as the riots that greeted Synge's Playboy of the Western World in 1909. The potential for a close-minded provincialism was present as early as the first decade of the century, but the Easter Rising of 1916, the Revolution, and the Civil War muted its blossoming until the mid-twenties and then the thirties. Yeats, Synge, AE and the rest of the writers who reached maturity at the turn of the century could have been the mavericks, the pariahs, but historical circumstances made them otherwise.

By the mid-twenties, when O'Casey's plays were hostilely received and under attack, there had been drastic changes in the social scene in Ireland; the centers and directions of political and religious

power had shifted enormously. The artists unquestionably experienced considerable difficulty in their struggle for freedom of expression. Synge, it has been pointed out, was only threatened by a group who wielded no political power whatsoever,¹⁴ but by O'Casey's time the artist faced the official opposition of the government.

Yeats and AE both recognized the problem the writers that followed them would have to face. AE said in 1932: "I fear we are in for an era of materialism."¹⁵ Mary Bromage thinks that AE felt that the new writers were reacting not only against stage-Irishness but against the 'abstract tendency' of Yeats in his late period. It was thought that actual participation in the conflict had shorn the work of the new writers of their imaginativeness. This had come about as a result of the lack of political responsibility which he felt had characterized the literary renaissance.

In a speech at the founding of the Irish Academy of Letters, Yeats remarked that the raw material on which the new generation had to work was infinitely tougher than that out of which he and his generation had made their poetry and plays. The new generation had grown up in a period of revolution and thus had been more closely aligned to and aware of the public cause throughout their childhood than the preceding generation had been. It would have been impossible for them to maintain the distance that Yeats and his group had maintained from the middle-classes in the early years of the century.

It was precisely the rise of a new and dominant middle class, a class which had few, if any standards of literary taste, which endangered the new writers. They suspected the new and experimental, and resented anything even slightly suggesting criticism of the Irish

"status quo." It is this middle class which worked more strongly than ever censorship against the writers' innovations and criticisms. Censorship, itself, has historically never been strong enough to quell the writers' storms: it needed an adjunct such as the new materialistic middle class which Yeats, it seems, so rightly feared, to curb most bold acts of writing. Vivian Mercier stated the case categorically in 1947 showing that the writer, too, was to blame because of his lack of fortitude:

Those of us who remained in Dublin throughout the war years had an unhappy feeling that we were a race of pigmies. If people from outside thought the arts were dead in Ireland, we ourselves were to blame, for we repeatedly told them so. Our attitude was not that "flippant, futile derision" which Shaw thought "peculiar to Dublin," but a serious purposeful pessimism. Hemmed in by active censors and indifferent Philistines, we began to feel that we had nothing to offer which was worth defending. Like our ancestors at the time of the Danish invasions, we retired into round towers -- which this time had walls of ivory. 16

Also, the younger generation of writers were nearly all Catholics, and the Catholic Church in the new Ireland had done what it could to alienate them. Close behind the general censorship lay the general asceticism, Puritanism or Jansenism -- a quite uncultivated but strong popular feeling combined with a long social tradition of rural poverty which was, of course, unaccustomed to luxuries of mind and body and which had therefore developed a distinct suspicion of anything that might be the symptom of the intellectual independence and confidence that come from centuries of social and economic freedom.

There was only one way a writer could be meaningful in post-revolutionary Ireland: by addressing himself to the actual problems of the rural population and the Catholic majority. Ireland had to focus on itself, on its own weaknesses. It had to seek its own answers to domestic

problems rather than levelling blame on an external enemy. And the new writers did bravely attack the enemy within -- the provincial imitator of English ways, the 'gombeen man' (i.e. the petit bourgeois), the corrupt politician, and the Church. Yeats foresaw what was to come -- in a letter to Florence Farr (published by Cuala) he says: "I have noticed, by the way, that the writers of the country who come from the mass of people -- or no, I should say, who come from Catholic Ireland, have more reason than fantasy. It is the other way with those who come from the leisured classes. They stand above their subject and play with it, and their writing is, as it were, a victory as well as a creation."

Others, too, were conscious of this sudden change not only in the make-up of the "class" of writers (with the shift from the aristocracy to the middle and lower classes, from Protestant to Catholic) but in the subject matter of the new literature. Ernest Boyd in Current History said, "Unfortunately, these men were witnesses of that whereof they speak, and they cannot be thrust aside as libellers of their country. Much that is sordid and ugly and cruel, much that is brutal and brutalizing in Irish life has at last found expression in a literature which, whether through accident or design, has heretofore concentrated on what W.D. Howells, in a well-remembered phrase, called 'the smiling aspects' of existence. The differences between these authentic narratives, informed by a real understanding of Irish history and psychology, will be readily seen by a glance at the substitutes for the real thing now being offered."¹⁷ Power now had shifted to the native bourgeois class. Sean O'Faolain describes this group¹⁸ not as a laboring class but as middlemen, small shopkeepers and manufacturers, the modern counterpart of Moore's nineteenth-century middle-classes; this

new twentieth-century middle class was designed to fill the vacuum created by the earlier alienated upper class and upper middle class. On the whole it had little education and therefore only a slight interest, if any at all, in the intellectuals' fight for liberty of expression. O'Faolain believes they were "ordinary, decent, kindly self-seeking men who had no intention of jeopardizing their new-found prosperity by gratuitous displays of moral courage." Having suddenly become wealthy, they had a vested interest in their country's economic position and sanctioned isolationism. Their power resulted in an alliance between the Church, new businessmen and politicians for quite obvious moral, commercial and politico-patriotic reasons.

The effect on intellectuals and artists was not beneficent. The new sense of alienation, following on the heels of the disturbing Civil War, endangered the position of the artist greatly, making it increasingly difficult for him to maintain a sane and healthy relationship with his material. Significantly and not surprisingly we find most of the literature of the thirties and forties lacking in comedy. (Notable exceptions include some of Austin Clarke's plays.) The general direction of each writer's development shows him struggling to achieve a balanced and detached point of view. The basic subjects available to him now followed the contours of the contemporary social scene of Ireland. Its basic themes: the land, the traditional unintellectual life of the small farmer, the growing tendency toward materialism, the late and/or (non)marriages, the religious intensities, and the political intrigues.

The writers felt themselves almost daily becoming more isolated. Their country declared itself neutral in World War II; as an almost

direct result of that, the writers were so insulted from the outside that their work, it seemed, suffered from lack of criticism. There were only a few resident critics, and owing to their eagerness to inbreed, most of these critics tempered their criticism with undue kindness. The temptation to leave Ireland, as James Joyce did, for a more stimulating and competitive environment, grew all the more immediate for Ireland's better and more innovative writers.

The writers forced to examine themselves and their particular situation; their need for personal expression betrayed another aspect of Celtic hyperconsciousness. Patrick Kavanagh, in the late thirties and early forties, felt himself to be a valid sample of the current Irish "cosmos" (his own term), and identified himself with the glories and grievances of the average Irishman. In general, there was much resort to autobiography for subject matter though some writers became very concerned with the political situation.

Frank O'Connor predicted in 1942 that two things would have to happen if Irish literature was to survive the war. First, somehow or other a theatre would have to be re-established. He believed that theatre is the only art form that can directly influence public opinion, particularly since the censorship of books is fairly effective in cutting off the source of anything that imaginative. Secondly, he felt Irish writing would have to be prepared to speak openly: "We must have done with romanticism for the next twenty years or so and let satire have its way."¹⁹

Contemporary Irish literature had become part of what AE earlier had called the Continental "drama of disillusionment." The native temperament had turned from its sense of natural magic. The

gigantic dimensions of the heroic figures of the Revival had shrunk -- there was a return to the paltry size of the everyday, and even bordered on the Lilliputian. The ability to soar was gone -- the visionary thrust of Byzantiums lost in the struggle with a confining new order, with kicking against the pricks. Modern Irish writing has recently had to close its eyes to the visionary and instead stare coldly at the near-at-hand. Apparent sacrilege and defiance, anger and resentment permanently replaced the suspended judgement, the mystical contemplation of the early days of the century, the days before the Uprising.

In examing the poetry of Austin Clarke, the most significant Irish poet to follow Yeats, we shall see what has happened to the texture and quality of the new poetry. Criticism of Ireland until the work of Austin Clarke was rare. Sean O'Faolain, who although he acknowledges the fact that repressive forces threaten to destroy the Irish writers like a deadly paralysis, said:

The questions that now agitate us are all anterior to intellectual interests. They are fences to be got over, such as Censorship and all this discussion about Gaelic. Such fences have long since been got over in every other country, and the world is bored with our childish lolloping over them, and our own writers are bored with it, and exasperated, and exhausted, because the whole thing is really just like the lolloping of kids at a riding school. The writers cannot breathe in that air, and what has resulted is a neurosis of frustration. 20

The scene of this frustration engenders several questions: Can the writer maintain his honesty--his fidelity to himself? Will his embittered reaction to the country around him strangle and poison his work? Will his disillusionment ultimately help to terminate his creativity or will it be a form of revelation? Can the artist cut through all the acrimony and explore Irish life with objectivity? Can he not only see clearly but also write passionately? Sean O'Faolain, in

1962, underscored the Irish scene as no helpful adjunct to the struggling writer: "Irish life in our period does not supply the dramatic personae, ready for the hard conflicts, the readiness to take anything jusqu'au bout in either full or at least some awareness of what is at stake, without which dramatic themes ... are missing."²¹ He believes the Irish produce spurts of spirit which ultimately end either in laughter, the great national vice and virtue, or in exile. His is a pessimistic view because he thinks that the change-over from a stratified, various society that ranged from aristocrat to peasant, to a few class society where the only hard traditional core is in the farming population, will not likely produce people with any great "awareness," an essential characteristic for the production of literature.²²

The crux of the matter involves not only subject matter but audience. In so far as there is any public in Ireland for Irish literature today it is largely a public with ingrained taste only for the romantic and "Celtic" -- the shamrock and the leprechaun. And the first obstacle the writer must encounter is the lack of self-awareness among the community at large, his readership. The motives of today's Irish literati are artistic; their final cause is moral. They are trying to give Ireland a literature which expresses the condition of Ireland today in the belief that good health begins with self-recognition. In Yeats's words: "A nation should be like an audience in some great theatre ... watching the sacred drama of its own history; every spectator finding self and neighbor there, finding all the world there as we find the sun in the bright spot under the burning glass."²³ The isolation of Irish life is a primary stumbling block. The politicians and clerics strive to maintain and to strengthen the isolation -- understood by them as a

necessary protection for a young, weak nation. But the artist finds himself unguarded and alone in a world not only of indifference but also of suspicion. The writers themselves are not the only group who fear that they as a nation can not survive; although Ireland, or at least the twenty-six counties, is politically independent, conditions have not improved considerably in the last few decades. Slums continue to exist: the farmer is, in many cases, still near starvation; economic opportunities for the young have failed to appear and, consequently, people are still emigrating; there has not been extensive social reform; the people are less interested in cultural affairs than they were thirty years ago and most recently the I.R.A. has been reactivated in the time of trouble in Ulster. Industry and the banks still remain in the hands of the Anglo-Irish Unionists and the new middle class seems indifferent to almost everything. Many Irish writers (the most notable being Austin Clarke) believe that the conservatism of Irish Catholicism is responsible for Ireland's failure to advance, and the bulk of their work is devoted to exposing the weaknesses and narrowness of the Church.

The grievances of the Irish intellectual have helped to inspire modern literature but they may also work negatively and, therefore, threaten a continued standard of excellence. The new writing may tend to become repetitious²⁴ and, in its desire to rout out the narrow and parochial, become itself an apotheosis of the narrow and provincial. Or, as O'Faolain fears,²⁵ within a few years Irish literature may disappear for lack of support in addition to lack of substance.

But the fact can -- and in later chapters of this study will be -- documented: in the last twenty years in Irish poetry there has been no loss of technical skill; since Yeats's death there has been an

increase in metrical sophistication, and the experiments of Austin Clarke are largely responsible for this.

Nevertheless, the ultimate question remains: has Irish poetry done anything but illuminate the local? It is that question I shall try to answer in this study of Austin Clarke, because it is true that the local is in danger of becoming solely the regional, the provincial. Irish writing must have universal significance if it is to pass on to posterity. As O'Faolain said: "Their main worry must be that their worst enemies are impalpable and insinuating: self-pity, bitterness, sentimentality, cynicism, their own unsophistication, barren rage, even their love of country, their love of friends."²⁶

Footnotes to Chapter I

¹Ernest Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance (New York: Knopf, 1922), pp. 27-28.

²Though O'Grady, Sigerson and Hyde have so much more vitality than we usually understand by the "antiquarian."

³W.B. Yeats, United Ireland, Jan. 23, 1892. Newspaper review.

⁴Phillip Marcus, Yeats and the Beginnings of the Irish Renaissance (Ithaca: Cornell, 1970), p. 26.

⁵Boyd, p. 109.

⁶Marcus, p. 48.

⁷W.B. Yeats, Explorations (N.Y.: 1962), p. 43.

⁸Frank O'Connor, A Short History of Irish Literature (N.Y.: 1967), p. 224.

⁹Timothy Coogan, Ireland Since the Rising (N.Y.: Prager, 1966), pp. 167-168.

¹⁰Maurice Harmon, "The Era of Inhibitions: Irish Literature 1920-1960," Emory University Quarterly, XXII, p. 18.

¹¹AE, AE's Letters to Minanlabain, ed. Poeter (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1935), p. 3.

¹²John Eglinton, Irish Literary Portraits (London: Macmillan, 1935), p. 190.

¹³Augustine Martin, "Inherited Dissent: The Dilemma of the Irish Writer," Studies, LIV (Spring 1965), pp. 2-3.

¹⁴Harmon, p. 18.

¹⁵Mary C. Bromage, "The Literature of Ireland Today," So. Atl. Qu., XLII (Jan. 43), pp. 27-37.

¹⁶Vivian Mercier, Commonweal, June 6, 1947, p. 183.

¹⁷Ernest Boyd, "Joyce and the New Irish Writer," Current History, XXXIX (1934), p. 704.

¹⁸Sean O'Faolain, Fifty Years of Irish Writing, Studies (Spring 1962), p. 97.

¹⁹Frank O'Connor, "The Future of Irish Literature," Horizon, V, 215 (January 1942), pp. 62-63.

²⁰ Sean O'Faolain, "The State and Its Writer," The Bell (Aut/Wint. 1962), p. 97.

²¹ Sean O'Faolain, "Fifty Years of Irish Writing," Studies (Spring 1962), p. 102.

²² Ibid., p. 103.

²³ Yeats

²⁴ Lawrence McCaffrey, "Trends in Post-Revolutionary Irish Literature," College English, XVIII, p. 29.

²⁵ See editorials in The Bell in the 1950's.

²⁶ O'Faolain, "Fifty Years of Irish Writing." Studies (1962), p. 104.

CHAPTER II: The Memoirs - Clarke's Image of His Life

Austin Clarke has given us two volumes of autobiographical memoirs, Twice Round the Black Church and A Penny in the Clouds from which we can piece together his life story. What we learn from these memoirs cannot be called biography, but the skeletal picture of a life that these works do illuminate gives us a better understanding of the "I" so frequently used in Clarke's poetry. Clarke's memoirs are not absolutely central to his work but they do have literary merit and do serve as a convenient frame for his life, for the record of encounters, some of them important, along the poet's way and for the growth of the consciousness that informs Clarke's poetry.

Clarke was born in 1896 in Dublin, Ireland, the son of Augustine and Eileen Patten (Browne) Clarke, staunch Irish nationalists. His childhood experiences were similar to those of James Joyce: he was trained by the Jesuits from the age of seven, primarily at Belvedere College and at University College Dublin. In the anecdotes he tells of his childhood and adolescence a pattern appears, pinpointing the three most important concerns of his early years: religion, consciousness of country and its national struggle, and of course, his burgeoning interest in the world of literature.

Clarke reports that his maternal great-grandfather and his maternal grandfather were skimmers; his own father, superintendent of the Dublin Water Department. He was a bit ashamed of his father's lowly position; when Clarke was very little, he was the only one in his class

at school who was not rich enough to come dressed in a shop-suit.¹ He thought the Jesuit College he then attended snobbish (it was an imitation of a well-known public school in England): most of the fathers of children there belonged to the professional classes and were doctors, barristers.² The young Clarke had not gone to the Jesuit College from the very start; originally his parents sent him to National School in Dorset Street, but he reported to his mother that all the other children there ate black bread, and so his career at the National School ended after two days. "No doubt a child who had suffered from gastric fever with all its torments of vertigo and cerebral expansion, a child who had to be so often coaxed back to appetite with arrowroot and spongecakes sopped in sherry, could not be exposed to the risks of a National School."³ So he was sent to the Christian Brothers School in St. Mary's Place, where he lasted one week because it was, as he explains, "a veritable frenzy of repression and sadistic celibacy."⁴ From there he went to a better school, The Jesuit College, Belvedere, because it was the only way his family could save him from excessive corporal punishment. But Clarke felt self-conscious at "college" and his father's occasional presence was just another aggravation: "To make matters worse, my father, despite his rapid promotion, had never changed his easy-going ways and was not always as grammatical in his speech as I was."⁵ Austin Clarke has never attempted, however, to describe his experiences at Belvedere because he was there a generation after James Joyce, and he felt it would be vain of him to try to describe similar events during his own school years, as little seemed to have changed.⁶

From Belvedere he was sent to boarding school, another Jesuit

College, on the outskirts of Limerick. His strongest memory of the place was its filthiness: all the bathrooms were outside and many of the boys did not hesitate, instead, to appropriate any available corner as their own private place. But it was at this school that Clarke had his introduction to literature. Thomas Babington Macaulay Fell, who claimed direct descent from the poet-historian, introduced Austin Clarke to the nature of poetry when he read aloud the last part of Hiawatha.⁷ For Clarke "the classroom and all the boys in it disappeared and I saw the pinewoods, the creeks, and the glitter of unknown waters, With the last words the extraordinary vision disappeared and Mr. Fell was back again on the rostrum. This was my first experience of the evocative power of verbal rhythm and it brought back my earlier experiences of Nature."⁸ Mr. Fell also introduced him to drama, and indirectly to religious rebellion: "Mr. Fell produced the college plays and the first which I saw was very moving and edifying. The scenes took place in contemporary France, where the world was witnessing the most violent and vicious campaign against religion that history had yet seen. The whole power and resources of the wicked were organized against religion and there were traitors everywhere."⁹

After he left boarding school he was sent back to Belvedere where what he recalls as "some unaccountable change"¹⁰ came over him. Everything went wrong. He neglected his lessons, became careless and indifferent. The more he struggled and blundered, the more some contrary presence seemed to possess his mind. Looking back on the experience he explains: "That confusion and mental dimness in which I seemed lost are hard to recall but I have no doubt this is the state in which so many young delinquents, as they are called today, find themselves."¹¹

Religious turmoil and its essential relation to his puberty may have contributed to his uncomfortable state. One of his volumes of memoirs, Twice Round the Black Church, published in 1962, takes its name from the Protestant Church in St. Mary's Place in his childhood neighborhood in Dublin. It was a "gloomy edifice" and it stood in a space all to itself, enclosed by a railing with spikes around it.¹²

The doors were locked during week-days, and that surprised us as children, for our chapels were always open from seven o'clock in the morning. After school the little boys and girls from Paradise Lane, which was at the back of our street, scampered around the Black Church. But at night the shadowy gas-lit place was silent and deserted, except for the echoing footsteps of a passer-by or the rumble of a cab. As children, we were told that anyone who ran round the church three times after dark would meet the Devil himself on the third round, but none of us had the courage to test the legend. Always, when I came late at night with my parents from the south side of the city, it was an exciting experience to pass that terrible church in complete safety. As we hurried by, I . . . knew there was another hemisphere in which all is different. There the Black Church which I feared so much when I looked at it, was radiant, lovely and enskied.¹³

The Black Church was a daily sight for the young boy, and thinking about it, its significance and its difference from his own Church, the Catholic Church, became a religious obsession, an obsession which was to possess Clarke for many years. Religion, he believes, caught him and molded him before he had a mind of his own: "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."¹⁴ It was at Mass that he received the first intimations of immorality, for as he explained, the language of religion belonged to franker centuries than his own twentieth-century Ireland.¹⁵ At his first confession

the priest asked him if he had ever "made himself weak"¹⁶ and he felt so guilty that he confessed, even though he knew that in doing so he would be lying.

His mother, in his early years, was a 'super-priest' in the boy's eyes. She represented something purer and more moral than even the Church had to offer. He insists that his mother was never a religious fanatic or a ceaseless church-goer but that she had an intense Victorian sense of deity as a model for her morality which even superseded that of the Church.¹⁷ Her 'religion' made that of the Church seem gross in comparison. Thus modesty was strictly enforced at home: Clarke relates his confused feelings after having peeped into the Douay Bible and found the strange story of Lot's two daughters, with accompanying illustrations which depicted naked men and women.¹⁸ So it was no surprise that the young boy not only rebelled against the Church but raged secretly against his mother when he reached adolescence; they had "incessant quarrels over religion;" he felt great bitterness toward his mother when she seized and burned his books in the closed range in the kitchen. Among the books which she considered "heretical" Clarke tells us were Arnold's Literature and Dogma and Renan's Life of Jesus.¹⁹

His feelings toward his mother became enmeshed in his complex of emotions about religion and emerging manhood. He was, understandably, to be plagued by increasing guilt as he reached puberty. He describes his vivid memories of his experiences at this time for us: "all the little acts of curiosity about myself and others which have been set down by Freud and are denied with such vehemence by those who insist on perfect innocence of childhood."²⁰ Puberty was inordinately complicated for him by the religious overtones it assumed; and as if to exorcise these

memories which still plague him, he frankly tells us: "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 shore myself."²¹ And again, "Soon compulsory confession was to become a weekly ordeal. Obscurely, through the grille, some 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 techniques."²² Playfully, but with evident bitterness unconcealed, he says: "Had I known that we cannot sin until the age of seven, which theologians hold to be the age of reason and consent, I might have been spared much anxiety and have rejoiced in my desire for knowledge."²³ Even his very early childhood was not exempt from unnecessary constraints.

The young Clarke, because of his religious turmoil, had trouble accepting the facts of life even when they were duly explained to him. He recalls that his "mind lacked due preparation" and for several years "refused absolutely to accept the urogenital design, regarding it as a proposition of the Devil." He was convinced that his nipples must have a purpose and confirmed this by consulting the Douay Bible. In the Song of Solomon he found the words "He lay betwixt my breasts" and those words gave him a "delicate, dreamy feeling." He was sure that conception took place not in a "gross" way but instead "ethereally by the gentle touch of the male and female paps."²⁴

Human nature was only one of the young man's obstacles. For one who was born and bred in the city, the world of the outdoors, of nature, held a strange charm. His first experiences with a nature less

refined than man's occurred when an aunt took him and his sisters for drives in her pony-driven trap to the nearby countryside. Clarke tells us that he has forgotten much of what he saw on those trips because he was always facing the "large-wagging hinderparts" of the pony.²⁵ Each time he was surprised by the "sudden change from the spiritual refinement of our home life."

I must have endured much, so constantly were three of my senses offended. I knew that acts of natural necessity are permitted to us all if we do not take pleasure in them and that animals cannot sin because they have no souls. Nevertheless I shrank back whenever modesty was offended. Was there a false ring in our voices when we raised them so as not to hear what the pony was doing? Was our sudden interest in the hedgerows and fields we passed too obvious? It was all very puzzling to me, for the pony was an intelligent animal, in front, with demure glance, and his grey-black mouth was affectionate, though somewhat fumbling to a small palm. All the more did I enjoy our return journey through darkness, when his base rounds were hidden and I was warm among rugs, drowsing in the well of the trap.²⁶

When Austin went on his first prolonged trip to the country with his sister to stay with family friends he felt as if he had entered a whole new world: "I found myself, without guidance, in a region that seemed to me beyond the catechism."²⁷ Nothing in this foreign place, the green countryside outside of Dublin, was what it initially seemed--and he was at his wits' end in his attempts to try to understand it in the idealistic way he assumed it must be interpreted.

In a story which he read as a child, and still vividly remembers, we can see how complex and all encompassing his musings about nature were. The story was a parable of the disappearance of Nature in twentieth-century life. The children discover a magic ball and when it bounces over a garden wall they find themselves bounding through the air, following it. First they discover themselves at the seaside, bathing

and playing on the beach, as happy and innocent as Adam and Eve. But each time they quarrel or do not behave themselves properly, Nature is disturbed. First a mile long promenade appears; the next time it is by the appearance of a pier with a bandstand that Nature shows her chagrin. Then finally hotels and even patrolmen (police) are established as a result of Nature's displeasure. Clarke's awe and respect for unsullied nature are evidenced by the powerful effect this little tale had on him. He says: "In my case it may have been that parable for children which caused me to seek its likeness in the elopement tales of early Gaelic literature and find in them a version of the Platonic ideal."²⁸

Clarke begins the first of his memoirs, Twice Round, with an explanation of how, as a child, he reacted to Shakespeare. His first encounter, however, was not with Shakespeare the dramatist. In an empty room in the Clarke family's house a portrait of Shakespeare hung with "half mournful, half accusing look,"²⁹ and when the young boy discovered whose portrait this menacing picture was, his fear was not lessened. The name sounded "inimical" and "foreign;" the eyes of the portrait seemed to follow him around the room. The whole room had become for him "the forbidden chamber of legend, dreadful in darkness;"³⁰ it gave him a "bewildering sense of guiltiness."³¹

Shakespeare was not the only foreign presence in his childhood literary experiences; the Gaelic language, too, had an air of the foreign: strangeness pervaded his first experiences with it. Clarke learned Gaelic as a youth long before it became a required subject in the Irish schools. As he recalls humorously, when he studied it, it almost had an illegal aspect, and the peculiar feelings he had while working away at this alien tongue were enhanced by the notable physical blemishes which

which each of his Gaelic teachers inevitably seemed to have.³² But he enjoyed it, as he was to learn to enjoy Shakespeare: "we felt that the complexity of Irish grammar was at variance with the simplicity of the subject matter." The mystery of the world of nature was enhanced by his perception of it in the context of Gaelic literature: "Yet as a city youngster, I found excitement and strangeness in this mental farm life."³³ His literary experiences were finding sure links with the rest of his mental life.

In both Twice Round the Black Church and A Penny in the Clouds, Clarke refers to his experiences as an undergraduate at University College Dublin. His teachers and contemporaries were some of the most renowned men Irish literary history has known: George Sigerson, Douglas Hyde and Thomas MacDonagh were among his instructors there. His initial reaction to UCD however, was one of surprise and disappointment. He was struck with the poor, ill-tended physical plant and with the fact that students and professors wore regular clothes and not the dignified cap and gown he had seen at Trinity.³⁴

It was at UCD that Clarke began to grapple seriously with English and Irish poetry. He remembers memorizing, for example, the whole first book of Milton's Paradise Lost: "Imaginatively I ventured into the visible darkness, moved by the lakes of burning marl, peered into pandemonium and admired those majestic fallen angels, who, despite continual pain, spoke so proudly and with such courage. Their secondary names brought me glimpses of other mythologies--Mulciber, Dagon, Baalim, Ashtaroth, Thammug. The speeches of revolt stirred my mind so that I forgot the grovelling and insincerity of our medieval training. The next world had become a mental refuge."³⁵ Douglas Hyde's animated lec-

tures made Gaelic a living language for him and Hyde's words instilled in Clarke an ardor for learning about the past:

On the morning of our first term, he [Hyde] 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. 36

Thomas MacDonagh, whose position he was to assume at UCD after the Rising of 1916, taught him how translations from the Gaelic had led to a new, wavering, delayed rhythm in English which was particularly Irish in mode.³⁷ MacDonagh, who treated the young Austin Clarke as a fellow poet,³⁸ talked to him of his own favorite lyric poet, Thomas Campion, and of his own theory of song-verse and speech-verse. It was MacDonagh who suggested that Clarke should write his thesis on the influence of lute-music in the shaping of the Tudor lyric.³⁹ But after the Rising and MacDonagh's tragic death, Clarke realized, despairingly, that it would be a waste of time for him to continue his thesis on the development of the Tudor and Caroline lyric. Having read much Elizabethan drama, he decided instead to do a study of John Ford, about whom there had not been anything published at that time.⁴⁰ But when he finished his thesis and became an M.A., he became aware of the fact that his degree was of little practical value. He was determined to try his hand as a musician, took his violin out of its case (though he had begun to study the violin as a young child, literature had replaced it as a mode of spiritual expression and he had not played for five years) and practiced assiduously for three months before applying unsuccessfully for a position as violinist at the New Ross Cinema in Dublin.⁴¹

He then attempted to make a career of journalism and subse-

quently spent months battling with the condensations of stenography. But that proved unnerving for him: "After a couple of months, I found I could scarcely read a page of prose without translating it in my mind into this jargon and I thought that soon my delight in the vowel music and sound pattern of poetry would be destroyed."⁴²

Soon afterwards he was appointed to a post as Assistant Lecturer in English at UCD. The position he acquired was one left empty as a result of MacDonagh's death in the 1916 Uprising. Clarke, a student at the time, had not been active in the uprising itself but many of his older acquaintances (and teachers) had been and he sympathized with the cause. He seems very self-conscious in his recollection of that time:

The historic hour existed with all its secret, countless memories of the past, in and of itself, so that even the feeling of suspense and of coming disaster seemed to belong to a lesser experience of reality. It is difficult now to recapture that emotion, that thought, from which even the crowd, dimly hostile or, perhaps, taken by total surprise, was scarcely a distraction. It has become quite easy to forget how completely the country had turned away from its own individual, national life, to forget how bitterly the few awakeners and poets who revived pride, were hated and abused. ⁴³

One of Austin Clarke's closest friends around this time was F.R. Higgins, who also did not take part in the Uprising. They met in 1914 when they were both eighteen, and because of their highly different backgrounds, had much to learn from each other. Clarke was awed by Higgins' knowledge of the 'Nineties, the Celtic Twilight, Symbolism and Maeterlinck (at that time Yeats was still known as the Celtic Maeterlinck). Higgins lectured Clarke about Japanese poetry, lent him Victor Plarr's book on Ernest Dowson. These things were all confusing, exciting and stimulating for Clarke because he had little knowledge then

of the contemporary or near-contemporary: he had not progressed much further than Tennyson in his study of literature.⁴⁴ Higgins declaimed his poetry to Clarke--it was very unlike Clarke's own, embodying the memories of a country childhood--although Clarke was too shy to read him his. Higgins was instrumental in giving Clarke the all important introduction to ecclesiastical history: "To that talk behind a wooden partition in a plain cafe, I owed my later interest in the neglected Celtic-Romanesque centuries."⁴⁵

When he was in his early twenties, Clarke went to Paris and met James Joyce, Clarke recalls what was youthful cockiness when he spoke with Joyce. He quotes, in Twice Round the Black Church, the sketch he wrote some fifty years ago of his visit to Joyce soon after he returned to Dublin, with apologies for the "entranced" style and youthful lack of reverence for the master. Most important, it seemed to him that Joyce had been unable to read The Vengeance of Fionn, published in 1917 when Clarke was twenty-one, but then Clarke hadn't been able to read Joyce's Chamber Music either and was "content with [his] own excursions through more than a thousand years of Gaelic literature, a subject about which he (Joyce) was entirely ignorant."⁴⁶

James Joyce's relation to and influence on Austin Clarke was undoubtedly complicated by their having so many experiences in common. Both had attended Belvedere College and had been educated solely by the Jesuits from an early age. Both went through a prolonged period of adolescent conflict between sex and religion. Both had had troubles with the Church, essentially embodied in their conflict between flesh and spirit. Both were provoked into literature by Ireland and the wounds it created in their souls that needed the catharsis that only

writing could give.⁴⁷

It was around 1913-4 that Clarke became conscious of the other Irish literary master of his era, Yeats. Walking home from University College Dublin before he had ever read Yeats's work, he would pass bookshops in Nassau Street and Dawson Street where Yeats's books were displayed:

I had become vaguely aware of Irish poetry, because the volumes of W.B. Yeats were displayed in them, some open: their covers still lavish with the gold-leaf which had been used in the nineties to adorn the Book Beautiful. Moreover, in the art-shops down on Grafton St., his best-known lyrics, such as 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and 'When you are old and gray,' hand printed illustrated, were on sale. Later, I saw those framed pictures on the drawing room walls of every house with pretensions to good taste. 48

It was only then that he took the early Collected Poems of Yeats out of a Municipal Lending Library in Dublin and "groped through the Celtic Twilight, confused by the delicate impressionism and images."⁴⁹ He tried in vain to scan the poems but he felt they evaded the prosodic rules he had learned in his classes at UCD. However, he acknowledges that later an understanding of them was forthcoming: "Only after I had read a great deal of English literature did I appreciate the subtle, delayed rhythms."⁵⁰ In 1966 he even delivered a series of lectures which was subsequently turned into a book on the Celtic Twilight and the 'Nineties.⁵¹

It is likely that his book on the Celtic Twilight was a substitute for the biography of Yeats that he never wrote but seriously contemplated doing during the early 'thirties. At the time (after Yeats had been awarded a Nobel prize) only three studies of his work had appeared and a publishing firm (unnamed in Clarke's recounting of the

incident) asked Clarke to do a biographical study. At the interview the editor asked whether he knew if the "love affair" between Yeats and Maud Gonne had been platonic, hinting that this type of information would lend interest to the forthcoming book. Clarke admitted that he did not know but would find out by directly confronting Yeats. First, however, realizing how rash an approach that would be, Clarke went to the lyrics of The Wind Among the Reeds to see if he could glean the 'truth' from the poems themselves. He was convinced: "Certainly in some of them there were indications that the poet's relations with Maud Gonne had been immoral!" So he wrote to Yeats asking whether he would approve of the book, and if he would be kind enough to give him some of his time. While he waited for Yeats's reply, he collected material and read Yeats and other poets of the 'Nineties in the Reading Room of the British Museum, incidentally becoming interested in theosophy. When he finally did meet Yeats in the "sedate, gloomy lounge" of the Savile Club, Yeats began the session by sternly saying that Clarke was not to interview him and he was on no account to report anything Yeats said to the press. His suspicions made Clarke uneasy and Yeats's cheerful statement to Clarke that there were Yeats portraits in galleries in Dublin, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester and Edinburgh did not aid in getting their meeting off to a propitious start. Yeats's only helpful suggestion was that few critics had dealt with his plays and that he would like Clarke, therefore, to give them special attention. But after a few tense lulls in the conversation, Clarke did have the courage to ask if there was any basis in fact in the poems of The Wind Among the Reeds. Yeats immediately caught the implication, asked Clarke if he were trying to pry into his private life, then inexplicably

softened a bit and told Clarke he might "suggest" something in his biography if he did not write anything that would "give offense to any persons living." Clarke interpreted this to mean that "as a Victorian, he wanted it both ways" and consequently never wrote the book.⁵²

George Sigerson, too, influenced Clarke during and just after his UCD days. From him he traces his learning about "the subtle art" of Irish formal poetry.⁵³ At the time that Clarke was an English Assistant, George Sigerson (a professor of Zoology, though most remembered as a Gaelic scholar who translated Gaelic poetry in its original meter, e.g., see Bards of the Gael and Gall) met him in the Professors' Room one day and told him to come to his house the following week. Clarke did so and Sigerson, surprisingly enough, gave him a mild shock treatment with a galvanic battery. Sigerson told him to come back for regular treatments and ordered him to eat black pudding because of its wholesomeness. Clarke obeyed these instructions for a month but they did not save him from the mental collapse that was imminent "because there is no cure for the folly of youth or the dire consequences of overindulgence in continence."⁵⁴ The fear and guilt of his religious youth had finally caught up with him.

Although he never directly states it in his memoirs, it appears that Clarke was hospitalized for a while at this time:

As we explore our own small past imaginatively, 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. Had I been many-eyed, I could not have seen more at Mount Argus or forgotten so quickly. Yet years later, when in a succession of delirious dreams, I hurried for months along grim corridors, up and down 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. . .poetry.⁵⁵

A. E. was perhaps the closest spiritual mentor that Clarke was ever to have. Clarke regularly attended A.E.'s Sunday evenings, sometimes staying until long after all the other guests had gone home. There he learned much. Among other things, A.E. introduced him to Ireland's history via O'Grady's sagas, and to assonance via William Larminie's poetry and criticism.

Clarke met A.E. after he had written his first long work. Early in the spring of 1917, Clarke wrote his first narrative poem, The Vengeance of Fionn. It was completed in six-eight weeks, and after its completion, he showed it to Stephen MacKenna who suggested that he send it to Ernest Boyd who was then regarded as the leading Dublin critic. Boyd would not hazard an opinion but, in turn, advised Clarke to send it on to A.E. A.E., almost at once, wrote a flattering letter to Clarke and gave the book itself to Messrs. Maunsel and Roberts who signed the contract to publish it.⁵⁶ After that, a friendship was established between A.E. and Clarke. Clarke recalls with pride and respect that early on in these Sunday evenings when only a few people had arrived, A.E. would praise his among the poems of his young protégés and sometimes even quote entire passages from his poetry from memory.

Clarke believes that Yeats regarded the younger generation with disfavor after A.E. gathered their early poems into a small anthology.⁵⁷ The hostility that Clarke felt existed between Yeats and A.E. was not ever acknowledged openly until much later but it was clear to

Clarke that a young poet had to choose between the good graces of one or the other. Finally A.E. told Clarke mournfully of his early quarrel with Yeats which had resulted in their subsequent coolness to each other.⁵⁸ George Moore had worked out a plot for the prose play Where There is Nothing and had asked Yeats to collaborate with him in the writing of it. Padraic Colum told Clarke that the chief character in the play was patterned after the eccentric religious poet, Phillip Francis Little, who had denounced A.E. as a heretic. Moore and Yeats failed to agree in their collaboration and both came with their grievances to A.E., who tried to make peace between them. But before A.E. could resolve their difficulties for them, Yeats slyly persuaded Arthur Griffith, Editor of Sein Fein, to publish his version in order that he might secure copyright. The play was printed in a special supplement, much to the surprise of A.E., who was disturbed by Yeats's display of cunning and underhandedness. As a result, their friendship dwindled.⁵⁹ However, Yeats, in his Autobiography, complained that he was ill-spoken of in A.E.'s circle, but Clarke says he never heard him mentioned without respect even though the above had occurred.⁶⁰

Clarke believes that the initial hesitation on the part of the authorities at UCD to appoint him as lecturer was political and understandable. As he puts it: "They were rightly suspicious of young poets"⁶¹ because the authorities then, just after the Rising, were all firm supporters of the Parliamentary Party and opposed to the Sein Fein movement. So they watched over the young lecturer closely. After a year they suggested he stop writing about pagan Ireland and concentrate instead on a religious theme. He tried to ingratiate them by fulfilling this request, but when he secretly married his first wife, Margaret, in

a registry office without first publishing banns and compounding that transgression with another--lying about attending Church for a month previous to the wedding--his University appointment, which had been a yearly contract, was not renewed.

Margaret, his wife, was a young woman writer who had returned to Ireland from the Continent at the outbreak of the first World War. She was older than Clarke; he was tantalized by her past about which he knew little because in one of her poems she hinted that an Austrian officer had committed suicide for her.⁶² In his memoirs, Clarke's description of her is brief:

The implication of cruelty made me uneasy at times but, when she lit two candles and let down her hair, I could not resist the pale gleaming of her face. She had ignored the new fashion and her black tresses reached almost to her knees: hidden poetically in their shadow I was well-nigh lost. Margaret had advanced opinions and, having some small private means, was independent and could express them freely. She was a fervent admirer of James Joyce and was writing a novel, which was to be entitled Portrait of The Artist as a Young Woman. In it she described her own early religious experiences and they were like my own for she, too, had hated the insidious questioning in the confessional. I liked in particular the episode of her first disillusion as a sensitive child. She was so awed by the quiet voices of the Dominican sisters and their graceful white robes that they almost seemed heavenly spirits to her. Then one day she tip-toed into a forbidden part of the convent, little knowing how she would be punished both for her disobedience and her curiosity. She looked down from a window into a cobbled courtyard, saw on a clothes-line a hideous row of bloomers and burst into tears because of their enormity.⁶³

Their marriage proved a failure; Clarke never attempts to explain why it terminated in less than a fortnight except to say that it was "only a marriage in name"⁶⁴ and to hint indirectly that the fault was with Margaret and not him: "Was I the last young poet to lie under such heavi-

ness of hair, while I clasped her in my arms? I suspected her secret, when, in her passionate self-struggle, like Telisphe, Attilis or Mergara, she forgot long after midnight that I was with her."⁶⁵

So Austin Clarke left Ireland to seek work as a book reviewer in London. It was a difficult period for him; his lodgings were small and grimy (he took rooms first off King's Road in Chelsea and then in Pimlico near Vauxhall Bridge Road). The first reviews he was commissioned to do⁶⁶ were for Robert Lynd, the literary editor of the Daily News. He soon, however, returned temporarily to Ireland because his mother, after the death of his father, saved money and accumulated a small income.⁶⁷ She enticed him to come home by suggesting that he could devote himself entirely to writing if he were to stay with her in Dublin. But he felt that despite his reconciliation with her, he could not bear to live "too near her will."⁶⁸ And he longed to be independent again. Thus he soon returned to London with understandable regret compounded by the realization that "despite the emotional havoc of the Civil War and its immediate miseries, the Irish Free State was just beginning and hopes for a small independent literature with its own standards of criticism were astir."⁶⁹

Book reviewing as a profession was on the wane and Clarke was fortunate to catch the last of its great Fleet Street tradition in the 'twenties. In his memoirs he acknowledges his gratefulness to have known and learned its "teamwork" from such literary editors as Bruce Richmond, Robert Lynd, H.M. Tomlinson, Desmond MacCarthy, Leonard Woolf, R. Ellis Roberts, R. Scott-James and others.⁷⁰ He appreciated the intellectual exercise it was to practice writing in different styles: to be dignified in Printing House Square, precise and somewhat Anglican in

Convent Garden, sceptical and outspoken in Great Queen Street, familiar in a popular way both at Ludgate Circus and the Strand."⁷¹

Clarke lived for a time in Bloomsbury and contributed reviews to the same periodicals as did the illustrious Bloomsbury Group itself. He never met any of them and suspects that the popular legend about their exclusiveness had some truth in it. But he was not bothered by it; he was scarcely aware of their existence, being much preoccupied himself with thoughts of Ireland. He claims he knew nothing of the latest fads in literature and that modernism was alien to him⁷² yet he admits that going back and reading old reviews in The Nation he was unable to recognize those that were his own: "each began with a brief disquisition on the aims of the contemporary novel and they were so compressed, subtle and elliptical in their metaphysical notions and abstractions that I could not grasp their meaning--if they ever had any."⁷³

During his journalistic stint Clarke wrote for Desmond MacCarthy in the New Statesman, Leonard Woolf in The Nation, Alan Porter in The Spectator, Caradoc Evans and Con O'Leary in T.P.'s Weekly and was Assistant Editor of the Argosy to E.V. Odle, husband of Dorothy Richardson, the female novelist who anticipated Joyce's stream of consciousness technique.⁷⁴ Later he was a contributor to The Observer, one of the most influential periodicals in London. In fact, it is due to his position as reviewer for The Observer, felt by many to be one of the last defenses of tradition against Modernism, that Clarke credits his invitation to visit Harold Monro at the Poetry Bookshop for a meeting of the Criterion Circle, at which T.S. Eliot was present.

However, even before he moved to England and made reviewing his trade, he had been invited to many literary gatherings in both

London and Dublin for much less suspect reasons, and a good share of A Penny in the Clouds is devoted to telling anecdotes about his travels and his literary acquaintances, acknowledging his indebtedness to them for inspiration and friendship.

When Clarke was in his early twenties he began to make a series of bicycle excursions which were to take him all through Ireland over a period of years. He owes the impulse to make these journeys, he believes, to his temptation by superstition: the discovery of his country's mythology and the epic stories by the poets of the Irish Literary Revival excited his imagination and he cycled with delight to many places associated with legend and enchatments.⁷⁵ He recalls that "in this way the temptation increased and, lying in the heather near the source of the Liffey under the morning lark-song or climbing past boulders into the upper glens and gullies of the Connemara Mountains, I was aware of our imaginative heritage."⁷⁶

In his travels (not all his trips were taken alone; one, for example, was with Padraic O'Conaire) he met Ella Young and Maud Gonne. Maud Gonne told him how, in the night, she was aware of invisible beings she had known in the past. He remained silent, struggling against superstition, determined to use those stories as a purely fanciful form and experiment since he felt that in the poverty of Irish history, owing to centuries of conquest, they were all that was left to him.⁷⁷

Clarke tells of his surprised reaction to Lady Gregory. When he first saw her, he did not know who she was, but as he listened to her speak, her sentences filled with the rustic dialect of "dis, dat and dose," he assumed she was a farmer's wife come up to town to seek advice about butter and eggs or some local problem. As a young writer, he

resented her provinciality, but he admits he later realized her "remarkable achievement."⁷⁸

At Coole, he met Yeats, and over lunch the elder poet gave him advice. He told him: "The imagination must be disciplined, when it is young. Therefore study the Jacobean lyrics, Donne, the poems of Landor...." Yeats cautioned Clarke that verse should be "ascetic, the beauty of bare words."⁷⁹ Yeats wanted to see a Neo-Catholic school of young poets in Ireland, citing as examples such poets as Jammes, Peguy, and Claudel. But Clarke tried to defend himself from the "religious novelty" he felt Yeats was evolving. Clarke doubted Yeats's system as an autonomous unit:

How could we learn to write the traditional songs of repentance before we had known those 'merry sins' of which Synge had spoken. I thought of the extravagant Gaelic poetry of the eighteenth century. Once more the strapping heroine of 'The Midnight Court' was railing against aged bridegrooms, denouncing the celibacy of the clergy. She was proving to her own satisfaction that it was heretical for these tonsured young men to live in a state of single bliss. Once more the Man-gaire Sugach was reeling from another parish with a satire on his tongue, and in a distant tavern, O'Tuomey was filling his till with the fine words of his fellow craftsman.⁸⁰

In A Penny in the Clouds, Clarke tells of his friendships with Seumas O'Sullivan, editor of the Dublin Magazine, the publication in which so much of Clarke's work was to appear before it was published in book form; with James Stephens, also an Irish expatriate living in London during the 'twenties and early 'thirties, who was, like Clarke, a follower of the anti-treaty party in Ireland; with Oliver Gogarty, the doctor and poet, a fellow member, with Yeats, of the Free-State Senate; of Victor Plarr, the biographer of Ernest Dowson, who will be remembered by readers of the 'Siena Mi Fe' portion of Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,"

with Herbert Trench, neglected Irish poet (later edited by Patrick Kavanagh), an expatriate living in Florence, of whose work Clarke was to say: "Instead of the muted music of the Celtic Twilight, I held in my fist 'a mad discordancy, like fifes, drums, brasses;'"⁸¹ with George Moore, whom Clarke considered master of the most subtle rhythm in modern prose. Clarke tells, however, the anecdote about the argument over a line of his own verse that he had with Moore. Moore insisted that there was a missing syllable and Clarke found it impossible to convince him that it was a deliberate omission, "an attempt to suggest the sudden drop as the otter dives under water, leaving bubbles and bright circles above him." This incident shocked Clarke because he felt that Moore's own prose rhythm was an apotheosis of subtlety and yet in verse he would not permit (or comprehend) any liberties.⁸² Another friendship he had at this time was with Joseph Campbell, who reviewed Clarke's first book in New Ireland with severity because it embodied inaccuracies in the description of nature.

After about fifteen years residence in England, Austin Clarke, one of the many "wild geese" of his time in expatriation from Ireland, returned permanently to Dublin. He has resided since then at Bridge House, Templeogue, Co. Dublin with the wife he brought back with him and, until they were grown, their three children, all sons. In his memoirs, curiously enough, he tells us nothing of his wife and children and never even mentions them by name, although his wife, Nora, is mentioned in his later poetry.⁸³

From his London experiences on, he furnishes us with few details; however, the importance women played in his life during that time is clear: he describes, with notable frankness, four or five of

the women he knew before his second marriage. On one occasion, he hints at the significance women, in general, had in his life: "I suspected that Eros, remembering my sacrifices to him, was present in his Roman guise in order that he might show me to escape from Imagination into the sunniness of Fancy."⁸⁴

When Clarke resettled in Ireland he became active in dramatic circles; he formed the Dublin Verse Speaking Society (1938) with Robert Farren, another poet-critic, in order that broadcasters and actors might "have practice in lyric, choral and rhythmic speech."⁸⁵ He also founded the Lyric Theatre Company which regularly presented verse plays in the 'forties. In the last fifteen or twenty years his emphasis has again shifted from drama to poetry and he has been thoroughly accepted as the dean of Irish letters.

This is the matter of Clarke's memoirs; these memoirs have neither the passion and cadence of O'Casey, nor the fullness of Moore (whose prose Clarke has always admired), nor are they an intellectual record as deeply problematic as Yeats's autobiography. But they are memorable for their candor and lucidity: they delineate with the sincerity and honesty that are this author's hallmarks, a modest life lead in service of the Muse; and they do form a significant part of his oeuvre, locating it within time and place. They also serve as a convenient frame for presentation of Clarke's life a scaffold which will be helpful in the chapters that follow and they serve as a record of encounters-some of them important-along the poet's way.

Footnotes to Chapter II

¹ Austin Clarke, Twice Round the Black Church (London:Routledge and Kegan, Paul, 1962), p. 14 .

² Clarke, Twice Round the Black Church, p. 146.

³ Clarke, p. 147.

⁴ Clarke, p. 147.

⁵ Clarke, p. 146.

⁶ Clarke, p. 150.

⁷ Clarke, p. 157.

⁸ Clarke, p. 162.

⁹ Clarke, p. 162.

¹⁰ Clarke, p. 165.

¹¹ Clarke, p. 165.

¹² Clarke, p. 6.

¹³ Clarke, pp. 22-23.

¹⁴ Clarke, p. 14.

¹⁵ Clarke, p. 10.

¹⁶ Clarke, p. 132.

¹⁷ Clarke, p. 9.

¹⁸ Clarke, p. 123.

¹⁹ Clarke, pp. 122-23.

²⁰ Clarke, p. 9.

²¹ Clarke, p. 137.

²² Clarke, p. 138.

²³ Clarke, p. 9.

²⁴ Clarke, p. 166.

²⁵ Clarke, p. 55.

- ²⁶Clarke, pp. 55-56.
- ²⁷Clarke, p. 57.
- ²⁸Clarke, p. 124.
- ²⁹Clarke, p. 1.
- ³⁰Clarke, p. 2.
- ³¹Clarke, p. 3.
- ³²Clarke, pp. 167-68. He noted, in conversation with me that now that it has become a "required" language, he has given it up.
- ³³Clarke, p. 168.
- ³⁴Austin Clarke, A Penny in the Clouds (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1968), p. 2.
- ³⁵Clarke, Twice Round, p. 172.
- ³⁶Clarke, Twice Round, p. 169.
- ³⁷Clarke, A Penny in the Clouds, pp. 22-24.
- ³⁸Clarke, A Penny, p. 23.
- ³⁹Clarke, A Penny, p. 24.
- ⁴⁰Clarke, A Penny, p. 37.
- ⁴¹Clarke, A Penny, p. 39.
- ⁴²Clarke, A Penny, p. 39.
- ⁴³Clarke, A Penny, pp. 31-32.
- ⁴⁴Clarke, A Penny, p. 14.
- ⁴⁵Clarke, A Penny, p. 17.
- ⁴⁶Clarke, Twice Round, p. 26.
- ⁴⁷J.C. Rehan, intro. to The Celtic Cross (Purdue U., 1964), p. 9.
- ⁴⁸Clarke, A Penny, p. 2.
- ⁴⁹Clarke, A Penny, p. 3.
- ⁵⁰Clarke, A Penny, p. 3.
- ⁵¹See chapter on Clarke's criticism.

- ⁵² whole incident, Clarke, A Penny, pp. 200-206.
- ⁵³ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 169.
- ⁵⁴ Clarke, A Penny, pp. 42-43.
- ⁵⁵ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 18.
- ⁵⁶ Clarke, A Penny, p. 51.
- ⁵⁷ Clarke, A Penny, p. 73.
- ⁵⁸ Clarke, A Penny, p. 55.
- ⁵⁹ Clarke, A Penny, p. 55.
- ⁶⁰ Clarke, A Penny, p. 54.
- ⁶¹ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 88.
- ⁶² Clarke, Twice Round, pp. 88-89 and A Penny, p. 44.
- ⁶³ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 89.
- ⁶⁴ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 90. It is to be noted that she would, however, never grant him a divorce; the formal marriage ended only with her early death.
- ⁶⁵ Clarke, A Penny, p. 44.
- ⁶⁶ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 92.
- ⁶⁷ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 95.
- ⁶⁸ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 95.
- ⁶⁹ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 95.
- ⁷⁰ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 103.
- ⁷¹ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 103.
- ⁷² Clarke, Twice Round, p. 103-104.
- ⁷³ Clarke, Twice Round, p. 104.
- ⁷⁴ Clarke, A Penny, pp. 182-187.
- ⁷⁵ Clarke, A Penny, p. 84.
- ⁷⁶ Clarke, A Penny, p. 86.
- ⁷⁷ Clarke, A Penny, p. 88.

78 Clarke, A Penny, p. 57.

79 Clarke, A Penny, p. 82.

80 Clarke, A Penny, p. 83.

81 Clarke, A Penny, p. 166.

82 Clarke, A Penny, p. 210.

83 Today the Clarkes live modestly; she cares for the household, types all his work and answers correspondence. Their three sons - Donald, a lecturer in history at Trinity, Aidan, head of Marine Radio in Jersey, and Dardas, a journalist for a trade paper -- are all close to their parents.

84 Clarke, A Penny, p. 180.

85 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays (Dublin: Dolmen, 1963), p. 397.

CHAPTER III: The Early Poetry

The Vengeance of Fionn was published in the spring of 1917.

The first work captured the immediate attention of critics who responded to the intensity with which the new young Irish poet had meditated on the legendary figures of Ireland. The Irish Times wrote enthusiastically "Not since Mr. Yeats first put on his singing robes has any Irish poet appeared with such decisive claim to be in the bardic succession." In many other places, too, the poem was instantly lauded for its dramatic quality, its poetic power.

The Vengeance of Fionn, which remains nearly unchanged in the 1936 (the final) version printed in the Collected Poems,¹ is an imitation of Deirdre Wed by the neglected Irish poet Herbert Trench.² A narrative poem in the epic manner, The Vengeance of Fionn is based on the legend of the pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne by Fionn (Toruigheacht Dhiarmuda agus Ghrainne). Although Clarke does fill in some of the background of the tale in the "Argument" that precedes the poem proper, he does not give enough background there or in the poem itself for a reader totally unfamiliar with the legend to work his way easily into the subject.

Following usual epic convention, Clarke's poem begins in medias res. Briefly the legend with which he assumes his reader is familiar may be thus sketched: Grainne, the daughter of King Cormac, is betrothed to Fionn, the leader of the Fianna. She, however, loves Diarmuid,

of the Fianna, and by magical spell (*geasa* is the term in Gaelic) gets him to go off with her. They wander all over Ireland and after many battles, heroic combats, and escapes, peace is made between the two men, Diarmuid and Fionn. Thus Diarmuid and Grainne are finally able to settle down in peace. Many years after, Fionn goes to visit the home (rath in Gaelic) of Diarmuid and Grainne; the following day, Diarmuid goes out hunting. He slays a magic boar, but in combat with it, is mortally wounded. He dies, taunted by Fionn.

The poem itself begins with the scene where Fionn goes to visit Diarmuid and Grainne; the direct action we witness has a duration of only a day or two, taking us from Fionn's visit just to the point before Diarmuid actually kills the boar. Due to the flashbacks, most of the narrative deals with the youth and love of Diarmuid and Grainne, so that, according to Clarke, "the reader has an awareness of the past --- ideal in itself, yet further idealized by memory --- in the present."³ Clarke's purpose here is plain: his aim fell neatly in line with the vogue of current Irish poetic nationalists; he wished to revitalize the past, to grasp the essence of the spirit of a bygone age in order to attain present pride of country and heritage. Most of the poets of the first twenty years of the twentieth century in Ireland were doing the very same thing with unquestionably the same self-consciousness. This early work, unlike much of the later Clarke, is in harmony with the temper of its time. However it was said almost slightly of this early work in the mid-sixties: "It was a natural, even modish gesture on the part of a young poet emerging into that literary ethos. The country had risen in arms the previous year, and it was natural to look to the past for heroic parallels."⁴ But it was acknowledged that

even though Clarke's first book must be seen in the context of the spirit of the time and thus must inevitably be appraised in relation to the works of other writers of heroic redactions such as Yeats, Lady Gregory, James Stephens, and A. E., it must not be diminished or obscured because of them. And it has been correctly pointed out by various critics that Clarke was not a mere sedulous follower of tradition, a man who was doing in his own small, less skilled way what Yeats was doing greatly. It would not be fair of us to compare a poem of Yeats of the same period to one of Austin Clarke; Yeats was a mature poet and Clarke a novice. It would be appropos, however, to compare one of Yeats's early works, e.g. The Wanderings of Oisín with The Vengeance of Fionn, for it is only then that we shall see what an accomplishment Clarke's poem really was.

Yeats did not know any Gaelic and had no firm grasp on his source material; Austin Clarke understood Gaelic and was far more faithful to the spirit and idiom of the old tale he used than was Yeats. Clarke's poem, qua poem, is more alive, more vivid, the characters more real. Though The Vengeance of Fionn in the absolute sense is not excellent poetry, seen against The Wanderings of Oisín, it stands out because of its clearer sense of reality, its more definite narrative line, its more compelling use of imagery: the world Clarke's poetry inhabits is not the dreamy half-light of the Celtic Twilight. The Ireland of Yeats's Wanderings seems distant but Clarke's is around still; Clarke has shown us the Ireland of today while sketching for us the Ireland of the heroic age. The mountains and the bogs are all before us -- there is a wealth of precise perception in his verse; he makes us see the scenery around Killarney, as it was, as it is.

The sharp detail and the precise and revealing epithet in The Vengeance of Fionn recall to some critics the Irish nature poets of the ninth and tenth centuries⁵ and to others the English narrative verse of the nineteenth century⁶ because of the seemingly endless descriptions and the artificial unconvincing dialogue. Clarke would like to see himself aligned with the former -- but whichever the true antecedent, his descriptive power renders the impression of a world that is unusually vivid, fresh and uncomplicated --

But even as shining waters calmed in deep
Pools, --- and all the peaceful household hours
And the garden of grasses and long purple flowers
The swarmy murmuring of summer bees
Among the smoke-grey limes, the elm trees
Drowsing in the heat of the blue noon
Around the rath when the tired winds could pull
No leaf and from the grianan came the croon
Of spinning-women while the bundled wool
Turned on the droning spindle, sweet to me
As I sewed in the sunlight -- and the prattled words
Of children and of waters at the fords.⁷

but sometimes restless and stormy:

So, on a gusty day,
From bare stone mountains where the kittiwakes
Scudded and screamed beneath the clouds of grey
Sea-rain or tossed above the long black lakes
Whitening in the gale, at fall of night
Across brown boglands under mountain tops
That huddled darkly in the cold, wet light
Of westward rivers, through loud leaves and drops
Whirling from tattered trees the Fenians came
Into Rath Grainne.⁸

Unfortunately in the early verse, Clarke uses description to a fault; his tendency to pile up descriptive detail tends to clog the narrative flow. If there were more action, the reader would be less likely to get lost in the time changes resulting from the jerky sequence of flash-backs of the tale (even if he were not familiar with the legend before coming to Clarke's poem). Sometimes we feel that the action is so

subordinated to the description that the poem actually stands still. The length of the poetic breath - poetic unit - has something to do with this. The unit seems to average about ten lines and even though a unit of eighteen lines (the first eighteen lines of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, for example) need not be excessive when used by a master craftsman, the consistent use of very long units, many of which are pure description, is a problem for the young Clarke. Whenever his units are short and the descriptions are punctuated with dialogue, the narrative flows well.

Some of Clarke's critics have focussed on the adjective as the main source of trouble in the early verse. Augustine Martin believes that Clarke overuses adjectives⁹ while G.B. Saul contends that the adjectives are not always logically placed.¹⁰ Neither of these critics seem to realize that the use of the hyphenated double adjective (e.g. 'soot-black', 'red-glowing', 'wide-fleeing', 'many-throated') is a characteristic device often found in Gaelic which Clarke was unquestionably imitating consciously. One critic, Douglas Sealy, doesn't scorn Clarke's use of adjectives:¹¹ he voices the belief, with which I agree, that they contribute to, rather than conceal, the development of the poetic sentence.

The subject of The Vengeance of Fionn, as Padraic Colum said of it in the introduction to the Collected Poems, is "a prolonged song -- the song of the passing of youthfulness unto unadmired age, a song that has its burthen in Grainne, the girlish, the free."¹² The characters of Grainne and Diarmuid are made human and believable. We see her realistically awakening "in sweating heat"¹³ and we see her pulling her sleepless husband down "upon her hot breasts until he slept."¹⁴ Diarmuid,

though less vivid than his mate, is also alive for us: we see him full of life and passion yet aware of the transitory nature of all things before he meets his death in the fight with the boar:

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.¹⁵

But we have trouble identifying the hero in this tale: we don't see much of Fionn and yet we are not sure whether we shouldn't commiserate with him. Clarke seems almost to refrain from taking a moral stand on the issue between the two.

The theme is not expressed until the very last line, "Youth only is wisdom and it is love."¹⁶ One of the major failings of the poem is that we witness so little of their love. We see each of them alone most of the time; too much is left for the work of the reader's imagination, aided only by the ever-present vocative "O" used to perpetuate sehnsucht.

The Vengeance of Fionn is written mostly in five foot stressed blank verse although some sections have alternate rhyme (a b a b c d c d, etc.). It begins with rhyme:

Upon a stormful nightfall when the plain
And mountains darkened and the fiery forge
Of sundown under soot-black clouds of rain
Burned fiercest, like some angered demiurge
Brooding in iron through red-glowing smoke
Smelted: up from the smouldering glooms one came
To Almuin while the great slow raindrops broke.¹⁷

The use of rhyme becomes first less frequent, then less regular -- one can almost feel Clarke tiring of it as he reaches the end of the poem:

"And I saw poor Grainne in the sunlight
Wrinkled and ugly, I do not think she slept.
My mother says that she was beautiful
Proud, white, and a queen's daughter long ago,
And that they were great lovers in the old days
Before she was married -- and lived in the hilly woods
Until they wearied.
I do not want to grow so old like her.
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."
"O Shiny Dew
O little wild Bird of the air
Youth only is wisdom and it is love."¹⁸

Occasionally there is an awkward accent or irregularity, but generally there is very little metrical variety in his use of the pentameter line.

Although the aura of contentment and romanticism, conveyed is one of the most potent qualities of The Vengeance of Fionn, there also is present an obligato of tension, anxiety, fear and a desire for flight which threatens to destroy the rosy atmosphere of the whole. This tension, fear and anxiety is again to be found in The Sword of the West -- fear is what occasions the need for "The Music Healers" (see below.) It has been suggested that the fear-flight themes present in Clarke's early works (although, as we shall see, these themes never disappear from his work, viz. the title of a late work, Flight to Africa) have strong personal overtones and that Clarke might have found the objective correlative with them for some of his anxieties which were to culminate in his early breakdown.¹⁹ The reasons for the flight and the fear are not yet evident in the early works (therefore, an examination of the underlying reasons will be postponed until the chapter on his later poetry.)

Unlike Yeats, Clarke continued as a narrative poet and in rapid succession produced three other long poems: The Fires of Baal

and The Sword of the West were both published in 1921 and The Cattle-drive in Connaught was published in 1925. The first is another epic redaction; surprisingly, its subject is not ancient Ireland but the Old Testament of the Bible. It tells of Moses' farewell to his people and his ascent onto Mount Nebo.

In Twice Round the Black Church Clarke tells what made him use this particular subject. He was hired as English Assistant at University College, Dublin to replace Thomas Macdonagh, who had died in the Easter Rising, and after his first year there the head Professor of English Language and Philology took him aside and talked to him. It was suggested that "instead of writing about pagan Ireland" he "attempt a religious theme." It so happened that at that time he had been reading a poem by Laurence Binyon called The Death of Adam and it occurred to him that the lonely death of Moses on Mount Nebo after his vision would make a complementary theme. But Clarke's accommodation to the desires of his superiors was not as simple as it seems. As he confesses: "Unfortunately my imagination was stirred by the various pleasures of polygamy which had been permitted by God to the patriarchs under the Old Law: and, to make matters worse, I was tempted, like the Israelites themselves, by the variety of polytheism and so displayed an undue interest in Baal, Ashtaroath, Dagon and other idolatrous figures." And if that were not enough, the writing of such a poem seemed to him a way to create an adequate parable of "our own lean centuries."²⁰ The poem served many purposes for the young Clarke.

Nevertheless Clarke was aware that this subject might seem a bit out of the ordinary to his readers, and in a note to the first edition of the work he explains in yet another way his choice of subject

matter: "In defense of this orientation, this departure from native legend, one can, perhaps plead an Eastern tradition from Lalla Rookh onward."²¹

The poetry of The Fires of Baal is rich but uneven. It is characterized by an extension of both the good and the bad qualities of his first work. There is an abundance of imagery (the description of mountain scenery is perhaps the most striking section of the book). But the narrative again suffers from over-emphasis on description and the description itself pushes Austin Clarke to extremes. It forces him to protract verse sentences --- poetic periods have a tendency to become longer and longer -- some reach almost thirty lines, and the rhythm, as a result, bogs down.

The Sword of the West was to have been the introduction and conclusion of a version of The Tain, epic which encompasses the entire Ulster cycle of legends, and contains the Cuchullin saga and the tales of the wars of the eastern and northern kingdoms for supremacy over all of Ireland. In the forward to the 1921 edition²² Clarke explained that "these verses come from the remote islands and capes of the west where light is still heroic." He went on to account for their length: "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." And the poems do read better aloud than silently. The span of the long poetic periods (breaths) accommodates itself much better to the spoken than to the written word.

As originally published, The Sword of the West is made up of two sections: "Concobar" and "The Death of Cuchullin," each about forty-five pages in length. The first, "Concobar," dated 1918, is in

six sections. The second, "The Death of Cuchullin," dated 1920-21, is in four sections. Only parts of these, much worked over, are reprinted in the Collected Poems of 1936; Clarke did realize that this was among his weakest works. In the Collected Poems the section entitled Gods and Men is made up of revised fragments of The Sword of the West.

"Concobar in Uladh" equals section one of "Concobar"; "The Circuit of Cuchullin" equals section four of "The Death of Cuchullin"; "Our Love there is no Beauty" equals part of section two of "The Death of Cuchullin" with very little revision; "Beyond the great Forest" equals part of section three from "Concobar"; section three of "The Death of Cuchullin" equals "The Music Healers."

With his revisions Clarke made the narrative lines clearer, thus eliminating one of The Sword of the West's chief weaknesses, especially in the section that became "The Music Healers." It had had vague pronoun referents; he often relied heavily on the use of the indefinite pronoun "one": in the later version the many "one's" have been particularized and named. The work is better as it appears in the Collected Poems broken up into small sections because that way the lack of continuity, caused partially by the independent episodic sense of each section and the multitude of personages, is not obtrusive. Another weakness in the 1921 edition, later evaded by deletions and revisions, was that everything seemed to be told as heard second-hand, "O Concobar, I heard" used to introduce a dream or a flashback was a frequently used device. Because this action never went on before our eyes -- there was a weakening in the power of Clarke's epic impulse.

The strengths of this work are those that are common to almost all of Clarke's early work: his descriptive power is highly developed, the vividness of the scenery is one of the most striking elements.

The erotic frankness and the romanticism in "The Music Healers" section are both notable and outstanding. But this section is not as clear as it could/should be: again Clarke assumes too much knowledge on the part of the reader. Yet the theme of the total book is never obscure: man is capable of destroying all things but war.

It has been pointed out²³ that in The Sword of the West imagery excels the rhythm; this is certainly, to a limited extent, true. And since Clarke locates the focal point of the image in the verb, the imagery generally overshadows the narrative line by concealing the action. Yet the rhythm does become more sophisticated than it has yet been in Clarke's work -- internal rhyme is used for the first time. And in section four of "The Death of Cuchullin" there is a steady dactylic rhythm, an unusual departure from the iambic, which one critic²⁴ has assumed was a deliberate attempt by Clarke to imitate the galloping of horses.

Cattledrive in Connaught was first published in 1925. It included two sections of lyrics as well as a long narrative poem from which the book takes its title. Several of the lyrics had appeared before: in The Nation and Athenaeum, The New Statesman, The New Witness, The Irish Statesman, and The Dublin Magazine. All the lyric poems have been reprinted in the section called "Past and Present" in the Collected Poetry of 1936 with the exception of a poem called "Praise." Also, the

title of "If there was nothing noble" was changed to "Since there was nothing noble." "Six Sentences" is not in the original volume; "The Land of Two Mist" becomes "The Country of Two Mists" in the Collected Poetry, and in the original volume "The Circuit of Cuchullin" (revised fragment from The Sword of the West, see above) is printed. "Induction," a short poem about Mannanaun Mac Lir, The Son of Lir, the sea god, introduces "Three Sentences" in the original volume whereas in the 1936 edition the section is framed instead by three sentences at the beginning and six at the end. Each of these "sentences" is both a syntactic and a metrical unit -- one sentence per verse, and thus their titles.

The short poems in this volume are evidence of Clarke's search for a new form; rhyme is not used and strange irregular rhythms appear. Assonance, appearing both internally and at the end of a line, replaces rhyme. In a note in the original edition²⁵ Clarke steers us away from an interpretation of his avoidance of rhyme as a reversion to Gaelic practice: "Although most of these lyrics are based on assonance and feminine, or stopped, rhyme, they are not necessarily an attempt to suggest the intricate prosody and sound of Gaelic verse." However, by the time he came to write the notes for the Collected Poems, he was ready to explain assonance to his readers and he was much less defensive about his own use of it. The simplest use of assonance, Clarke said,²⁶ occurs when the tonic syllable at the end of the line is supported by an assonance in the middle of the next line. He acknowledges that the use of an internal pattern of assonance in English is more limited in its possible range than it is in Gaelic; however, he does believe that it changes the pivotal movement of a lyric stanza. The way the change of pivot is achieved is by rhyming or assonating

only one syllable of a two syllable word at the end of a line. In some forms of the early syllabic Gaelic metres only one part of a polysyllabic word was used in assonance and this practice Clarke adopted as a guide to an experiment in partial rhyme and assonance.²⁷

Clarke sees possibilities for the use of assonance as a medium which is capable of autonomous development in English but he cautions that if it were used as an ornament in addition to ordinary rhyme it would undoubtedly fail. In 1936, he did not shun rhyme entirely in favor of assonance, at least in theory. He wrote, "Assonance, however, 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 celestis'".²⁸

In The Cattedrive in Connaught Clarke's great Tain project makes its last appearance. This work, considered mistitled²⁹ because it never arrives at the actual cattledrive but stops short with the mere introduction of the situation which leads up to the event, recalls the story from Maeve and Ailill's "pillow talk" to MacDara's refusal to give Maeve his bull. In The Cattedrive, written in iambic pentameter blank verse, one can recognize the beginning of Clarke's movement toward the dramatic: the narrative is smoother, tighter than it had been in any of the earlier works, there is considerably more action than Clarke had used up until then and the dialogue has a more prominent place than it has ever before occupied. Although some of the dialogue is stilted and rings false, much of it is animated and some is both sensuous and racy. The descriptions of characters, too, are more realistic and earthy, e.g. Maeve combing the dandruff out of her hair.³⁰

Clarke anticipates the invention of the concertina by about two thousand years, and thereby introduces a note of contemporaneity into an old legend. This is later to become a hallmark of his verse -- the old mingled with the new via intentional anachronism -- a startling way of enunciating eternal recurrence.

With The Cattle-drive in Connaught we come to the end of one phase of Clarke's development. The Vengeance of Fionn, The Sword of the West, The Fires of Baal, and The Cattle-drive in Connaught are all narrative poems, epic in style. Clarke, like Yeats, began with mythology. Although The Fires of Baal is taken from the Pentateuch, the rest of his epic fragments come from Irish mythology: e.g. from the Fenian cycle comes The Vengeance of Fionn and part of The Sword of the West; from the older Red Branch cycle comes The Cattle-drive in Connaught and some of The Sword of the West. Clarke's treatment of Irish legend differs from that of Yeats: his characters are less hazy, more realistically drawn and consequently more epic in stature. Yet, as has been pointed out previously, Clarke's attempt at the epic fails in one strategic way: the narrative line is inevitably weak and is compensated for by overemphasis on description. However, in The Cattle-drive in Connaught there is a noticeable break with his earlier mode: his writing is, on the whole, harder, more realistic, and yet it does not lose its essential romantic quality. It comes as no surprise that The Cattle-drive in Connaught is his last epic attempt, that he realizes he will go no further with his project to tell the tales of Ireland:

The thousand tales of Ireland sink: I leave
Unfinished what I had begun nor count
As again the youthful frenzy of those years;
For I remember my own passing breath,
Man's violence and all the despair of brain
That wind and river took in Glenasmole. 31

From the epic Clarke turned to the lyric. His early lyrics are mostly light, timeless evocations of his Ireland: poems of his travels around Ireland, "The Itinerary of Ua Clerigh"; a typical country pedlar, "The Pedlar"; and a country fair, "The Fair at Windgap." In the addition to the 1936 edition, "Six Sentences," his poetry becomes more topical than it has been as he strikes out self-consciously at the Blacks and Tans --

No man can drink at any public-house
In Dublin but these roarers look for trouble
And break an open door in -- Officer,
When spirits are at hand, the clock is moon:
Command these men, dreadful as what they hold,
Nor think the pockets of a pious poet
Have something worse in them than this poor curse --³²

and his self-righteous countrymen who participated in the Civil War:

I could not praise too hot a heart
Or take a bellows to that blaze,
Yet knowing I would never see him,
I have my hand to Liam Mellowes.

They are the spit of virtue now,
Prating of law and honour,
But we remember how they shot
Rory o'Connor.³³

The events of the 'twenties have hit home and the timeless lyric is no longer Clarke's province -- he despairs"...but O when truth itself/Can hold a despairing tongue, what recompense/To find my name in any mortal mouth?"

The volume Pilgrimage and other Poems was the last volume to appear before the Collected Poems of 1936 -- its contents are transferred to the later volume with the exception of two lyrics "The Scholar" and "The Cardplayer" which, since they are taken from the play A Son of Learning, appear only within it in the Collected Poems volume. There is a commentary³⁴ at the end of the volume in which we can see Clarke's use

of assonance becoming more self-conscious and his defense of it more dogmatic. The note to this volume says that assonance, more elaborate in Gaelic than in Spanish poetry, takes the clapper from the bell of rhyme. At this time, Clarke used "vowel-rhyme" interchangeably with the term "assonance" signalling that he believed that the two terms could be used interchangeably.

In the Pilgrimage volume a new tendency begins to emerge: it is here that the medieval Cashel and Clonmacnoise that were so to hold Clarke's attention are first mentioned. The Middle Ages in Ireland, known to Clarke's readers as the Celtic-Romanesque, with its strong emphasis on monastery life, was the setting for three prose romances and seven plays and much verse that Clarke was to write in the next three decades. It is important to look at the history and literature of medieval Ireland to see why this period tantalized Clarke. Monastic society produced a magnificent flowering of native Irish art: the monumental Celtic Crosses and the manuscript illumination of the Book of Kells are still extant. Other examples of works of the period are the metal-work of the Tara brooch or the Ardagh Chalice, and of course, the still standing Celtic-Romanesque architecture as exemplified by Cormac's Chapel on the Rock of Cashel. It is in Pilgrimage, in the short narrative poem "The Confession of Queen Gormlai," that Clarke first uses the story of Cormac MacCuileanan, the ninth century King-Bishop of Cashel, his wife Gormlai, and the chapel to which he gave his name.

Clarke was drawn to the Catholicism of ninth century Ireland precisely because it was during this epoch that religious sentiment in Ireland reached its artistic apogee. Clarke considered himself a religious man -- in "Black and Tans" he calls himself a "pious poet"³⁵ yet

like Joyce before him, he found himself repelled by the Jansenistic version of Catholicism in which he was brought up as a child in Dublin. To him, it seemed overwhelmed by excessive clericalism (see Chapter Two); he was offended also by its similarity to the practices of the Church of England, commonly thought of as abhorrent and offensive in the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland. In a letter to Augustine Martin he lamented: "I wish we had a small church here as in Brittany, but we seem to have taken over, since the establishment of the Republic, the imperial and evangelical spirit of the British race."

In the title poem of the collection, "Pilgrimage," Clarke recounts a religious pilgrimage to the holy mountain of Croagh Patrick, (a site which still once each year receives its pilgrims and penitents.)

Beyond a rocky townland
And that last tower where ocean
Is dim as haze, a sound
Of wild confession rose:
Black congregations moved
Around the booths of prayer
To hear a saint reprove them;
And from his boat he raised a blessing
To souls that had come down
The holy mountain of the west
Or wailed still in the cloud.³⁷

But the religious ceremony is tinged with a touch of the pagan. Women place pins near wishing wells and tie rags to "guardian" trees as tokens:

When the far south glittered
Behind the grey beaded plains,
And cloudier ships were bitted
Along the pale waves,
The showery breeze -- that plies
A mile from Ara -- stood
And took our boat on sand:
There by dim wells the women tied
A wish on thorn, while rainfall
Was quiet as the turning of books
In the holy schools at dawn.³⁸

In this stanza the monastic is pitted against the secular, the religious against the pagan -- but all is still contained in the rainy backdrop of the Irish countryside, the rendering of which Clarke had perfected in his earlier works.

"Celibacy" is Clarke's first satirical anti-clerical poem:

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.³⁹

He describes a fight with a she-devil, the personification of his desire and lust -- but his struggle is in vain; he failed, as we see in the following phallic passage:

But fiery as the frost
Or bladed light, she drew
The reeds back, when I fought
The arrow-headed airs
That darken on the water.⁴⁰

"The Confession of Queen Gormlai" is a narrative poem which tells the story of Gormlai and her three husbands. Padraic Colum, writing in Dublin Magazine in April 1930, commented on this and the other narrative poems in this volume:⁴¹ ("The Young Woman of Beare" and "The Marriage Night") although their tales do not seem excessively hard to follow for the average reader of poetry, they "have what has been attributed to certain Gaelic poets as a 'profound and noble obscurity in which the meanings glimmer like jewels through troubled water.'" The Singing Men of Cashel, published in 1936, is an expansion of the same tale, dwelling on Gormlai's early years.⁴²

"The Wandering Men" is a humorous satire of the lives of the monks, which stresses their unnecessary asceticism. The reader not familiar with the saints of Irish Catholicism must read carefully the note which tells us that the Great Brigid of the

poem is Saint Brigid.⁴³ The reader could easily assume that this is definitely a poem of opprobrium until he reads Clarke's explanation of Brigid as a saint to whom many miracles of a curious visionary quality, which deal with mental phenomena, are attributed. It is also mentioned that there has been some confusion in legend between the saint and the early Brigid, the Goddess of Fire and Poetic Inspiration. In the poem Brigid comes to the rescue of men wandering lost in the night. She gives them food and ale and lodging. The speaker in the poem "was aware/ of shapes no priest can see, / The centaur at a house of prayer, / The sceptred strangers from the East"⁴⁴ all through that night. But Brigid did not cure him with her erotic wiles; when her women fell asleep all around her, she sat in a carven chair alert. And both she and her house were gone when the men awoke the next morning.

Yet we gave praise to that sky-woman
For wayfare and a vision shown
At night to harmless men who have
No parish of their own.⁴⁵

The reader is left wondering whether the men would ever covet a parish of their own after such an experience.

"The Young Woman of Beare" is a variant on the legend of the old woman of Beare or Berehaven. A well-known figure in country stories, the old woman of Beare had seven periods of youth before her grief began. In an old and Gaelic classic poem she contrasts the privation and suffering of old age to her glorious youth when she had been the object of the King's delight. Clarke acknowledges that the "legend still lives giving nobility to the contrariety of human nature."⁴⁶ Clarke uses her as a vehicle to pit early Ireland and its gay freedom against the restrictions of prohibitionary contemporary Ireland.

The drama of racial consciousness did not attract our elder poets of the Celtic Twilight, though it particularizes that Gaelic poetry with which they were not acquainted at first hand. 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 novelists placed on the condemned list.⁴⁷

The poem is a praise of instinct (as against the codes or laws in present-day Ireland) which sometimes can be satisfied only in private at night:

Gold slots of sunlight
Close up my lids at evening.
Half clad in silken piles
I lie upon a hot cheek.
Half in dream I lie there
Until bad thoughts have bloomed
In flushes of desire.
Drowsy with indulgence,
I please a secret eye
That opens at the Judgement.⁴⁸

Her innocence is accentuated by the harmless beginning to her lascivious life. She playfully cautions others to try to avoid her fate:

Young girls, keep from the dance-hall
And the dark side of the road;
My common ways began
In idle thought and courting.
I strayed the mountain fields
And got a bad name down
In Beare.⁴⁹

She tells of her joys as a mistress but then warns again:

Women, obey the mission
Be modest in your clothes.
Each manly look and wish
Is punished but the more.⁵⁰

She tells of her travels -- how she went off with a sailor, then journeyed home with a Flemish merchant and finally, when she came back to Ireland, even curried pleasure of the President of Munster. Her "wares"

knew no class lines. The mythological woman is timeless -- her warnings ring out as clearly for the present as they did for the past -- yet they are obviously not intended solely to put people on guard but also to criticize the clergy for its too strict orders and for its greediness:

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 they are not unthrifty,
Who spend it in a shame
That brings ill and repentance,
When they might pinch and save
Themselves in lawful pleasure?⁵¹

The Young Woman of Beare, at the end, appears as a forlorn victim of society, now spurned, hoping only to live on in others' dreams. She laments: "I fear, lost and too late, / The prelates of the Church." and ends her monologue wishfully, "I turn a drowsy side -- / That dreams, the eye has known, / May trouble souls to-night."⁵²

Philip Marcus thinks that there is a possibility that Clarke's Young Woman may have served as a prototype for Yeats's Crazy Jane.⁵³ Clarke's poem was published in 1929, a year before the first one of the Crazy Jane series appeared in The New Republic and The London Mercury. Marcus sees ideas and images in Yeats's poems very reminiscent of Clarke, yet Marcus correctly points out that he believes, partly because of its length (he does not single out the other reasons) that Clarke's poem lacks the control of the poems in the Yeats series.

"Aisling" is an English version of an old Gaelic form. It is a vision poem of the type that reached its zenith in the eighteenth century. In the original edition of Pilgrimage, Clarke cites a chapter

on that form in Daniel Corkery's history of eighteenth century Ireland, The Hidden Ireland. The aisling follows a standard pattern: the poet tells how he met a beautiful lady whom he then describes in great detail. This lady always brings good news of the deliverance of Ireland from the English and the return of the Catholic Stuarts to the throne.⁵⁴ Padraic Colum notes that the woman functions as the personification of Ireland who utters prophecy.⁵⁵ Gerard Murphy, in an article on the aisling, also mentions that in the eighteenth century the aisling was usually allegorical and included political prophecy.⁵⁶ Murphy says that the woman appears most often in outdoor surroundings, beneath trees, on a hillside or beside a river. This aisling, the first of several Clarke was to write, fits the pattern: on a hillside and beside a stream the narrator comes upon a young woman and she declares to him: "there is peace."⁵⁷

Pilgrimage has a special place in Clarke's oeuvre technically, as it is in this volume that he first really uses assonantal measures exclusively; and Pilgrimage is probably the first book in English to written in toto in assonantal measure.⁵⁸

In his early poetry, Clarke is attempting to find his own voice, congenial form and subject matter. At first he consciously attaches himself to Irish tradition by using legendary subject matter and by trying his hand at narrative poetry. Never really feeling at ease with narrative, he turns to the shorter lyric and temporarily abandons the legendary Celtic material for more contemporary subject matter. In striving to find himself, in his search for a valid and independent voice, he is thrown up against two issues: one structural, one thematic.

The thematic problem was one of finding the mean between the historic and the contemporary -- between the local and the universal. Yeats had inaugurated the occasional poem; he had lifted it to full dignity by giving maximum intensity to the occasion it celebrated. Clarke did not want to follow in Yeats's footsteps, yet he saw the limitations of the thematic possibilities of the Celtic Romanesque mode and the pitfalls awaiting him in a too narrow confines of the local: its slackening into the provincial, the obscure. Although Clarke's early poetry before 1936 betrays an awareness of this problem he does not find any solutions. As he has recently said⁵⁹ he soon realized that Joyce did not avoid obscurities -- his readers faced up to the difficulties of his work without lessening their total respect for it -- and therefore - he rationalized - there was no reason why his own readers could not and would not do the same. And so, as we shall see, Clarke was to focus solely on Ireland, dealing with its problems in a Swiftean mode: bitter satire softened only by the underlying love of the country so critically examined.

The structural problem however, saw the beginnings of its resolution in these early years. One of Clarke's closest friends and literary advisors, A.E., watched him battling with questions of rhyme and prosody and encouraged him to go back to the assonantal measures of the Gaelic.⁶⁰ With A.E.'s support Clarke began in the late 'twenties and 'thirties what was to become a life-time project: the creation of a valid Anglo-Irish prosody with its roots in Gaelic but its sound suited to and designed ultimately for twentieth century English.

Footnotes - Chapter III

¹A conversation with Clarke during summer 1971 revealed that much of the early poetry now is revised. In its newly revised state it has not yet been published.

²Austin Clarke, Twice Round the Black Church (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1962), p. 29.

³Austin Clarke, The Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1936), p. 263.

⁴Augustine Martin, "The Rediscovery of Austin Clarke," Studies, Winter 1965, p. 410.

⁵David Morton, The Renaissance of Irish Poetry (New York, 1926), pp. 180-181.

⁶Richard Loftus, Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry (Madison: U. of Wisconsin, 1964), p. 259.

⁷Austin Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn (Dublin and London: Maunsel and Roberts, 1917), p. 17.

⁸Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn, p. 2.

⁹Martin, p. 411.

¹⁰G.B. Saul, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke," Celtic Cross (Purdue, 1964), p. 27.

¹¹Douglas Sealy, "Austin Clarke: A Survey of His Work," Dubliner (Jan. Feb. 1963), p. 8.

¹²Padraic Colum, Introduction to Austin Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 11.

¹³Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn, p. 4.

¹⁴Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn, p. 5.

¹⁵Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn, p. 12.

¹⁶Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn, p. 56.

¹⁷Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn, p. 1.

¹⁸Clarke, The Vengeance of Fionn, pp. 55-56.

¹⁹Philip Marcus, Yeats and the Beginnings of the Irish Renaissance (Cornell U. Press: Ithaca, N.Y., 1970), p. 271. "A Cliff Song" a short lyric, was also printed in the first edition of The Vengeance of Fionn,

dated autumn 1916. Except that it is the very earliest printed work of Austin Clarke, it is not notable in any way. It has never been subsequently reprinted. Its subject is the coming of Mæve. It is written in alternate lines of four and three beats; it consists of three alternately rhyming quatrains.

²⁰ Clarke, Twice Round The Black Church, pp. 88-89.

²¹ Austin Clarke, The Fires of Baal (Dublin and London: Maunsel and Roberts, 1921), p. 31. Perhaps A.E. influenced Clarke here and helped him in formulating this rationalization.

²² Austin Clarke, The Sword of the West (London: Maunsel and Roberts, 1921), unnumbered page.

²³ Robert Farren, The Course of Irish Verse (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947), p. 148.

²⁴ Sealy, p. 9.

²⁵ Austin Clarke, The Cattedrive in Connaught (London: Allen and Unwin, 1925.)

²⁶ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 309.

²⁷ A full discussion of the prosody of Clarke's poetry will be found in the appendix.

²⁸ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 309.

²⁹ G.B. Saul, p. 28. There is, at last, a translation of the Tain by the poet Thomas Kinsella. See it for tale. Oxford U. Press, 1970.

³⁰ Clarke, The Cattedrive in Connaught, p. 49.

³¹ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 57.

³² Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 56.

³³ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 56.

³⁴ Clarke, The Son of Learning: A Play in Three Acts (London: Allen and Unwin, 1927), p. 43.

³⁵ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 54.

³⁶ Martin, p. 413.

³⁷ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 87.

³⁸ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 85.

- ³⁹ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 88.
- ⁴⁰ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 89.
- ⁴¹ Padraic Colum, "A Note on Austin Clarke," Dublin Magazine, IV (April 1930), p. 66.
- ⁴² See discussion of Prose Romances, chapter #8.
- ⁴³ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 312.
- ⁴⁴ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 98.
- ⁴⁵ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 98.
- ⁴⁶ Clarke, Pilgrimage, p. 44 and The Collected Poems, p. 312.
- ⁴⁷ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 313.
- ⁴⁸ Clarke, Pilgrimage, p. 24.
- ⁴⁹ Clarke, Pilgrimage, p. 28.
- ⁵⁰ Clarke, Pilgrimage, p. 30.
- ⁵¹ Clarke, Pilgrimage, p. 27.
- ⁵² Clarke, Pilgrimage, p. 34.
- ⁵³ Marcus, p. 261.
- ⁵⁴ Patrick Power, The Story of Anglo-Irish Poetry, 1800-1922 (Cork, Ireland: Mercier), p. 18.
- ⁵⁵ Padraic Colum, "A Note on Austin Clarke," Dublin Magazine, IV No. 2 (April 1930), p. 67.
- ⁵⁶ Gerard Murphy "Notes on Aisling Poetry," Eigse, I (1939), p. 44.
- ⁵⁷ Clarke, The Collected Poems, p. 111.
- ⁵⁸ In the appendix the genesis of Clarke's experimental use of assonance will be analyzed and linked to his desire to write in a particularly Irish mode.
- ⁵⁹ Conversation with Clarke, summer 1971, Dublin, Ireland.
- ⁶⁰ See appendix for full discussion.

CHAPTER IV: The Later Poetry

Austin Clarke's volume of Later Poems, published in 1961, begins with Pilgrimage (1929), discussed in the chapter on earlier poetry. The Later Poems also contains Night and Morning (1938), Ancient Lights (1955), Too Great a Vine (1957), and The Horse-Eaters (1960). These four collections are all but unavailable as published in their original form because Clarke's work between 1938 and 1960 appeared only in private, limited editions of about three hundred copies each, printed on his own press, The Bridge Press, in Templeogue. Many of the poems of this period also appeared, however, in the Dublin Magazine.

Writers do not all react the same way to neglect, though in general, it may be said that Irish writers are not particularly eager to go unnoticed.¹ We can hardly imagine a Wilde, Shaw, or Yeats allowing the world to be apathetic to him. But Clarke felt that even though the country (and the world) did not desire his poems, he would continue to write them-and publish quietly. And therefore he brought them out in severely limited (booklet-like) editions throughout the twenty-year period when he concentrated mainly on drama. Indicative of the neglect shown Clarke in this period is the fact that Yeats, in 1936, the year of the appearance of Clarke's Collected Poems, did not include Clarke in the Oxford Book of Modern Verse which he edited, although he did include a great number of poems by another minor Irish poet, Oliver Gogarty.

The years from 1930 through 1938 were Clarke's least prolific

for verse writing--the twelve poems of Night and Morning are all the new verse that appeared in those years. But this volume, consisting of a dozen poems, is, I believe, Clarke's best until this time--it is the first of the volumes of the middle-late period and marks one of the peaks of his work.² Even the casual reader will see that two elements, flesh and spirit, are clearly confronted and clearly opposed in this transitional book: the struggle between these two forces is real. The setting of medieval monasticism still dominates Night and Morning, but now the historical unquestionably functions as the objective vehicle for some of Clarke's most autobiographical poetry. His reason is at war with his tortured but persistent faith, and the battle rends and torments him. This struggle frees him finally from the historical analogue; at last, in this short volume, he finds his own voice and speaks to us directly and simply.

The contours of the poems vary but there is a thread which undeniably unites them. In the first stanza of the title poem, "Night and Morning," Clarke states the main issue:

Thought can but share
Belief -- and the tormented soul,
Changing confession to despair,
Must wear a borrowed robe. 3

The theme is repeated again and again.

In "Mortal Pride":

When thought of all our thought has crossed
The mind in pain, God only knows
What we must suffer to be lost,
What soul is called our own. 4

In "Tenebrae":

Close as the thought that suffers him,
The habit every man in time
Must wear beneath his ironed shirt. 5

Sarcastically in "Martha Blake":

The flame in heart is never grieved
That pride and intellect
Were cast below, when God revealed
A heaven for this earth. 6

Nostalgically in "Repentance":

When I was younger than the soul
That wakes me now at night, I saw
The mortal mind in such a glory--
...
And I forgot the scale of thought,
Man's lamentation, Judgement hour
That hides the sun in the waters. 7

Despairingly in "The Lucky Coin":

His soul can make a man afraid
And yet thought will endure. 8

Proudly in "Summer Lightning":

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. 9

Resignedly in "The Jewels":

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,
All eyes, terrible as the jewels
And carbons of the consciousness
That waste the night in falsehood? 10

Only in the early poems of the series can Clarke ever
reach catharsis by idealizing the past:

O when all Europe was astir
With echo of learned controversy,
The voice of logic led the choir,
Such quality was in all being,
The forks of heaven and 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.
--from "Night and Morning" 11

and

But thought is older than the years:
Before our doom, it came and went.
--from "Mortal Pride" 12

Now he realizes that the dichotomy is not so much that of the past versus the present (although that is a factor), but of the impossibility of reconciling his experience--and his mature intellectual curiosity--with his youthful faith. He searches for clarity and peace but cannot bear to forfeit either his religious faith or his intellectual freedom. His dilemma is that of modern man in general but it is especially intensified because of his Irish Catholic background, which (in this sense) is identical with that of the James Joyce of both the Dubliners and Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Roscelli explains the general reader's reaction to it well:

Perhaps more than anything else, this sympathetic understanding of the human condition -- the ceaseless quest for Eden which inevitably leads us to the cloister or the bed, which makes ideals into abstractions and turns our lust to ashes, which rips away the last veil of our illusion and leaves us naked in our weakness -- that made Clarke, if not a poet of the foremost rank, nevertheless a vital one for those of us who could still believe in sin. 13

"Night and Morning," the title poem of the collection, is one of Clarke's strongest and most memorable. A celebration of man's pride and intellect, it is a personal statement, not of scorn for the Church but of respect for the achievements of past centuries when the exercise of faith and religion were not at odds with each other. It is clear that

in this poem religion per se is not the object of Clarke's criticism, for Clarke differentiates sharply between religion that depends on mindless, blind faith and devotion and that which grows and enriches itself by including intellectual faith and argument. There should be no difficulty in comprehending Clarke's stance here even though he does not settle for a simplistic solution, pro or anti-religion in toto, but most of his critics, oddly enough, have seized this particular poem as illustration of the obscurity and incomprehensibility of Clarke's poetry. Roscelli's statement is a broad one: "The revival of interest in the poetry of Austin Clarke, occasioned largely by the 1961 publication of his Later Poems, has brought into rather sharp focus one of the most difficult problems with which the literary critic has to wrestle, namely, the relative obscurity of much contemporary poetry."¹⁴ G. B. Saul speaks specifically of "Night and Morning" in hostile tones because he cannot understand it: "The title piece seems an enigma of 'the tormented soul'; and what lines like 'the forks of heaven and this earth/Had met, town-walled, in mortal view' mean, I wouldn't know. The whole book is opaque with an intellectualism that seems to be seeking difficult images and contorted statement (always a sign of the lesser poet), with results sometimes puzzling to the point of bafflement."¹⁵

Clarke is arguing for rationality; he is sure that it is only through the use of untrammelled reason that man can become most human (and thus, paradoxically, most divine):

sum of reason
To elevate a common soul:
Forgotten as the minds that bled
For us, the miracle that raised
A language from the dead. 16

Dejection mars "Mortal Pride": original sin defeats man even before he is aware of it and Clarke is resentful because he feels that it has not only deprived us of joy in procreation, of enjoyment of the physical world, but also, that by its implication of man's limitations, it has robbed us of the ultimate creativity of man's intellect:

Pray, how shall any bride discover
A husband in the state of bliss,
Learn in the curious arms of love
The ancient catechism
Man must obey? She never fears
He will forget the sacrament.
But thought is older than the years:
Before our doom, it came and went. 17

"Tenebrae" takes its name from that office in Holy Week when all the statues in the Church are draped, when all the candles are extinguished one by one to recall the passion of Christ's crucifixion, His sacrifice for the salvation of all mankind. The question the poem raises is whether modern man should accept or reject the Crucifixion--is there evil inherent in that which was worshipped in the past or was it, in truth, 'ideal'? The persona is still much attracted, at least partially, to that which his intellect forces him to reject. One reason he is dogged by dilemma is that that which is opposed to faith is bright and clear but--like the sun--can only seem to illuminate half the world at any one time; the obscurity which inevitably does remain, is paradoxically as disturbing to him as the too transparent brightness:

An open mind disturbs the soul,
And in disdain I turn my back
Upon the sun that makes a show
Of half the world, yet still deny
The pain that lives within the past,
The flame sinking upon the spike,
Darkness that man must dread at last. 18

"Martha Blake," unlike most of the poems in this series, is

not autobiographical. Clarke has created a convincing portrait of a typical, unreflective, pious single (Irish) woman going to morning Mass. Her life and devotions are ritualistic, uncomplicated, never marred by thought. Though Maurice Harmon calls this a "gentle portrait"¹⁹ it is far from gentle; it is Clarke's first satire--its biting humor and criticism are unmistakable:

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.

Her soul is lying in the Presence
Until her senses, one
By one, desiring to attend her,
Come as for feast and run
So fast to share the sacrament,
Her mouth must mother them:
'Sweet tooth grow wise, lip, gum be gentle,
I touch a purple hem.'

Afflicted by that love she turns
To multiply her praise,
Goes over all the foolish words
And finds they are the same;
But now she feels within her breast
Such calm that she is silent,
For soul can never be immodest
Where body may not listen. 20

Critics of Clarke have avoided exegesis of "Repentance" because of its alleged difficulty. Robert Farren, co-founder with Clarke of the Dublin Verse Speaking Society, is one of the few who have anything to say about it at all:

In it he speaks so arcanelly, lurks and skulks
in such pitchy corners of language, that what he
says is often matter for debate...(and)...still though
one can, with certain confidence, conjecture its
general drift, and some of its detail, details
remain which obscure entire understanding. 21

"Repentance" is an intensely personal poem bearing many similarities to the confessional poems of other modern poets, e.g., those of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. Clarke, strangely enough, most likely not unaware of the modern tradition, cites as analogue for this type of poem the confessional poems which were a recognized literary form in Gaelic until the eighteenth century.²² In this poem, Clarke recalls the time when he found escape and relief from his problems by travelling to the west of Ireland. Nature was cathartic for him then: "I felt/Repentance gushing from the rock"²³ but now his soul wakes him at night and he regretfully admits that nature and youth have been replaced by ritual and age:

I count the sorrowful mysteries
Of earth before the celebrant
Has turned to wash his mouth in wine.
The soul is confined to a holy vessel,
And intellect less than desire.
O I will stay to the last Gospel,
Cupping my heart with prayer:
Knuckle and knee are all we know
When the mind is half despairing. 24

The countryside of Connaught was for him a place replete with the awe and terror of the ages (the historical--reference to Patric--now linked to the geographical). The inhabitants of Connaught have their religion, and he believes, their fervor too:

No story handed down in Connaught
Can cheat a man, nor any learning
Keep the fire in, turn his folly
From thinking of that book in Heaven. 25

He wonders if he could strip himself enough to join their company:

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? 26

"The Lucky Coin" praises time past, pre-Rising days when there was greater individual liberty, less materialism and when religious activity was not as constraining and all encompassing as it has become:

Turning in cartwheels on the fairground,
The sun was hastier --
That strolling girls might have for dowry,
Two hands about a waist;
Men voted for the Liberator
After the booths were closed
And only those in failing health
Remembered their own souls. 27

The Rising and its aftermath freed the Irish from the English but resulted in restrictions on the Irish themselves; they were freed from external control, but significantly, they were still (or possibly became?) prisoners of their own minds:

But when our dread of the unseen
Has rifled hole and corner
How shall we praise the men that freed us
From everything but thought. 28

"The Straying Student" is one of Clarke's most anthologized poems, and for good reason. It is a central poem: it explores love, chastity, religion, clericalism, art, faith, and intellectual reason, pitting one against another in the portrait of an eighteenth century Irish scholar from Inishmore who had gone to Salamanca to study for the priesthood, but had been sent home a failure. In Clarke's poem we find a man who has been drawn in by the secular world of the imagination, the intellect and the instincts. As a youth the scholar could not welcome the austerity of the priesthood with its rigid logic; he desired a fuller life encompassing a shameless embracing of secular goods, symbolized by the vision of woman, the prototype of the secular:

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. 29

When age brings the scholar the wisdom of experience, no longer are the conflicting claims of faith and reason, flesh and spirit so easy to live with in Ireland; he fears that in the end the physical, the secular may desert him:

Awake or in my sleep, I have no peace now,
Before the ball is struck, my breath has gone,
And yet 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. 30

In "No Recompense" Clarke's assurance falters; he plumbs the depths, questions the efficacy of the very truth itself:

Quality, number and the sweet divisions
Of reason may forget their schoolmen now,
And door-chill, body's heat, anger of vein
Bring madness in our sleep. I have endured
The enmity of my own mind that feared
No argument; but O when truth itself
Can hold a despairing tongue, what recompense
To find my name in any mortal mouth? 31

The terror-stricken "Summer Lightning" is the forerunner of Mnemosyne Lay in Dust, a nightmare, intense and moving, of men in a sanitarium. No less autobiographical than the rest of the poems in this series, since Clarke did have a breakdown when he was in his twenties and spent some time hospitalized,³² it reminds us again of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, other contemporary narrators of nightmare. It is a fitting sequel to "No Recompense" and the poems that preceded it: Clarke has discovered, to his horror, that he cannot reconcile his mature experience with his youthful faith.

In the last poem of the series, "The Jewels," although he bemoans the more perfect past we can see that he finally accepts his fate:

The crumbling centuries are thrust
In hands that are too frail for them
And we, who squabble with our dust,
Have learned in anguish to dissemble;

Yet taken in the darkest need
Of mind, no faith makes me ashamed.
Whether the breath is foul or sweet
The truth is still the same. 33

Now it is childhood with its innocence intact that receives the idealization:

But O to think, when I was younger
And could not tell the difference,
God lay upon this tongue. 34

Clarke's next volume, Ancient Lights, did not appear until 1955.

Certain changes are immediately evident in this new book: the subjects of the poems are less autobiographical, less introspective. Overt satire is the chief method used in this book of many occasional poems. The language is full of wit and irony, the social comment pointed, astringent and lively. Ancient Lights is more akin to the two books that follow it (Too Great a Vine and The Horse-eaters) than to those which precede it. The poems in all of these last three volumes grouped in the Later Poems are largely religious and/or political in connotation. The focus has turned from that of the individual soul in torment to an all-encompassing concern for the dignity of man: the sense of public responsibility has become more pronounced.

As Clarke's satires have become more overt, the objects of his criticism have become more particular and therefore, more limited. A change in stance has occurred--before Clarke seemed to refrain consciously from making moral judgments: in these three volumes, by comparison, he becomes almost dogmatic. His satire is almost exclusively anti-clerical and gives him a sense of release, a new catharsis. He has moved away from the Middle Ages (the Celtic Romanesque) as setting; he now concentrates on current issues and problems specifically and directly.

The tone of these poems is markedly different from those that preceded them: the earlier poems sometimes mocked, but they mocked indirectly and gently and always almost with humor. These are harsher, more deliberate, often bitter and wry.

Clarke's poetic technique, too, underwent a change in the years between 1938-1955. Personalized description was replaced by precise photographic reproduction of detail,³⁵ similes gave way to puns. The natural speech patterns which often marked the early poetry are increasingly replaced by the clipped, the compressed, the elliptical. Clarke had sometimes in the past made verbs into nouns; this practice now became more common; definite articles and conjunctions were now frequently eliminated to achieve the desired tightness.

Ancient Lights is all assonantal; when traditional rhyme is used it is only off the beat, on the unstressed part of the foot. Donald Davie, in a review of Ancient Lights, commented³⁶ on this innovative technique, deciding that it changed the pivotal movement of the regular lyric stanza. This was no small achievement: "...the reader who knows no Irish can applaud this effect (if the poems were better known, it could be a momentous innovation in the whole tradition of Anglo-American verse) while having only a hazy idea of the way in which it is done."³⁷ Davie does think, however, that most of the poems in Ancient Lights go out of their way to be provincial in presentation and range of subject matter, though they do it with a technique that has been purged of the provincial and should be taken, he strongly urges, into the tradition of English poetry wherever it is written.³⁸

There has been much criticism of Clarke's unexpected swerve in subject from the general to the particular; it is held by some that many of his themes are too petty to sustain great metaphor. Augustine Martin believes³⁹ that he has relinquished his satirical authority and lapsed into mere controversy, that "one constantly gets the picture of the poet as soldier cut off and surrounded in enemy territory snip-

ing nervously at almost everything that moves." It is true that this later work is more tense than that which preceded it; it rarely laughs or sings because of the contemporary issues Clarke selects to write on; it is also often difficult to identify (especially for the non-Irish reader) the local references and allusions. Many of the poems from Ancient Lights on have more of specific social commentary than general universal themes. This practice has been widely criticized and seen as a major flaw in Clarke's work. "This refusal to universalize the themes, so far as to let into the secret those who happen not to be Irishmen of a particular generation, seems nothing short of perverse."⁴⁰

Clarke's focus has changed dramatically and this change is interesting to chart: the poetry Clarke wrote before Ancient Lights was set mostly in the past, while those poems in the present were mainly personal, autobiographical; in Ancient Lights thirteen of the eighteen poems are on contemporary subjects--and this emphasis remains in the rest of the Later Poems volume--of the fifteen poems in Too Great a Vine, twelve are on current public subjects, and all but one of The Horse-eaters poems follow the same pattern.

Most of the public and satiric poems are more direct than the first one in Ancient Lights, a poem of much density. "Celebrations," the poem with which Ancient Lights begins, has received much critical comment. The most likely reason for the attention is that although it is tantalizing poetically, its meaning is not immediately clear even to the sensitive reader of poetry because of its unusual concentration and its being riddled with oblique allusions to contemporary and historical Irish occurrences. It has been said: "The elaborate internal structure here, with its compressed and suggestive use of word, is very much in

the manner of Finnegan's Wake."⁴¹ However exaggerated that may be, the poem is a difficult one, and Clarke has acknowledged our need to know some "facts" as aids to our reading. In his notes to the volume, he states almost apologetically:

In the Oxford Book of Irish Verse, one of the Editors, Donagh MacDonagh, thought it necessary to add a note when including this poem so he wrote in his introduction: "Here it is necessary for reader or critic to know that the 'Celebrations' with which the poem deals are the Dublin Eucharistic Congress of 1932, that the Papal colours are yellow and white, with crossed keys, while the Irish flag is green, white and yellow." The following details may be added: The Rebellion started on Easter Monday 1916. Over the gateway of Dublin Castle there is a statue of Justice. During the Civil War, seventy Republicans were executed by the Provisional Government. Between 1936-46, when the Republican Government was in power, of the small group of political intransigents, four were shot without trial, four were shot by firing squad, one was hanged by Pierpoint, and three died on hunger strike. 42

Two of the critics who give the poem most detailed exegeses have, I believe, gone a little too far. Of the first line--"who dares complain or be ashamed" they note that it insists for full power on the reader's knowledge of two patriotic songs which they think it consciously echoes: "Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight" dealing with the Insurrection of 1798 and "Who fears to speak of Easter Week?" dealing with the Easter Rising. However much Clarke was aware of or intended both these reverberations, I do not believe it is necessary to hear them to appreciate the poem fully.⁴²

In general, the poem⁴⁴ reflects upon and summarizes the changes between Ireland before 1916 and Ireland today: the mood and spirit are contrasted in jibes at the religious and political materialism

that are the current manifestations of what used to be simple faith. Prosperity is now complacently enjoyed and celebrated in a small country religiously and politically divided:

We have uncrowned the past:
And open hearts are celebrating
Prosperity of church and state
In the shade of Dublin Castle. 45

The ironies explore and expose the expensive tyranny which lurks not far behind the brightly decorated facade of freedom and happiness. Cooney has stated the theme and intent accurately and succinctly: "The poem's real purpose is quite the opposite of the imagined speaker's; it is to expose the faults and corruptions of Irish society and to invoke and assert the values by which this society must be judged."⁴⁶ It is only in the last three lines;

No steeple topped the scale that Monday,
Rebel souls had cost their savings,⁴⁷
And the looters braved the street,

that the commemorative aspect, the ironical statement goes completely undisguised and the depth of the bitterness at the betrayal of the promise of the Irish Rebellion is expressed.⁴⁸

"Three Poems about Children" deal with the burning of an orphanage in County Cavan in which sixty children, trapped in an upper dormitory, without fire escape, perished. The three poems, Clarke notes,⁴⁹ were inspired by the statement of a local bishop. It is important to realize that this orphanage was under the supervision of the Church even though it was some distance from the main convent building and was under the charge of a lay woman. In Ireland orphanages are mainly for children born out of wedlock; these children are condemned to spend their lives in religious institutions.

Clarke's method is direct and forceful; he needs no symbols here--his speech is simple:

Better the book against the rock,
The misery of roofless faith,
Than all this mockery of time,
Eternalising of mute souls. 50

The poem grows out of a close interweaving of two different feelings: anger and compassion. The anger unburdens itself in bitter satire against the insufficient precautions that the Church has undertaken in its wordly duties as well as the insufficient consolations with which such a gruesome event is explained away.

The second poem comments on the official Catholic attitude toward infants who die without benefit of baptism: they must go to Limbo and never see Heaven:

These infants die too quick
For our salvation, caught up
By a fatal sign from Limbo,
Unfathered in our thought
Before they can share the sky
With us. 51

In the third and final poem Clarke begins by making us recall the usual death by fire, reserved only for martyrs and heretics. In the third line the satiric vein breaks through:

But smoke of faith on fire
Can hide us from enquiry
And trust in Providence
Rid us of vain expense. 52

The first stanza of the third poem ends by sardonically asking the reader why he should feel pity since this event has set no church-bell tolling (the tolling of the church-bell would have been the sure sign of a blessed death in the eyes of God and Church.)

In the last stanza Clarke wryly paraphrases the Church author-

ities:

Has not a Bishop declared
That flame-wrapped babes are spared
Our life-time of temptation? 53

Horst Oppel has not exaggerated the uncompromising effect these words
must have:

Wenn an dem Trostwort des Bischofs wirklich etwas
wäre, so würde es besagen, dass jeder glücklich
zu schätzen ist, der überhaupt nicht geboren wird.
Das hiesse den Sinn und den Wert des Lebens leugnen,
--damit auch den Sinn desjenigen, der Leben geschaffen
hat. Das Wort des Bischofs kehrt sich gar nicht gegen
uns, sondern es kehrt sich gegen Gott, dem er doch
eigentlich dienen müsste. 54

The poem ends solemnly but not without sarcasm: because the
children were burned ('charred') on this earth they do not need to en-
dure hell-fire:

Those children, charred in Cavan,
Passed straight through Hell to Heaven. 55

This poem, with its concrete and finite specificity, nevertheless moves
us beyond the particular to the universal; Clarke is able to do this with
very simple diction and an economical use of metaphor. His structures
are tight and disciplined, his compassion direct, sincere and honest.

Over and over he rails against the Church: in "Offerings" and
"Bequests" it is their money-grubbing that especially disturbs him:

When money burns in the last breath
Of frightened age, such bells are set
In air, their tongues will stick at nothing
Until religious institutions
Have storied every contribution. 56

The title-poem of the volume Ancient Lights is the most auto-
biographical in the book. It much resembles the verse of "Night and
Morning" in its mingling of confession and the recollection of an in-

hibited, fear-ridden childhood:

But darkness
Was roomed with fears. Sleep, stripped by woes
I had been taught, beat door, leaped landing,
Lied down the bannisters of naught.

Being sent to penance, come Saturday,
I shuffled slower than my sins should.
My fears were candle-spiked at the side-shrines,
Rays lengthened them in stained-glass. 57

The first stanzas of the poem deal with the trauma of confinement in the confessional and the attempts to constrict a little boy's mind. Escape from the church and its limitations of the imagination open up a new freedom for the young boy; he can read its lesson because he sees there among the sparrows a caged-bird with whom he identifies:

Once as I crept from the church-steps,
Beside myself, the air opened
On purpose. Nature read in a flutter
An evening lesson above my head.
Atwirl beyond the leadings, corbels,
A cage-bird came among sparrows
(The moral inescapable)
Plucked, roof-mired, all in mad bits. 0
The pizzicato of its wires! 58

On his way home it began to rain and he had to take shelter at the door of the Protestant Church; in the rain he was cleansed, absolved:

There, walled by heresy, my fears
Were solved. I had absolved myself:
Feast-day effulgence, as though I gained
For life a plenary indulgence. 59

It was then that he realized that the Church is not the completely cathartic; although it can forgive us, the Church does not offer man's final salvation. Man is always only human, and original sin is forever united with the act of thought which the contemporary Church, hypocritically, Clarke believes, stifles. Upon reaching this conclusion, the culmination of all his struggle in Night and Morning and Ancient Lights, Clarke pro-

duced one of his most memorable stanzas. In it, the particular is forever subsumed by the universal, and is symbolized by the world of poetry:

What Sunday clothes can change us now
Or humble orders in black and white?
Stinking with centuries the act
Of thought. So think, man, as Augustine
Did, dread the ink-bespattered ex-monk,
And keep your name. No, let me abandon
Night's jakes. Self-persecuted of late
Among the hatreds of rent Europe,
Poetry burns at a different stake. 60

It seems to me that Roscelli is less than cogent when he says of such a poem that:

The poet is rigorous in his refusal to relate his experience to our own, and rightly so, for the primary function of the lyric is to explain the metamorphosis of Austin Clarke.

and then goes on to say:

What is disturbing about "Ancient Lights," however, is that it delineates in highly compressed form a mystical experience which few readers, if any, can share. The events, the place-names, the allusions the images which are obviously so meaningful to the poet can evoke from the reader only the vaguest sort of response. At least in Night and Morning there were the undercurrents of passion, the appeals to humanism and to history, and the sense of loss and insecurity to guide us; but after the third stanza of 'Ancient Lights' we can follow the poet only with the greatest difficulty. We do not feel the magic effects which the birds in Rutland Square and the Black Church in Mountjoy Street wrought upon him. We are not participants in this poem; we are auditors merely. 61

The craft of this poem embodies, I believe, Clarke's finest intricacies. The total experience is unified by its use of sacramental imagery (knot) and the phallic is obvious in the phrase "My fears were candle-spiked at side-shrines." "My grief bowed down" "an evening lesson" "sparrow at nails" stand out most clearly, but there is also the mock sacramental

"and all around the spires of Dublin/ Such swallowing in the air" and finally "such cowling/ To keep high offices pure"⁶² which Augustine Martin points out has at least a double meaning:

(An essay might be written on the associative potency of 'cowling' in the context: most obviously there is the monastic cowl beneath which the monk shelters, representing the indoor world of observance which the poet is running from, a world which in turn resists the miraculous outdoor 'services' of nature. Secondly the chimney cowl turns in the gale, in a sense frustrating the cleansing process of rain and wind: keeps the 'high offices' of ecclesiastical worship 'pure' by keeping out the elemental influence of nature, the rain. One assumes an irony on 'pure'.)⁶³

Internal phonological links make up most of the complicated music of this poem:

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

The sun came out, new smoke flew up,
The gutters of the Black Church rang
With services. Waste water mocked
The ballcocks: down-pipes sparrowing,
And all around the spires of Dublin
Such swallowing in the air, such cowling
To keep high offices pure: I heard
From shore to shore, the iron gratings
Take half our heavens with a roar. ⁶⁴

Following "Ancient Lights" there are several occasional poems: one about state-control and the commemorative Marian Year Stamp (1954) called "Mother and Child," one in memory of James Larkin, Labour leader of the common people in the struggle for economic rights during the Lockout of 1913, called "Inscription of a Headstone" and "An Early Start," a criticism of the purchase of a new and bigger bell by the Church.

"The Blackbird of Derrycain" appears in the play As the Crow Flies.⁶⁵ Full of rich assonantal music, it is a simple lyric, a free

translation of Binn Sin a Luin Doire an Chairn, one of the early Ossianic lays.⁶⁶ Robert Farren, co-founder of the Dublin Verse Speaking Society, is the only critic who has ever mentioned this poem. His praise seems, to the non-Irish, non-Gaelic reader, a bit exaggerated:

This lyric could be the subject of a long, luminous analysis, but I will say no more here than this: that every vowel, and every rest fit into place here like pieces of stained-glass, and that the thought and feeling come through like sunlight to make all the colours glow. It is as Irish as Cormac's Chapel in Cashel, something the world has had from us, and would not otherwise have found.⁶⁷

"The Envy of Poor Lovers" describes the lack of privacy lovers have in Ireland, their envy both of those securely married and at home in their own houses; and of the tolerance shown of the unmarried young elsewhere:

Lying in the grass as if it were a sin
To move, they hold each other's breath, tremble,
Ready to share that ancient dread--kisses begin
Again--of Ireland keeping company with them.⁶⁸

In the last poem in the book, "Return from England," Clarke sleeplessly longs for England where, regrettably, things were not much better: jobs were not readily available there either, but there, at least, the wrongs of the Catholic Church did not daily haunt him:

But mind, pretending pity,
Unslaves me in like haste,
Only to take me closer
With some new tale of wrong here,
Holy retreat of tongue.
When I had brought my wife
And children, wave over wave,
From exile, could I have known
That I would sleep in England
Still, lie awake at home?⁶⁹

Clarke's next volume, Too Great A Vine, was published in an edition limited to two hundred copies. It too is made up of poems mostly

religious and/or political. In the explanatory notes to the volume he tells an anecdote about his great-grandfather which sardonically dramatizes what he assumes is also his position--an eccentric old man who is a marginal commentator at best.

A great-grandfather of mine, who was a skinner, lived in the Liberties of Dublin and had a tannery in Watling Street, near Usher's Quay. In his later years he seems to have become eccentric for he wore wigs of different colour during the week. He amused himself by writing occasional verses of a satiric kind about his fellow-traders and got the ballad singers from Thomas Street to recite these outside their shop-doors. 70

He attests (in these notes) to having few personal interests left and therefore has made an attempt to concentrate on local notions and concerns which he says "are more important than we are, keep us employed, and last long."⁷¹ With two exceptions--a sonnet entitled "The Trial of Robert Emmet" and an experiment in rime-riche, all the poems in the volume were written within a two week period. Clarke notes that this fact accounts for the continuity of mood throughout the volume. It seems also to account for the consistency in technique: although there is much assonance, there is also considerable perfect rhyme.

Roscelli, who has done the most significant criticism on this volume to date, has commented that the dominating factors in Clarke's vision are now his disillusion and rejection, and that his illusions of faith and romance have disappeared, brutally destroyed by his mature experience.⁷² Clarke's myopia, Roscelli suggests, has left him with a world without God or sin (a severe exaggeration, I believe) --power and desire are the only components left to him in a world all of whose tastes and values he must reject.⁷³ Roscelli's view is to be contested,

I think; Clarke does not reject, though he does criticize--and his criticism is generated by respect for country and of Church; he wants to help his countrymen "see" their faults and correct them.

In this book Clarke's satire has become somewhat more virulent. He explains quite humorously to us that this increase in intensity is entirely intentional. "In their notices of Ancient Lights: Poems and Satires, a few critics suggested that some of the pieces were too mild to be called satires."⁷⁴ And he hopes here to have made amends.

The first poem in this volume, "Usufruct," is one of the two autobiographical poems in the volume (the other is "Loss of Strength") describes his feelings about the house in which he lives: it was deeded by his mother to the Church, not to him, but the Church has given him permission to remain there. His mother's intent was good, but slightly far-fetched and frivolous:

My mother wore no rural curch
Yet left her savings to the Church,
That she might aid me by-and-by,
Somewhere beyond the threatening sky. 75

His feelings about the place are mixed--he wants to stay in Ireland because it is his home, but he is eager to leave, "ready to flit"⁷⁶ because of the suffocating effect the Church inflicts on all--"Ireland was never lay." He envies the impulsive nature of the kingfisher who swoops down on its prey:

The kingfisher, too seldom seen,
Is warier than I am. Flash
Of inspiration makes thought rash. 77

"Abbey Theatre Fire" scorns the men who plan to demolish the old Abbey Theatre for the purpose of building a new one with a more im-

posing facade and a hundred extra seats;⁷⁸ Clarke knows the fire is only an excuse for the Directors to demolish the theatre--it had not been seriously damaged. Their plan is a waste of money: the theatre had been good enough for Yeats, and that, Clarke attests, is an excellent credential for any theatre:

Pride made of Yeats a rhetorician.
He would have called them knave or clown,
The playwright, poet, politician,
Who pull his Abbey Theatre down.
Scene-dock and wardrobe choked with rage,
When warriors in helmets saved
The auditorium and stage.
Forgetting our age, he waved and raved
Of Art and thought her Memory's daughter.
Those firemen might have spared their water. 78

"Wolfe Tone" is a lament for the father of Irish Republicanism who was regarded with suspicion. It acknowledges Thomas Davis, too, by referring to Davis's statue, which was blown up.

"Miss Marnell" is a portrait of the religious mania of an elderly spinster who was a convert to Catholicism. Miss Marnell had no material riches, no maid, but it was assumed that before her conversion she had been well-to-do:

She had become a Catholic
So long ago, we smiled, did good by stealth,
Bade her good-day, invited her to tea
With deep respect. Forgetting her loss of wealth,
She took barmbrack and cake so hungrily,
We pitied her, wondered about her past. 80

It was discovered after she had been taken away insane that she had wardrobes full of silkdresses and still had money in the bank. The money she never spent on herself (it went to convents and colleges and missions in Africa). Clarke castigates the Church and its acceptance of her hoarded money spent in false anticipation of its redemptive powers: "The figure

of her cross-cheque made restitution/For many sins."

In "Local Complainer" Clarke expresses his annoyance at the ugly, expensive religious statuary being erected all over Ireland; the money, he believes, for this kind of extravagance, would be better spent on Ireland's dying industry:

Their new Madonna at the quay-side,
Without a vessel in the tide-way,
White flower and stem of grace, but sea-ghost
When day and night are dim, has cost them
Eight hundred pounds: cut, dressed and chiselled,
The best Italian marble. In welcome
The clergy came, the Mayor with gowmsmen,
Past derelicts of mill and warehouse
That bulge with emptiness. 81

The "Loss of Strength" is one of the longest poems Clarke had yet written--it is also one of his best. John Montague, praising it in Poetry has called it "a sort of abbreviated local version of the Four Quartets implying a judgement on an entire culture."⁸² Like most of Clarke's best poetry to date, it is under tight technical control and its subject is intimately autobiographical: it focuses on Clarke's relationship to past and present. Although it contains much history, it effectively balances public events with personal.

Combining Romanticism's exaltation of nature and Modernism's disillusioned glance at the contemporary polis, it begins with the celebration of a babbling brook, one of the few waterways not yet submerged under pavement by civilization's "amenities." Its freedom is symbolic for Clarke, who envies anything that has not been constrained by the metropolis of modern civilization.

Farm-brooks that come down to Rathfarnham
By grange-wall, tree-stop, from the hills,
Might never have heard the rustle in barn dance,
The sluicing, bolting, of their flour-mills,

Nor have been of use in the steady reel
On step-boards of the iron wheel-rim,
For Dublin crowds them in: they wheeze now
Beneath new pavements, name old laneways,
Discharge, excrete, their centuries
Man-trapped in concrete, deeper drainage.
Yet, littling by itself, I found one
That had never run to town. 83

He recalls the days when he bicycled around Ireland and compares those days to the present, aged, less idealistic period of his life:

I climb among the hills no more
To taste a last water, hide in cloud-mist
From sheep and goat. The days are downpour,
Cycle is gone, warm patch on trousers.
All, all, drive faster, stink without
Spirit and spark within, no doubt.
When hope was active, I stood taller
Than my own sons. 84

He sought solitude in the hills of Ireland, "The young must have a solitude/To feel the strength in mind," and direct experience with the folklore of the countryside: "I wanted test of stories/Our poets had talked about."⁸⁵ He compares the richness of legend he found with modern industrialization's destruction of legendary settings.

In one tour-de-force stanza he unites many themes--his fear and the inhibitions of childhood (in Freudian manner joined with water symbolism), his anger at the destruction of nature for electrical power for industry, and his assessment of nature as the repository of the legendary and the wise, e.g., the omniscience of the salmon at the Falls of Assaroe:⁸⁶

My childish dreams were devildom.
Sleep rose and sank: the Great Flood waked me,
Reservoir at low level! Come,
Dear rain and save our Roundwood Lake!
Should man complain of plans that curb
Torrent in turbine? Great disturbance:
The hush of light. Why keep with Fintan
The Falls of Assaroe, trample
Of transmigration, void of man
In shape of salmon? Those currents were ample.

Voltage has turned them, riddle and all,
To a piddle and a blank wall. 87

The Church's encouragement of celibacy and its implications have irked, thwarted and haunted Clarke throughout his life. He has found warrant in all of Irish history (including his beloved Celtic-Romanesque period, the age of the monastery), to whittle away at the Church's denigration of women and marriage.

Celibacy is our best rule still,
Restraint increasing its adherents.
Stuck-honey embitters. Though the schoolmen
Denounce our senses, what can fear add?
Let women masculate with hair-cuts,
Piety hates their very guts
But makes no comment on what shortens.
Refrain, poor sight, for much goes bare:
Walking temptations, visible mortal
Sins, church'd by fashion. Fewer stare now.
Layman watches the theologian,
Both, us. A cogent clan. 88

In lines from which come the book's title, he traces Ireland's present problem to those very medieval saints he has so often admired.

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. 89

Clarke ends, in despair, admitting that his poetry seemed not to help change things, that legend and verse no longer bring comfort to him, that all that is left is the countryside itself; he concludes with the emblem of hope with which he began: streams, cleansing and running free.

Loss but repeals the startling legend
Of time. A poet wants no more
To palliate his mind, edging
Worn cards behind a shaky door
Or tinting them until the puce
Shuffle the purple. May the Deuce
Take all of them and thought get better

While faith and country play a far hand!
Plod on, tired rhyme. The streams that wetted
Forgotten wheels push past Rathfarnham,
Half-underground: slime steps on stone,
I count them--not my own. 90

Throughout the poem Clarke's instinctive sympathy for the early Irish Church reverberates as he bitterly cites the Norman invasion which submerged the national uniqueness of the Celtic-Romanesque. He draws a parallel between the contemporary power of the Irish Church with its centralizing effect and the intrusion of the Norman and Continental Church.

The first poem in The Horse-Eaters, "Intercessors," returns to an already familiar "saw" of Clarke's: a pejorative portrait of the swarms of nuns shopping in Dublin Streets, sharing in the materialistic greed of the metropolis. There are too many intercessors between man and God in Dublin: "Flattered by their numbers and display,/ We break their vows with a smile." And yet it is not contradictory for him to view them as the occupying army, comparable to the British imperialists:

No rebel guessed
Prayer and retreat would sanctify unrest,
When Britain took the garrisons away, 91

In "Irish-American Dignitary" Clarke humorously catches the speed of the Irish-American priest's sojourn with a telegraphic technique--bereft of most definite and indefinite articles. The speed Clarke imitates is the speed of almost any twentieth century air-borne dignitary, but the diary of his day is especially poignant as he is probably an expatriate Irishman who has become but a mechanized robot:

Glanced down at Shannon from the sky-way
With his attendant clergy, stayed night
In Dublin, but whole day with us
To find his father's cot, now dust
And rubble, bless new church, school buildings
At Glantworth, drive to Spangle Hill

And cut first sod, hear, answer, fine speeches,
Accept a learned gown, freedom
Of ancient city, so many kissing
His ring -- God love him! -- almost missed
The waiting liner: that day in Cork
Had scarcely time for knife and fork. 92

"Knacker Rhymes" is the first of many poems which berate the Irish for exporting horse-meat. Clarke was upset at the cruelty to which the horses of Ireland were subjected--the title of this book reflects his great concern--he disdained the protective societies which, instead of condemning all horse-trade, advocated domestic slaughtering as a new possibility for a lucrative national industry. Clarke would like to see horses ridden again and pleads, though with some humor, with the rich for them to

Forget the horse-slaughter,
Lies, argument, speeches,
And see that your daughter,
Expensively breeched,
Capped, jacketed, learn
How to ride in the suburb
And prove what you earn now
By showing her seat. 93

"Christmas Eve-Dublin, 1959," which is the commemoration of a riot in Dublin on that night, charts the disillusionment of both the young and the converted. Here Clarke seems to be caught in between: he understands why the riot happened, and he sympathizes with those who could not possibly have had faith because of the contemporary degradation of the Church; yet there is still a trace of the Christian believer in the tone of this poem. It is as if Clarke condones or overlooks the tempestuous, the way it was either condoned or overlooked in the past--and believes the true faith can and will endure.

"The Flock at Dawn" is a middling length autobiographical poem.

In it Clarke speaks of his alienation from rhyme:

Rhyme, doting too near my pillow, hesitated,
Fled on a mocking note because I sleep
Alone now, having re-wooed her much too late
For open arms. 94

His dreams, by self-acknowledgement "unseemly,"⁹⁵ are always his ultimate source of redemption. These salvations are his life, his poetry, and, as this poem demonstrates, Nature too:

Hearing mistook the spot. No rhyme but the jackdaw
Who glosses a neighbourly fir-branch with his beak
And wants to be my tenant, left that caw.
Already the starling, tall as his twitter and tweak,
Was spangling himself, nearby, upon the gutter.
I turned, sheeting my doubtful self, and drowsed
While pinchbeck stims were inching past the shutter
Edges; then suddenly thought of that mighty unhousing
A mile away, rooks elming in a flock
Above Rathfarnham Castle, hunger in bits,
Whirring, time-struck, its own alarum clock:
Thousandfold call, not one, for Jesuits
In elmy, shadowy bedrooms, their birettas,
Soutanes off, spiritual weapons racked. 96

As usual, there is at least a moment of railing against what Catholicism is doing to-and not for-his beloved country:

A land of pious turncoats! Still in tatters,
The Penal Laws, half-mindless, mumble woes
Outside our city churches. 97

The raison d'être and function of his poetic satire is humbly expressed:

Satire owns to pride
And poetry is what we dare express
When its neglect has been personified. 98

He acknowledges that the language the Irish use is not their own but that it does not seem to matter now--and the question of language certainly does not disturb him as much as what his own countrymen have done to Ireland:

The English language
Was loopholed here for centuries. But the night
That Edmund jumped the wave-tops -- faerie castle
A torch -- our rivers ran with Thames to spite us.

We lost in that war of words. The syllables
Which measure all delight: mouth-exile. Scansion's
Our darling fondled over sea.

Who cares? 99

The nature Clarke worships is not simply Mother Nature, but is joined
unquestionably with the nature of Eros:

The flock is flying from the dawn to scattle
Among the dairy farms. Tired of complaint,
I dream of revellers unvaulted, place-names
In County Dublin left by the unsaintly,
When few that crossed themselves had buckle or lace,
Mount Venus, Cupidstown, the Feather Bed. . . 100

The longest poem of the series is "The Hippophagi" from which
the book derives its name. It is riddled with metrical puns and poly-
syllable against monosyllables, equivocal rhyme appears at the end of
each stanza: e.g.

A link went:
Beads, decades and all: self was delinquent.

and

Aye, demijohn. Shall no cruse aid her?
Lickeri echo: 'no crusader.'

and

Should the Almighty
Destroy it after All. . . might he? 101

The tone is definitely more glib than any of Clarke's earlier verse.

"The Hippophagi," like all the long poems in the Later Poems that precede
it, is quite autobiographical. Clarke weds his childhood memories of
horses with his own bygone innocence, his growing up with the increasing
scientific advances which made the horse (except in such perversions as
"horse-power") obsolete: "Old pet-names, meanwhile, teach Mechanical
species what we praised/ in horse power." All of this is joined, too,
to the usual flowering of Clarke's anticlericalism, the betrayal of his
youthful images of immortality:

I was immortal,
Yea, so important that monks pursued me,
Similitudes of bygone ages. 102

and the sensuality of religion:

Frankincense, flowers of speech,
Small gifts, beseech us to be good;
Premature swoon of sense, globe-spurning,
Cup-borne; gums burn us, celestial lilies
Vase mortal chill. Soul fades, love-sick,
In rhetoric.

.

A link went:
Beads, decades and all: self was delinquent. 103

His own life-history is not the only analogue used; the history of the world is another. The killing of horses is for Clarke a momentous sin, conceivably punishable by the strongest of God's wraths:

Cities remember ancient religion,
Signs, prodigies, fire coming up
And down, destruction in raised stone.
The streets I roamed in, suddenly horseless,
No tenderness in sky: terror
Of day was there, ready to strike out
A little likeness. Dodderers stop me
Often near shop or dissenting Church,
Mutter the world is in the wrong heads.
That makes me young again. Thought plays
The devil, unsought. Should the Almighty
Destroy it All. . . might He? 104

He understands why the Irish are killing, selling and even possibly eating their horses but he is nevertheless mortified and can only repetitiously and hopelessly recall the past:

Patting our dumb, why should we think,
Today, of drinking-trough in streets
A-clatter with meat no butcher sold,
Regard that nose-bag in the dust,
When Europe, thrusting its bloody face
In ours, will pay for every snout?
Horses, in thousands, are out of work.
But, must we burke their past? Breed them
For lesser needs: our word will carry. 105

The pain felt for this barbarism is unassuageable--even "Rhyme is no com-

forter."¹⁰⁶ The poem's length robs it of its potential power--Clarke cannot resolve the problem and thus catharsis comes with length alone, a poor substitute. He forfeits sympathy when he pushes his point to questionable lengths and repetition by chiding modern man who does not have the energy to walk or ride horseback but relies for movement entirely on the automobile:

Sham steed was spirited by dunlop;
I met with many a stop; what matter
If horse-shoe flattened a nail in tyre?
The near is distant now. Feet tire. 107

However, he wonders after all whether a return to nature would have made a difference or whether the modern citizen of the world (the "polyglot") is already beyond all hope:

Could self have learned
In woody, ferny glen to choose
With Fionn the music of what happens,
Found in some Clapham an honest sect
Of intellect? Lastly a premise
That wants much phlegm: can polyglot,
Carried in snot so easily wiped
Away, decide? What dare we call
Our thought, Marcus Aurelius,
Unwanted void or really us? 108

Footnotes - Chapter IV (Later Poetry)

¹Augustine Martin, "The Rediscovery of Austin Clarke," Studies, Winter 1965, pp. 408-409.

²Douglas Sealy also thinks highly of this volume. He comments that the Night and Morning volume is the richest verse of any Irishman of any age. Dubliner, Jan. Feb. 1963, p. 17.

³Austin Clarke, Later Poems (Dublin: Dolmen, 1961), p. 29.

⁴Clarke, p. 30.

⁵Clarke, p. 31.

⁶Clarke, p. 33.

⁷Clarke, p. 34.

⁸Clarke, p. 35.

⁹Clarke, p. 39.

¹⁰Clarke, p. 40.

¹¹Clarke, p. 30.

¹²Clarke, p. 30.

¹³W.J. Roscelli, "The Private Pilgrimage of Austin Clarke," The Celtic Cross, (Purdue, 1964), p. 59.

¹⁴Roscelli, p. 56.

¹⁵G.B. Saul, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke," The Celtic Cross (Purdue, 1964), p. 31.

¹⁶Clarke, p. 29.

¹⁷Clarke, p. 30.

¹⁸Clarke, p. 31.

¹⁹Maurice Harmon, "The Later Poetry of Austin Clarke," The Celtic Cross (Purdue, 1964), p. 47.

²⁰Clarke, pp. 32-33.

²¹Robert Farren, The Course of Irish Verse (London, 1948), p. 160.

- ²² Clarke, p. 91.
- ²³ Clarke, p. 34,
- ²⁴ Clarke, p. 34.
- ²⁵ Clarke, p. 34.
- ²⁵ Clarke, p. 35.
- ²⁷ Clarke, p. 35.
- ²⁸ Clarke, p. 36.
- ²⁹ Clarke, p. 36.
- ³⁰ Clarke, p. 37.
- ³¹ Clarke, p. 38.
- ³² See Chapter #2.
- ³³ Clarke, p. 39.
- ³⁴ Clarke, p. 40.
- ³⁵ Roscelli, p. 59.
- ³⁶ Donald Davie, Irish Writing, XXXIV (Dublin), pp. 57-58.
- ³⁷ The appendix is an attempt to clear the "haze" for the reader.
- ³⁸ Davie, p. 58.
- ³⁹ Martin, p. 418.
- ⁴⁰ Davie, p. 57.
- ⁴¹ Harmon, p. 50.
- ⁴² Clarke, p. 91.
- ⁴³ Seumas Cooney in "Austin Clarke's 'Celebrations'" (Eire Ireland II, 2), p. 18 and Maurice Harmon, p. 50 would not agree with me.
- ⁴⁴ For a line by line interpretation of the poem, refer to Messrs. Harmon and Cooley,
- ⁴⁵ Clarke, p. 43.

⁴⁶Cooney, p. 19.

⁴⁷Clarke, p. 43.

⁴⁸Cooney, p. 19.

⁴⁹Clarke, p. 91.

⁵⁰Clarke, p. 44

⁵¹Clarke, p. 45.

⁵²Clarke, p. 45.

⁵³Clarke, p. 46.

⁵⁴Horst Oppel, "Austin Clarke: 'Three Poems about Children,'" Die Moderne Englische Lyrik Interpretationem. Berlin III, 96, p. 265. My translation of the quoted passage: If there were really anything in the consoling words of the bishop, it would mean that everyone should consider himself happy just not to have been born. It would mean to deny the meaning and value of life -- and with it also the meaning and value of Him who created life. The bishop's word does not turn against us, but it turns against God, whom he (the bishop), should really serve.

⁵⁵Clarke, p. 46.

⁵⁶Clarke, p. 46.

⁵⁷Clarke, p. 47.

⁵⁸Clarke, p. 48.

⁵⁹Clarke, p. 49.

⁶⁰Clarke, p. 48.

⁶¹Roscelli, p. 65.

⁶²Clarke, pp. 47-49.

⁶³Martin, p. 424.

⁶⁴Clarke, p. 49.

⁶⁵Clarke, Collected Plays (Dublin: Dolmen, 1963), p. 177.

⁶⁶Clarke, Later Poems, p. 66.

⁶⁷Farren, p. 165.

- ⁶⁸ Clarke, Later Poems, p. 53.
- ⁶⁹ Clarke, LP, p. 54.
- ⁷⁰ Clarke, LP, p. 92.
- ⁷¹ Clarke, LP, p. 92.
- ⁷² Roscelli, p. 66.
- ⁷³ Roscelli, p. 66.
- ⁷⁴ Clarke, LP, p. 92.
- ⁷⁵ Clarke, LP, p. 57.
- ⁷⁶ Clarke, LP, p. 57.
- ⁷⁷ Clarke, LP, p. 57.
- ⁷⁸ Clarke, LP, p. 92.
- ⁷⁹ Clarke, LP, p. 57.
- ⁸⁰ Clarke, LP, p. 59.
- ⁸¹ Clarke, LP, pp. 60-61.
- ⁸² John Montague, Poetry, XCIV, p. 265.
- ⁸³ Clarke, LP, p. 61.
- ⁸⁴ Clarke, LP, p. 62.
- ⁸⁵ Clarke, LP, p. 63.
- ⁸⁶ See As The Crow Flies, discussed in Ch. 7.
- ⁸⁷ Clarke, LP, p. 64.
- ⁸⁸ Clarke, LP, p. 65.
- ⁸⁹ Clarke, LP, p. 66.
- ⁹⁰ Clarke, LP, p. 68.
- ⁹¹ Clarke, LP, p. 73.
- ⁹² Clarke, LP, p. 73.
- ⁹³ Clarke, LP, p. 74.
- ⁹⁴ Clarke, LP, p. 77.

- 95 Clarke, LP, p. 77.
- 96 Clarke, LP, p. 77.
- 97 Clarke, LP, p. 78.
- 98 Clarke, LP, p. 78.
- 99 Clarke, LP, pp. 78-79.
- 100 Clarke, LP, p. 79.
- 101 Clarke, LP, pp. 82-83.
- 102 Clarke, LP, p. 81.
- 103 Clarke, LP, p. 82.
- 104 Clarke, LP, p. 83.
- 105 Clarke, LP, p. 85.
- 106 Clarke, LP, p. 86.
- 107 Clarke, LP, p. 87.
- 108 Clarke, LP, p. 88.

CHAPTER V: The Latest Poetry

Clarke has done an unbelievable amount of work past the age of sixty. As an elderly man, he continues to seek out more firm roots. In his later work, as much if not more than ever, he is the poet qua Irishman: his poetry evokes what it means to be an Irishman with a sense of history in the contemporary world. Clarke's autobiographical poems demonstrate the inevitable stuntings of the inner self: his "I" is heard as a repressed voice; the Irish poet is victimized both by his relationship with the English and by his relationship to the Irish national religion.

The size of Flight to Africa (1963), the product of only ten weeks labor, is astounding especially when compared to the volume which preceded it, Later Poems, which took thirty years to write. There is less sarcastic bite, a little less anger and indignation in Flight to Africa than there was in Too Great a Vine or The Horse-Eaters, the last two parts of Later Poems. Clarke seems more ready to accept the faults of his countrymen than he had been in the past. Their failings evoke more compassion, understanding and sympathy. Flight to Africa was published when Clarke was sixty-seven and taken as a whole, it represents his work at its best; it is his supreme accomplishment as a craftsman. In this volume, too, his range of subject matter, as we shall see, widens. Because this book displays such "exuberance, variety and innovation" Augustine Martin recalls that John Montague, Clarke's junior

poetic colleague, was moved, after the publication of Flight to Africa, to describe Clarke as Ireland's "youngest poet."¹

The volume includes fifty-nine (59) poems of varying length and interest: (it is not possible within the scope of this study to discuss them all.) Clarke himself divided the book into three parts; the poems, however, for our purposes, can be separated into more convenient categories according to subject matter: 1) autobiographical poems 2) public poems on politico-national events 3) objectivized landscape poems (without an "I"), and 4) versions or renewals of eighteenth-century harp songs and other traditional Irish poems.

Clarke tells us in his notes that the inspiration for the volume came from his trip to Greece, a journey funded by a leading American university.² The excellent short poem, "Mount Parnassus," with which the book begins, describes his visit to the legendary mount of poetic inspiration. The meter is complex, the music intricate, and yet the rhyme, mostly traditional end-rhyme, is not typical of the later Clarke.

Never have I been in the south
So far from self and yet I must
Learn, straight from the horse's mouth,
To kick up my own dust.
Here is the source. Here was our must.
I see no flowers to grass us,
Only the scale of Mount Parnassus:
Simplicity of snow
Above, the pillared drouth,
The worn-out, below.
I stray from American, German, tourists,
Greek guide, feel in my two wrists
Answer for which I have come,
The Oracle, not yet dumb.³

Clarke notes that "Flight to Africa," the title poem of the collection, was one of the three poems in the book written before his

trip to Greece. The subject is polemical: the emigration of the Irish as messengers of the Church. Even if those who leave the homeland contribute to the progress and welfare of the countries to which they go to bring the ultimate gift of Christian charity, it is still debatable whether their contribution is a spiritual expense which Ireland, a new Republic, can afford. Clarke fears for the health and progress of Ireland if the large outpour continues:

Too many are professed --
He argued -- boys, girls, all in black
Brown, white. The Church unbeds the State:
Charity taught to emigrate.
Farmyard and scythe gone. Grain unsacked or
Let down by rain for lack of hand.
Old times are off again. Great land
Is measured by a man on tractor.
What blank started this steeplechase?⁴

Clarke questions the motives of the missionaries, and intuits a burgeoning imperialistic drive in tiny Catholic Ireland, the traditional underdog, victim of mother England:

Trade mission, helping most
Our Fathers of the Holy Ghost,
Grinned, nodded: hope of further bounties
From heathens. Once they rattled beads,
Were slaves of cotton, Protestant creeds:
Black brothers, now, whom diplomats
From Europe flatter with tall hats.
Carbon was sheeted. All seemed done
In piety.⁵

He wonders why individuals are prompted to leave Ireland:

A poet, too, may ruminate
....
....
... bandy the idea
Of CARITAS to every land
....
....
....
Religion inspects us, takes the best:
Or is it only our unrest?⁶

Clarke would like to see Ireland self-sufficient, noncompetitive:

Why should our politicians care,
If Germans, Dutch, Czech, Japanese,
Unpack their little factories
Among our western legends, share
What goes?⁷

He would wish the Irish not so overconcerned with a continent many times
the size of their own country that they become intolerant of their own
Northern neighbors, partitioned off from them:

Clappers may minstrel the Hierarchy,
Much thurifying unburn the darkie:
But will our North be Notre Dame'd?⁸

Similar sentiments are expressed in "Street Game"⁹ and "The Knock."¹⁰

In "The Knock" Clarke is visited by an old school friend, a returned
missionary. This poem again offers an occasion for Clarke to castigate
the dumb obedience of the laity and to condemn their brand of imperialism:

Spoiling for faith, the Irish race
Had robbed too late in Kenya, the Congo,
Japan, Formosa, Laos, Hong Kong.
Celestials with sunny cheekbone snipe at
Old Union Jack, new Stars-and-Stripes.¹¹

"Street Game" is a testament to the strong, violent hatred bred
in the Irish Catholic child:

Last week I saw a marching band,
Small Protestants in grey clothes, well-fed pairs
Led by a Bible teacher, heard the noise
Of boot-heel metal by bread-shop, sweet-shop, dairy,
Scrap, turf, wood, coal-blocks. Suddenly Catholic joylets
Darted from alleys, raggedy cherubs that dared them:
"Luk, feckin' bastards, swaddlers, feckin' bastards!"
Too well they knew the words their mothers, fathers,
Used.¹²

"From a Diary of Dreams" is, like most of the best poems in
this volume, a long poem. It lacks tight organization; but its color
imagery does contribute to its sense of unity. Clarke's dreams (this
is another of the autobiographical poems) focus most often on women;

this one echoes the nighttown of Joyce, although this Irishman's vision is set in Bloomsbury.

I stop to chat with them, aware of lewdness.
Neither has money. One of them smiles cutely:
"Did you try Mr. Large?"

"Yes."

"So did I,"

The other winks her meaning.

"Dot has nicknamed

That dirty trio, Mr. Large, Mr. Small
And Mr. Horne."

She pulls her knickers up

And says:

"Bye-bye."

Hurrying down the street

We come to a cabman's shelter.¹³

Morality and the Church haunt Clarke -- though they never succeed in driving out his dreams. Throughout the poem we see this emphasized by the color imagery: black and white (and Jesus and Mother) are driven out by the persistence of red:

Dreams wait around corners, linger in Jesus Lane
Under a gas-lamp, stand at urinals,
Purloin my blackthorn stick, shoes or new raincoat,
Give them back suddenly, are the sixth sin,
Strip me at night or in an afternoon nap,
Scatter my script beyond the microphone --
The red light on -- then lure me to a lap.¹⁴

then:

Dublin is London, elbowing rossie, bloke,

and:

Loins are the ages
Unknown to us. Lake-dwellings where women grilled
Middle-cut of salmon. Fire-brush cave

and again:

I skim the cooling edge -- the Redskin route --
The horses rear up. Mouth is eager to try¹⁵

Side-door is knocked with brass, St. George, the Dragon,
Red lacquer in beaded coil. Mother distressed.¹⁶

Beyond the box-edge, rose-
Beds, currant, loganberry, raspberry rows:
Magpie, magnificence in black and white,
Disdains them all.¹⁷

The poem flows gently in a convincing reproduction of a dream-sequence until weakened by the intrusion of political analogy, unnecessary and gratuitous, near the end of the poem:

The fir-tree rooks
Consider crusts that shine below, quick lookers
At open door and window that may shoot:
Cloud-droppers coming down by parachute,
Gun-metal-coloured, helmeted, goose-stepping,
Harmless HEIMWEHR.¹⁸

"Martha Blake at 51," the second Martha Blake poem,¹⁹ humorously but sarcastically chronicles the old religious spinster's daily ascetic routine, her joyless road through life to premature death. Her pathetic life is a series of sublimations: her travels consist of reading about saints and missionaries, her highest joy, the daily Communion:

Waiting for daily Communion, bowed head
At rail, she hears a murmur.
Latin is near. In a sweet cloud
That cherub'd, all occurred.
The voice went by. To her pure thought,
Body was a distress
And soul, a sigh. Behind her denture,
Love lay, a helplessness.²⁰

Her illness, colitis, one often aggravated by nerves, is ill-cared for by the staff of the Catholic hospital and so she dies, unhappy, unloved, her religious sacrifices in vain.

"Living on Sin," a concise poem, is remarkable because it combines and expresses many of Clarke's grievances against modern Ireland in just six lines: lack of freedom and privacy for the young, the church's (the nuns in particular) benefits from the pain of others, the

materialism of the Irish Free State, its lack of conscience and the cruel treatment of children born out of wedlock.

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.²¹

Only one of the longer poems in the volume is considerably weaker than the others. "Beyond the Pale," consciously patterned after the old-fashioned descriptive poems of the Victorian parson-poets of Walks and Gig Drives,²² is landscape poetry interspersed with a running commentary on Clarke's favorite topics: the stringency of the Church, his own lust for women, the disfigurement of the countryside by industrialization, and the richness of the Gaelic tradition. Although the looseness, it appears, is intentional, the poetry suffers as we wander aimlessly from place to place and from concern to concern with Clarke and his wife, Nora. The polemic is supposed to be ancillary to the extolment of the landscape. The poem succeeds most when his anger chokes the pastoral impulse and accurately parallels how he feels the countryside has been marred for him by the thoughtlessness of the modern Irish man:

See Wicklow hilling from car window, down
And pinewood, buttercupping grass, field-wire,
The shelves of hawthorn, konker bud on chestnut
Bulging with sun-shadowings, brook-lime,
The yellow iris-curl, flower o' the cress
And Slaney gliding around a sandy nook
Through flaggeries into the narrower falls,
Beyond the mills with rusty flange, cogwheel
And moss of the sluice, hear the jackdawing,
Yet sad to speed from the inn, along the bogland
Where State machines are cutting turf for miles
That furnaces may stop the centuries
Of turbarry, put out an ancient fire.
Hardly a living soul upon these roads:

Both young and old hasten to quit the dung,
The chicken-run, lean-to, sty, thistle blow
Of fields once measured by buckshot, midnight bung.
Foreign factories in town employ
Chattering girls: few levers for a boy.²³

"The Song of the Books," a paean to Tomas Rua O'Sullivan (1785-1848), records the lives of the laymen who were the pioneers of popular education in Ireland.²⁴ The poem was suggested by one of O'Sullivan's own poems and Clarke uses a similar stanza form, intricate and controlled. Each of the short lines is supported by spinal rhyme; there are four segments within each of the eighteen stanzas, and each has its own assonantal pattern:

The tumult blew from Clear to Dursey
By mountain corners with its firstlings,
As though all Ireland were accursed.
It blew from Cape Cod
Over the ocean from point and scraper
To Coomakista and escaped
Through gaps. Nothing could keep its shape.
Grass knew it, tod
Unscrambled. Barley and oats were flattened
In furlong, rod.
And in the cottage fire-light, shadows
Put sod on sod.
Galloping on the skyline, Phaeton,
Had taken a short-cut of lightning, late on
His course; the horses in half traces
Had been unshod.²⁵

The inventiveness of the verbs²⁶ especially heightens some of the descriptive passages:

South-westerly gale fiddled in rigging;
Furled canvases in foam-clap, twigged
The pulley-blocks. Billows were bigger.
The clouds fell out.
In Madman's Glen, snip hit the grasses,
Rains in Tralee and towned their phantoms
While rocks were thrumming in the passes.²⁷

Clarke dramatizes the difficult lives of men like O'Sullivan who not only lived at the mercy of the weather but of necessity worked at a

second job; O'Sullivan was also a teacher. Poetry received only the little time left over after daily work was done:

Tomás Rua O'Sullivan,
Poet in bed, schoolteacher, postman
By day, counted the leap o' the coast²⁸

O'Sullivan's was not an easy life but Clarke admired him because he did not sacrifice his sense of humor or independence:

Lightly, Red-head O Sullivan
Who fought with Rodney, jolly jacktar
Too much at sea, thin as a marlin
Spike, came and went,
Poet, schoolmaster, parish clerk.
He drank his Bible money at Mass-time,
A moll upon his knee, bare arsed.²⁹

Toward the end of the poem Clarke sadly notes that there is no difference in the life of the average Irishman today-- from childhood on the Church has again enslaved him:

We live again in a Penal Age
For teachers get unworthy wages
And clergy take their occupation,
Giving no lay
School benefit of weekly chaplain.
Pearse founded St. Enda's, forbad
All punishment: pupils were happy
At task and play.
Our celibates raise cane and strap,
Smiling at May
Processions that hide their cruel slapping.
Children obey
In dread. Poor brats in smelly rags,
And boys, who wear a college cap,
Shuffle unwillingly to chapel,
Confess and pray.³⁰

Clarke proves in "The Jest" that his own courage and sense of humor, like O'Sullivan's, do not fail:

Half spirit, the older
I am, the bolder,
Yet add for a jest
That you may think,
Not beat your breast,
Invisible ink.³¹

"Forget-Me-Not," printed as the last of the poems in the Flight to Africa volume, was written before the other poems in the book and published separately. It was commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain for the Poetry at the Mermaid Festival in London in 1961. "Forget-Me-Not" is another of Clarke's many poems dedicated to the horse;³² it is also a highly lyrical autobiographical evocation of childhood in Dublin at the turn of the century. The disappearance of the horse and the fading respect for it in contemporary Ireland motivate Clarke's reminiscences of the prominent position that the horse maintained in classical and Celtic mythology through the ages.

In this tour-de-force opus Clarke is aware that his craft is reaching its peak:

Trochaic dimeter, amphimacer
And choriamb, with hyper catalexis,
Grammatical inversion, springing of double
Rhyme. So we learned to scan all, analyse
Lyric and ode, elegy, anonymous patter,³³
For what is song itself but substitution?

He glories in the rhythm of the pony-trap and the poetic qualities of other ordinary things which surround him; all of these inspired verse in him as a child:

Verse came like that, simple
As joined-hands, yet ambiguous, lesson
Implied, a flower-puzzle in final verb
And negative. All was personification
As we drove on: invisibility³⁴
Becoming audible.

Place names too, early on, kindled his joy in language and his national pride in place:

A kindness spoke.
Assumed the god; consensus everywhere
In County Dublin. Place-names, full of Sunday,
Stepaside, Pass-if-you-can Lane, Hole in the Wall.
Such foliage in the Dargle hid Lovers Leap,
We scarcely heard the waters fall-at-all.

Often the open road to Celbridge: we came back
By Lucan Looks Lovely, pulled in at the Strawberry Beds,
Walked up the steep of Knockmaroon.³⁵

The horse becomes man's peer as he describes "Horses/Men,
going together to daily work."³⁶ He remembers that young colts and
young children alike were trained by the whip:

Beyond St. Patrick's, floats unloading, country
Colt, town hack, hay-cart, coal-bell. Often the whip-crack
The lash of rein. Hand-stitch in the numb³⁷ of pain
At school Religious orders plied the strap

Usually bearing an animus against all machine-like creatures, Clarke
miraculously allows the ironhorse, the train, to escape his censure
because he grew up with it already on the scene. His open-mindedness
was short-lived because soon the car came to disturb the peace and to
make the horse obsolete: "Mechanized vehicles/Horse-power by handle-
turn."³⁸ The cruelest cut of all came when the horse was killed,
carved up and eaten:

Good company, up and down
The ages, gone: the trick of knife left, horse cut
To serve man. All the gentling, custom of mind
And instinct, close affection, done with. The unemployed
Must go. Dead or ghosted by froths, we ship them
Abroad. Foal, filly, farm pony, bred for slaughter:
What are they now but hundredweights of meat?³⁹

Clarke's understandable rage against the horse-eating has its literary
and historical precedents: Herodotus and Pliny both condemned hippo-
phagy.⁴⁰ Clarke recalls for us the high esteem accorded the horse in
literature, folklore and mythology throughout the ages:

Yet all the world
Was hackneyed once -- those horses o' the sun,
Apollo's car, centaurs in Thessaly.
Too many staves have splintered the toy
That captured Troy. The Hippocrene is stale.
Dark ages; Latin rotted, came up from night-soil,
New rush of words; thought mounted them. Trappings

Of palfrey, sword-kiss of chivalry, high song
Of grammar. Men pick the ribs of Rosinante
In restaurants now.⁴¹

He contemplates the royal arch of Cormac's chapel with the sign of the Sagittary carved on it and bewails the somewhat self-inflicted fate of his country, historically and culturally so rich with possibility, now shorn of even its own language:

Too much historied
Land, wrong in policies, armings, hope in prelates
At courts abroad! Rags were your retribution,
Hedge schools, a visionary knowledge in verse
That hid itself. The rain-drip cabin'd the dream
Of foreign aid...Democracy at last.
White horses running through the European mind
Of the First Consul. Our heads were cropped like his.
New brow; old imagery. A Gaelic poet,
Pitch-capped in the Rebellion of '98.
Called this Republic in an allegory
The Slight Red Steed.

Word-loss is now our gain.⁴²

Clarke admits that a few noble horses have been granted life and even esteem; horse-racing, that materialistic show, is left for Ireland's chosen few:

Tipsters respect our grand sires,
Thorough-breds, jumpers o' the best.
Our grass still makes a noble show, and the roar
Of money cheers us at the winning post.⁴³

He compares Ireland's abuse of the horse with very different kinds of destruction, but his readers wonder if horse-killing, serious offense though it may be, is quite comparable to war making:

Is Ireland any worse
Than countries that fly-blow the map, rattle the sky,
Drop down from it?⁴⁴

Tradition is lost, Clarke abjures, now that horse meat is regularly exported.

One wonders after reading all these horse poems, why Clarke wrote so many of them. The issue they raise seems to have gone fairly unnoticed -- there is little or no mention of horse-killing and horse meat in the journals and newspapers of the 1960's in Ireland. When I asked Clarke about this question, he said he felt it was important although he acknowledged that there had been almost no discussion of it in national political circles. For him hippophagy was indicative of the quiet takeover of barbarism in Ireland.

Mnemosyne Lay in Dust (1966) is a long narrative poem published in a special limited edition with a series of drawings by Jack Coughlin which illustrate the mood of the text. Although Mnemosyne is concerned with the outcast, the man isolated from his normal environment and society, it is unlike almost any other work of Clarke's in that Maurice Devane, the poem's protagonist, has had his social links severed by mental breakdown.⁴⁵ The poem is about his long stay in a mental institution, St. Patrick's Hospital.

Although Maurice is cut off from all the usual spiritual, geographical and intellectual landmarks of the average man, one unlikely cultural tie binds Clarke's protagonist to the past and to the Irish literary world: he is incarcerated in Swift's hospital and Swift's name frames the poem, occurring in the first and last sections:

The eighteenth century hospital
Established by the tears of Madam
Steevens, who gave birth, people said, to
A monster with a pig's snout, pot-head.
The Ford turned right, slowed down. Gates opened,
Closed with a clang; acetelyne glow
Of headlights. How could Maurice Devane
Suspect from weeping-stone, porch, vane,
The classical rustle of the harpies,
Hopping in filth among the trees,
The Mansion of Forgetfulness
Swift gave us for a jest?⁴⁶

and:

Hope frowned. Up Steeven's Lane,
He walked into his darkness.
Classical rustle of Harpies, ⁴⁷
Their ordure at Swift's Gate.

In the hospital he is severed from everything normal and humanizing,
not given exactly kind treatment by the warders, even though we do
once find a warder's presence less ominous because he is reading a
novel:

All through the night the warder sat,
Chair tilted back, beside the fire;
Reason, the master of ancient madness.
He read a novel by shaded light.
Wakefully, Maurice watched his shoulder
Wrapped in a travelling rug, eye busy,
His great arm raised to unscuttle coal:
Cowl-like, monk of the Inquisition.⁴⁸

The poem is arbitrarily divided into eighteen sections, each
section composed in stanza patterns of different length and shape.
This irregular, disjointed verse-structure mirrors Devane's disease --
lack of orientation, bewilderment. In the first section we learn that
Maurice had not slept for six weeks -- he had been drawn into the void:
unconsciousness was the pit of terror he most feared. ⁴⁹ The setting
is sometime in the teens of our century and the therapeutic treatment
cited in the poem is that of over fifty years ago: strait-jacket, steam
bath, padded cell, forced feeding.

The experience of Devane is rooted in place -- there is no
mistaking the trappings of Dublin from the very first lines of the poem;
convent and public house stand in the foreground and even the disori-
ented Devane takes them for granted:

Past the house where he was got
In darkness, terrace, provision shop,
Wing-hidden convent opposite,

Past public-houses lighting up
Time, crowds outside them -- Maurice Devane
Watched from the taxi window in vain
National stir and gaiety
Beyond himself: St. Patrick's Day,
The spike-ends of the Blue Coat school,
Georgian houses, ribald gloom
Rag-shadowed by gaslight, quiet pavements
Moon-waiting in Blackhall Place.⁵⁰

Right away we recognize Devane's illness as one that (bearing in mind Clarke's other poems) has physical symptoms Clarke knew only too well:

Life burning in groin
And prostate ached for a distant joy.⁵¹

We remember from Clarke's memoirs (see Chapter 2) that he himself was institutionalized when he was in his twenties. There is no doubt that this poem records a personal experience made objective and bearable by poetic catharsis and the passage of half a century. Although the reviewer of Mnemosyne in Studies⁵² is not completely wrong when he says of Maurice Devane "He is close to the typical twentieth century figure, the anti-hero shorn of traditional supports. By plunging him into the isolation of the mental hospital, Clarke reduces him to the condition of the Beckett hero, denies him a place in the sun and brings him face to face with the void, with nothingness," it is perhaps more accurate to see this as a confessional poem. In defining this type of poetry, M. L. Rosenthal has said that it embodies "isolation of the effect of prolonged saturation in traumatic and insolubly depressive experience"⁵³ and that "the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of a psychological crisis, becomes a major theme. Often it is felt at the same time as a symbolic embodiment of national and cultural crisis. Hence the idiom of our poetry can be at once private and public, lyrical and rhetorical. Again, the continuing power of the Romantic tradition

is clear, the specifically modern turn being the strongly confessional, literally self-exposing vulnerability characteristic of the statement. Sexual candor, frankness about family life and confession of private humiliations of ranging psychological kinds are ... kinds of expression this vulnerability entails."⁵⁴

In the first sections of the poem, we experience with M.D. hallucinations, nightmares, sexual fantasies, all the tricks that his mind can play on him:

Once, wandering from a hollow of asphodel,
Still flowering at mid-night, he saw the glint of
Gigantic row of columns beyond the dell,
 Templed, conical, unbedecked
And knew they were the holy ictyphalli
Curled hair for bushwood, bark or skin
Heavily veined. He worshipped, a tiny satyr,
 Mere prick beneath those vast erections.⁵⁵

He has no consciousness yet of where he is or what ails him - Mnemosyne truly lies in dust - memory has deserted him:

 He wondered who
He was, but memory had hidden
All. Someone sat beside him, drew
 Chair nearer, murmured: 'Think!'⁵⁶

Religion, which until his breakdown had been omnipresent, can not haunt him now; he can not be conscious of it before he can remember who he was:

Beyond the rack of thought, he passed
From sleep to sleep. He was unbroken
Yet. Religion could not cast
Its multitudinous torn cloak
About him. Somewhere there was peace
That drew him towards the nothingness
Of all. He gave up, tried to cease
Himself, but delicately clinging
To this and that, life drew him back
To drip of water-torment, rack.⁵⁷

Strangely enough this void is paradoxical; it can be interpreted as a release but also as an undesirable abnormality for Clarke: madness

equals loss of, or absence of, God. But soon the concerns of religion are to reappear:

The words became mysterious
With balsam, fragrance, banyan trees,
Forgetting the ancient law of tears,
He dreamed in the desert, a league from Eden.
How could he pass the Gate, the sworded
Seraphim, find the primal Garden,
The Fountain? He had but three words
And all the summer maze was guarded.⁵⁸

As his stay in the hospital lengthens, he (and we) begin to be more and more conscious of the community of men there.⁵⁹ At first his memory, his self, comes back to him as a child -- but in facing his childhood he must return to both its peace:

Soon Mnemosyne made him smaller,
A child of seven, half gone to sleep.
His mother was at her sewing machine,
The shuttle clicking as she followed
A hem.

and its nightmares:

Madmen were leaping into the yard
With howls of 'Murder!' scarcely a yard
From him. He jumped out of the darkfall,
Awake, chill, trembling at the din.
There on his bed, a terrible Twangman
Was sitting.⁶⁰

Next we witness improvement, in Section XI, when for the first time he eats because he really wants to:

In June, upon the little table
Between the beds, he saw a dish
Of strawberries. As they lay
There, so ripe, ruddy, delicious,
For an hour he played with his delay
Then in delight
Put out two fingers towards the wished-for,
Ate for the first time.⁶¹

Section XII further reinforces the autobiographical nature of this poem; it is almost identical to a poem found among a group of other autobio-

graphical poems in Flight to Africa. There titled "Fragaria"⁶² the only words which are different from Section XII of Menemosyne are the pronouns: in "Fragaria" the adjectival pronouns all read "my," the nominative pronouns "me," -- in Mnemosyne they have been objectified, depersonalized.

In section XIV, Maurice finally acknowledges (recognizes) his own sickness:

They squawked and muttered. Maurice laughed
To fond he was an imbecile,
The quickest of them and the daftest.
Faster and faster the trio reeled
In-loony-go-round
John Ball snatched dirt and tried to eat it.
Stamping the ground.⁶³

The real world approaches when, in Section XVI, his first visitor, Uncle George, appears with a gift: Anton Chekov's The Black Monk and Other Stories. Devane is not yet ready to read. Nothing can hold his attention.

The words had changed to pothooks,
Hangers. Words hid their meaning from him
They turned to Russian again. His steps
Faltered. Lear roamed across the Steppes.
The jester disappeared in dimness.⁶⁴

In section XVII he is allowed to take a long walk outside with the warder, Mr. Rhys. He remembers places and people; he recalls where his family lived -- memory returns. In the last section, XVIII, he re-enters the world on his own -- healed, or as Clarke's neologism would express it, "rememorized." His recovery had been gradual: he relearned to acknowledge objects, to apprehend and structure his surroundings, to be a modern man cognizant of the alienation of the world; he is an existentialist yet still Catholic, aware of the dilemma of religion, a spiritual as well as political problem for the contemporary Irishman.

Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, published in January 1967, contains twenty-two poems. It is a geographic and literary map of Clarke's horizons, detailing his travels in Europe and America. The volume is framed with journeys -- the first a real one to the United States, the last a dream vision. In between, besides other poems about trips -- to Spain and Yugoslavia -- there are poems about other poets. These fill about one-quarter of the volume and illustrate Clarke's eclectic taste: Edgar Allen Poe, Walt Whitman, Henry W. Longfellow, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Garcia Lorca, and Pablo Neruda. The remaining half of the book is made up of poems inspired by Clarke's interest in women (about one-quarter of the volume): "The Pill," "Our Love was Incorruptible," "The Redemptorist," "A Student in Paris," "More Extracts from a Diary of Dreams"; and poems which reflect Clarke's position in the world (and Ireland) today, his opinions on the relevant issues of the times (about a quarter of the volume): "Napalm," "Letter to a Friend," "The Penitent," "A Young Member of the Party," "At Middle Abbey Street Corner," "Nova at Vetera," "Custom House Official," "Catechism Lesson," and "Pigeon Pie."

In this book there are no really major poems and Clarke has become perhaps a little over-conscious of craft.⁶⁵ Much of the work reads like material from a diary -- written hastily without the tight control so much of his recent poetry had had. Instead the abundant rime-riche seems almost glib. Indeed, the title poem "Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage," written with Whitmanesque rambling in lines of roughly six, seven or eight stresses, is distinctly Clarcean only because of its rime-riche line endings. Clarke had used occasional rime-riche in Flight to Africa and had noted there that several French scholars were

unable to give him the history of the device.⁶⁶ He learned from a note in an old schoolbook that Victor Hugo was the first to use it extensively and his example was then followed by De Musset, Gautier and Verlaine. Rime-riche, almost never used in modern English poetry, is the perfect rhyme in which two identical words with separate meanings are in accord. Clarke uses the technique freely to suit his needs: often the spellings of the words are far from identical and sometimes there is accord on only one of the syllables of a polysyllabic word.

Clarke noted that "in English the second homonym seems to be ironic in effect, and in composite self-rhyme may lead back, perhaps, to the mood of Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper, in which the rhyme becomes a running commentary."⁶⁷ That is certainly the case in sections of "Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage" and other poems in the volume as well where Clarke's principal interests are highlighted by the repetition of end words:

There was the old engraving that I recollected
So well, the frontispiece to the Collected Works
Of Edgar Allen Poe. In that old-fashioned volume
Remained the pale consumptive girls whose glance illumed
The midnight, fearful of the vault, damp, cerements,
The house of Ussher, mouldering, the woodland scent
Of leaf-decay, poor wet-their-drawers, not one robust:
The poet was frenzied by them in his thoughts, the bust
Of Pallas in the shadow: Ligia, Eleonore,
Morella, Berenice, phantoming his stories,
The stir of Gothic tapestries, the Saracenic
Lampion, cold glow of the antique jewel, the scenic
Background always the same. What tropical terror had Poe
Sucked from the milk of his black nurse, what poems
Of African forest, slave-ship, devil-masking rites
From the Dark Continent had buried all his writings
Under imagination?⁶⁸

It is Clarke's poetic craft which keeps him alive: in "Letter to a Friend" he lists all the social ills of the country which go unhealed, but he admits that with rime-riche he is consoled, and is able to

forget many other contingencies:

For something has happened to this eye,
Since it discovered homonyms.
All things shine now, all have nimbus,
Nature displays nimiety;
Though dampness lodge the grain,
Vague shadows move around in greyness,
A cloudy lid hide Ireland's Eye.⁶⁹

In "Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage" we experience the Irish poet's curious literary pilgrimage to the U.S.A. -- how many American poets or aficionados of poetry have ever thought of visiting Poe's cottage in the Bronx? Americans hold few places sacred enough in their own country for pilgrimage and Poe, especially, is left by American intellectuals for European admiration. Whitman, to whom Americans give higher regard, is debunked by Clarke:

Why should I rail
Against him -- a shaggy, bearded Victorian
Sharing the optimism of statesmen, historians?
He paid for the bluff chiselling: Walt Whitman
Awaiting the Resurrection. Why should you care a whit,
man?⁷⁰

Clarke does not think much of Robert Frost's verse: "I thought of him farming in Vermont / Composing that plain, wiseacre verse"⁷¹ but when he meets Frost in person in Ireland where an honorary degree is being conferred upon him, he sympathizes with the man who, at eighty-two, still suffers from family woes and has only death to look ahead to as escape:

Robert Frost
Was flung upon the ground, a Job
Of eighty-two, suddenly stricken
By family woes, the heavy stick
Above, shaking his body. He spoke
Of debts, ingratitude. Embarrassed,
I bowed with him. Was I the last
Poor comforter to listen? Must
We rend together the unholy mantle
Of poetry; half naked, scant,
Yet full of days, encounter dust?⁷²

Clarke always criticizes modernism; and Pound, too, was at first scorned by Clarke because of his aggressive syncretism:

Too often I pooh-poohed his poems
Surveying the inkiness of the globe,
Missouri, London, Paris, Po.
Why should my pen, I thought, dip pity
In praise for another American poking
At European curios⁷³

Later Clarke did recognize Pound's true worth and was fair enough to overlook the chaff that so many other critics of Pound focussed upon in disdain. In this paean to Pound Clarke's rhyme mode is at its strongest:

Rhyme, echo the name of Ezra Pound
Whom the war capitalists impounded.
For miserable years he pounded
The wall of modern verse, expounded
The madness of dollar, franc and pound.
Forget the theories he prepounded,
But praise the language he compounded.
The centuries are in that pound.⁷⁴

Garcia Lorca, too, won his respect:

Cruelty of medieval
Spain, heavy valance hemmed with cruor,
Incense, church martyrs and Moriscoes,
His words could risk the scream of sense.

He knew the purlieu of skyscrapers,
Lyrical skryer in New York,
Negro, poor white, the tall apartments.
Brazil and Paris made him groan.

Bull let out in the arena
Would gore his renes, that day the bullet
Spattered his songs so near to home,
Called homosexual, spat on.⁷⁵

Although parochial concerns are not entirely missing in this volume, Clarke, moralist and non-violent pacifist, does take a stand again and again on topics of more far-ranging current interest; he speaks out strongly against napalm, regardless of who the user is or

for what purpose it is used,

United Nations are mum
And Johnson lariats with the dollar.
Our clergy, faceless as mummers
Of darkness, have dressed up a rag doll
That must be nourished on paper money,
On public smother of their late victims,
Saffron to soot of Buddhist monks
Still petrol-stained.⁷⁶

and against the Vatican which forbids the Catholics to use the Pill;
he jeers at the rhythm method of contraception:

The rhythmic method can defeat us.
Now that the Cardinals are rubbing
Hands, will they permit us to be rubbered?⁷⁷

and foreswears the uselessness of the contemporary Church's action and
dogmas.

The coldness of the Holy Spirit
Breathes on the North. The Gulf Stream
Is berging. To-day a Jesuit,
Half nodding in the classroom,
Droops with the wings of his soutane
And in their fourpenny school
The Christian Brothers ply the rod
Too late,
For, arrogant, as the ages
Of persecution, greeted,
Escorted by Ecumenical Councils,
Heresy walks the street.⁷⁸

The Church stooped so low that it even ordered Customs Officials to
remove illustrations from art books. Clarke, taking a hint from a
Yeats's poem about an ideal fisherman,⁷⁹ tries to imagine the ideal
gauger:

Tearing out coloured illustration, plate
And photograph from large expensive volumes,
Art books displaying the lines of life, exposing
Our allotted shame -- in marble, bronze, grain, oil.
He hated, rejected, much of classical sculpture,
Gods, goddesses, in all their naked poses,
And, in particular, two slender figures
The Apollo Belvedere and Mercury,

Who had no decent cockleshell or fig-leaf,
To him the female was a meretrix.⁸⁰

The volume ends with "More Extracts from a Diary of Dreams," a sequel to "Diary of Dreams" in Flight to Africa⁸¹ but inferior to the former poem. Written mostly in loose pentameter, it begins with his journey to Germany with Sir Myles na Copaleen, a brilliant Irish satirist who was dismissed from the Civil Service by the Cabinet with only a small pension because of his satiric comments on Irish political life.⁸²

Before anything can happen to them in Germany the scene changes and Clarke finds himself suddenly at home in the past. He wanders aimlessly, historically and geographically, wondering aloud at the necessity of his hegira: "Why must I analyse / Myself in dreams, try to escape the lies?"⁸³ Midway through the poem the two most constant things in his life, literature and lust, mingle:

That girl stood naked but for the tricolour
That hid her pelvis and the gold brassiere,
Emblem, I thought, of our Literary
Revival."⁸⁴

These elements mingle and remingle throughout the rest of the poem as James Stephens, Donagh MacDonagh, Seumas O'Sullivan and Matthew Arnold all figure momentarily in his dream -- winding in and out among the women of his imagination. Nothing changes: echoing the concerns of Mnemosyne Lay in Dust, death and the fear of the loss of memory still haunt him at the end:

Again that sudden fear and pain,
The loss of memory. Into the new,
I strayed by crescent, drive, grove, avenue.

That dream again.⁸⁵

and

Why should the aged be unhappy,
Mope in the dark, when the unhappenable
Is theirs and they can glide between the shades
Of meaning in a dream, talk to the shades,
Unacheroned, watch every jog of nature
That proves the midnight merriment innate --
Fire in the great vein -- and when desire has chased
After high boot and bulging stays, be chaste?⁸⁶

The Echo at Coole is one of two volumes of verse published in 1968. With more than twice as many poems as Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage (forty-seven poems make up the collection), it is Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage's sequel in tone and mood not in subject. In contrast to the voyaging of the preceding volume, The Echo at Coole returns Clarke to Ireland for most of this book. He writes again of other poets, but this time they are mainly Irish. In The Echo at Coole, there are versions of classic Gaelic poems, occasional poems investigating the trends of life in Contemporary Ireland, autobiographical poems and the usual plethora of poems (semi-autobiographical) inspired by women.

This volume is divided into four sections. In the first we find poems about the major Irish poets, past and present, who were a force in Clarke's work and life: three poems are inspired by Yeats's presence, "A Centenary Tribute," "In the Savile Club," and "The Echo at Coole"; there is one each about A.E., James Stephens, and F.R. Higgins, titled simply with the respective poets' names. In "A Centenary Tribute" Clarke begins by reminiscing about his memories of Yeats at his country home:

Often I thought, only a stone's throw
From him at Riverdale, of that old man
Still seeking his perfection, still in the throes
Of verse, yet every word at his command,
Or wheeled along the garden in a bathchair,
Wild with impatience for a better couplet
To link divided rhyme.⁸⁷

But after Yeats's death, aware of how little respect there is in Ireland for the old, for places hallowed by memory, he is hesitant to return to the Yeats house. When he finally does go back, things are as he feared; it is grossly altered:

All had been changed: the stone-steps, railings hauled
Away: new side-porch to that Victorian
House: memory of the past evicted.
Contemporary fashion was villafied
Inside. All that the poet had defied
And raged against seemed to be on its guard.
He would have thought the furniture, carpets, garish,
Expensive.

Some night, perhaps, the Great Mood
Will change all in a dream: the house restored,
Old mortar used again by it as in a story
That Sato's sword may glitter at the moon.⁸⁸

"In the Savile Club" recalls Clarke's meeting with Yeats in London. Readers familiar with Clarke's memoirs⁸⁹ will remember this incident -- the day Clarke decided not to write a biography of Yeats. Our new kernel of information, however, is revealed to us here poetically. When Clarke made the decision not to write the book about Yeats he was finally freed from his dependence on his predecessor. Austin Clarke became himself:

I took my hat,
Leaped square and crescent at a bound,
Confused by all his gyres -- and I am bound
To say I left that book, unchaptered, unbound.⁹⁰

The title poem "The Echo at Coole," with its debts to Carroll O'Daly (a fifteenth century poet from Corcomroe, County Clare, who wrote one of the earliest Echo poems)⁹¹ and Yeats's draft of "A Prayer for My Daughter":

And after to the garden on that side
Where the Katalpa's grow (growing) and call
Until an echo in the wall
Above Maecenas' image had replied.⁹²

brings Clarke to Coole, Yeats's home, where he addresses the Echo and seeks prophecy (and sanction) for his own career. His anguish at the certainty of mortality (even for poets, who do have an immortality of a kind unknown to most other men) reverberates in the very last words: the yew tree is a traditional symbol for death.

"Echo, whereabouts can you hear
From?"
Here.
"My task in the future, can I know?"
No.
"Must I still hope, still body on?" On.
"Yet how can I be certain my way is right?"
Write.
"Tell me what thoughts had Carroll O'Daly, Swift,
Who called on other echoes, lonely as you?"
Yew.⁹³

The poem about James Stephens is written in two stress lines, an unusual metre for Clarke but one which Stephens himself used much. The narration initially takes us back to Clarke's youth when he frequently bicycled out of Dublin. Stephens, a poet who loved little words,⁹⁴ sported with time and space: it was for these two qualities that Clarke sought the open spaces to admire him:

Big, little, words,
Were hopping on twigs,
As though they were birds,
But how could I twig them?
With chirp and twitter,
They teased and twitted me.
Each cloud was white,
Lark sang, the sun
Was steady and bright,
Grass, green, sky, blue,
The breezes blew
And were full of fun:
Half abstract, essence
The songs of James Esse.
And I joyed in his joy
As if his enjoyment
Had all been meant
For me on young elbows,
In the greenest of elms.⁹⁵

Stephens, who had an irrepressible sense of humor, had lived in dire poverty in his childhood. Recalling those circumstances, the lilting rhythm of Clarke's verse slackens:

Then I thought of the slums
And my spirit slumped
Into the tenements
He came from, back-rooms
With ten, twelve, bare-footed
Children, wives bearing
The next one, gutters
With tin cans, straw, fishguts,
Men with torn cuffs
In the Coombe, or Cuffe Street,
The homeless arrested,
No stone to rest on,
The Mendicity Hall
At night, our city
Of broken windows
And Penal Law.⁹⁶

"F.R. Higgins" records Clarke's visit to the Higgins' house and his travels with his friend, a poet exactly his own age. This experience, too, Clarke has told in prose.⁹⁷ Several important facts coil their way through all of these poems: his continual seeking out of the company of fellow Irish poets, his desire to know the terrain of his native land and his struggle for direct contact with the Irish people of the countryside. What he respected most in his colleagues was just this quality:

The poet was among
His people, true to the little river-gardens
Beside the Moy where hae' pennies and farthings
Were more than pennies when he played at Hide-
And-seek, or Sally Water, before words sung
To him or he had heard of the Love-songs Hyde
Collected.⁹⁸

Clarke never lacks sympathy for the poor and downtrodden of his country; he knows that within their breasts live the folklore and mythology on which Ireland prides herself; "Paupers" pays testimony to these feelings:

Paupers who knew traditional tales
That bulged the pocket of time, grumbled
And groaned over skillet, mug, hoarded
The secret of caves, of sea-woman unscaled,
Merriment of the wake-house, rumble
Of death-coach, forgot their sorrow
In ruins where the banshee wailed.⁹⁹

In section II there is a poem to Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Since Hopkins was a Jesuit, Clarke questions why Hopkins escaped the torments that he himself, as thinking man and both Catholic and Irish, must take for granted:

What compound helped him to escape --
Christ-you-knocked -- from our Land-war-inscape?¹⁰⁰

The third section of the volume which begins with two poems that survey the scene in Dublin's inner city encompasses many topics. "New Liberty Hall" and "In O'Connell Street" describe a new elegant office building that is, ironically, being erected in memory of two national heroes who were spokesmen for the poor: Larkin and Connolly. The suites in the new building are expensive, destined especially for "capitalists" to rent. The tragedy is that the building, like so many new buildings in current urban redevelopment all over the world, does not aid the plight of the poor:

On top, a green pagoda
Has glorified cement,
Umbrella'd the sun. Go, da,
And shiver in your tenement.¹⁰¹

but even strips them of their present dwellings:

I saw a procession of forty
Or more poor people, shabby, ill-fed,
Struggling along with hope, unfed up,
In the middle of the street, some holding
Torn bits of paper and old cardboard;
Few on the pavement, hardly a car.
'Our babies die!' 'We have no homes.'
I read their grief. They had been put out
(But politicians are never put out)

And housed in an old British barracks,
Chill dormitory, one gas-stove, W.C.
Men, women, apart: the big door barred
A ten o'clock.¹⁰²

"The Subjection of Women" is another poem about women, but with a difference. A testament to the women leaders of twentieth-century Ireland, liberators internationally famous as well as those unknown abroad, it is void of erotic allusion. Maud Gonne, Countess Markiewicz, Helena Maloney, Louie Bennett, Eva Gore-Booth, Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Dr. Kathleen Lynn are the women Clarke praises.

Industrialization irks Clarke; he sees it not as an economic necessity for a small country but as the breeder of materialism and slavery and a demolisher of the past. In an indirect tribute to the idealism of Cervantes, he argues:

Don Quixote, if I
Remember rightly,
After he rode from
The dust of roads
Along the plain,
Ignored the millers
Unbagging grain,
But attacked the mills
That had become
Their feudal lords
Confounding all comers
With horde'd blows.¹⁰³

In "The Vocation" he minces no words about his feelings regarding organized religion:

Religion, cold, unfeeling
Came nearer, darkening the fields.
The man muttered, the woman wailed
Into her shawl. Both shambled away.¹⁰⁴

In the last section of the volume, IV, there are several versions and/or poems after the Gaelic. Clarke produces another Aisling;¹⁰⁵ there are two poems after Ua Bruadair, "Eire" and "A Jingling Trifle"; each

is made relevant for the Irish of today by social commentary in the Binding, the four line grouping at the end of each poem.

"Impotence," the last poem in the book, returns to Clarke's central concern in this volume: the anguished awareness of mortality, the faltering of his virility, the sexual desire itself unrelenting. After some of the excellent verse in the volume, and with Yeats's Byzantium poems on mortality in mind, one can only wish Clarke had not written some of the lines in this poem:

Soon, unable to delay
Smuggle and smuggling as we lay
Awake at morning, each second fast
And faster still, we broke our fast
Then sank into a sudden pit,
Knowing that love is but a pittance.
Enwrinkled as the fig-leaf of Cupid,
Booby can do no more than piddle.
Off clothes: I'll pray to great Priapus,
Although he turn delight to a pus.¹⁰⁶

A Sermon on Swift and Other Poems, also published in 1968, is Clarke's last volume of poetry to date and the first of Clarke's books since The Horse-Eaters, 1960 to appear under the name of his private press, the Bridge Press. It was designed by Liam Miller and printed in two-hundred and fifty copies at the Dolmen Press (for the Bridge Press.)¹⁰⁷

A Sermon on Swift, is a short book in four sections and although it takes up Clarke's familiar stands on Irish life and mores, it is of wider scope than Clarke's former work and contains much political comment on world affairs. The title poem, which begins the book, is an occasional poem memorializing the third centenary celebration for Swift on April 28, 1967 at which Clarke spoke. It is in blank verse ornamented only by assonance.

He begins by defeating the over-pompous solemnity of the occasion. The speakers who precede him hide the true nature of the satirist they are honoring, speaking solely of Swift the pious churchman. As he prepares his presentation, Clarke fears his own words because he knows:

My Sermon
Waits in the plethora of Rabelais, since
March veered with the rusty vane of Faith.¹⁰⁸

Thinking especially of Gulliver's travels, he feels he has no choice:

In prose, plain as pike, pillory,
In octosyllabic verse turning the two-way
Corner of rhyme, Swift wrote of privy matters
That have to be my text.¹⁰⁹

Recalling Swift's hospital, Clarke remembers his own breakdown in a passage which testifies to the autobiographical nature of Mnemosyne:

Last gift of an unwilling patriot, Swift willed
To us a mansion of Forgetfulness. I lodged
There for a year until Erata led me
Beyond the high-walled garden of Memory,
The Fountain of Hope, to the rewarding Gate,
Reviled but no longer defiled by Harpies.¹¹⁰

Searching for a moral to unify and justify his nonconformist lecture, (and his poem) Clarke settles on The Day of Judgment, an allegoric poem of Swift's, to help him:

In his sudden poem The Day of Judgment
Swift borrowed the allegoric bolt of Jove,
Damned and forgave the human race, dismissed
The jest of life.¹¹¹

In the poem which follows "A Sermon for Swift," "The Disestablished Church," Clarke declares the importance which Erigena's philosophy has had for him:

Spoon sang the Grace but now would say
Erigena consoled me. Schoolmen
Denounced his argument as stultes
Scotorum. All Europe cried Amen.

Centuries have been stultified.
Our broken thought is hard to mend for
The wayward soul can only stutter.
No Council has reached his holy saying.¹¹²

"The Disestablished Church" commemorates the memory of St. Mary's Church, the Protestant church which figured so significantly in Clarke's childhood as the Black Church.¹¹³ Now that Ireland is a republic, Protestantism is vanishing and its churches are either being deserted or torn down to make room for new businesses and new Catholic Churches. Clarke, nostalgic for the old Dublin, deplores the change:

His blood will spurt in this business quarter
Again, enshrined by glass, cement, steel.
Come all ye British firms with our dockets,
See Catharine staunch his wounded side.

Bird-hating machinery dumps, pounds,
Through suburbs. Catholic Churches, like banks,
Go up. Down damp of tenements
The poor go. Urchins play by the banks of
A fouled canal. Archbishop, sky-tended,
Sprinkles the laid stone. Redemption banks on
Our credit, hands up the mighty tender:
Two hundred and fifty thousand pounds.¹¹⁴

As we have found more and more frequently in his later work, Clarke intermingles his chief concerns in each of his longer poems. Here we find the woman motif juxtaposed with his vision of childhood, and with his criticism of the Church and Catholic educational principles:

(Lashes are red as the long hair of
The Magdalene.) His Breeches down,
Boy screams. Another with numbed fingers
Cannot unbuckle his book-strap, Doubt
And fear sit on the bench by numskull,
Exploring with sinful touch the down
Below there, copybook unnumbered.
(Who smears the ointment, faint with longing?)¹¹⁵

The ascetism of religion has disappeared -- the church is now the home of Sunday community dances, yet Clarke makes the jibe that the church is still more prudish about sex than the monks of the Middle Ages ever

were. He sees these facts as symptoms of modern imbalance, contemporary neurosis:

No Orders itch at night in the hair-shirt.
Saxophone shrieks, guggles the Sabbath
In the military church at Newbridge.
Young fellows and girls, sly savages,
Twist, wriggle hips, as if itch knew
No better. Soldiers, bundling Sabine
Brides, would have mocket at our neurosis.
(St. Mary combs her unkissed Hair.)¹¹⁶

"Another Protestant Insult," subtitled "An Extravaganza," is a spoof on an actual incident.¹¹⁷ It tells the story of a priest who becomes enraged at a lyric in The Cherry Tree Carol: "Let him pluck thee a cherry who brought thee with child":

The Bishop, the Cork Examiner
Must be informed of the blasphemous lyric, the City Fathers
Summoned at once, the bookseller boycotted, made an example
Of, national resolution ayed at a special sitting:
The refectory shook.¹¹⁸

Protestants were blamed for writing the insulting line but the embarrassing truth was revealed at last:

Soon columns were shaking with mirth, newspapers doubled up,
For AE had exposed the literary error o' the Devil:
That carol was known in the Middle Ages before the Protestant
Heresy.¹¹⁹

The bearers of the truth were, understandably, two of Clarke's greatest heroes, AE, the largest poetic influence Clarke has had, and the monks of the Middle Ages whom Clarke respected for their life-style, world views and forthrightness.¹²⁰

In "A Jocular Retort," Clarke with commendable sense of humor, responds to a Times Literary Supplement column in which he was called a "garrulous rambling old Irishman."¹²¹ He agrees that his poems are no longer obscure (because of new-found "suppleness"), and he gleefully attributes poems which hide their meanings to a generic "Englishman /

Who cannot untie his tongue." He compares himself to AE who, when he was old, was talkative too. He reasons that he will write on and on:

Because there is no return fare,
Few friends come out to the Isle of AEaea
Where lately my desires have been penned by
A Temple ogre who is one-eyed, filthy.
Whenever Circe has a night-party
And entertains with her famous snake-dance
Clubbable guests that show the kind
Of wallowers they are, when she's half-naked,
She forgets to give us our fill. But I
Have liked her and sometimes she is kind.¹²²

"Amor Angustus Domi," the penultimate poem of the volume, and "Stopples," the last poem, declaim the joys of earthly love. "Stopples" recalls wistfully the lady motif with a conscious erotic concern displacing the value of the poetic impulse and the memory of religion:

Night whisks key
And Missal from the sleepy mind.
I stay at home, minding
Each perfect rhyme. Thought rambles
Beyond their perambulator
To girls, so nebulous,
They cannot take in our lust
Below, my darling, dawdlers
Who stay with me till dawn.¹²³

In "Amor Angustus Domi" the acceptance of the physical is accompanied by almost a self-hate induced by erotic desires:

Come lie with me, Coita,
And let us try to prolong
What cannot last much longer
If our longings co-inhere.
Ultimate moments of pleasure
Dim consciousness by degrees.
So let us deglutinate
Before the great vein has azured
And love becomes corrupt.
Blissing is ready to give
And take us, so forgive, dear
My haste if I interrupt you.¹²⁴

Tiresias, Clarke's latest poem, is still in manuscript.¹²⁵ In it, Clarke is testing his poetic craft anew. His line is now hexameter. His control of this meter, so difficult in English, is superb. He turns to legend and focusses on the character of Tiresias, the sage. Tiresias becomes a woman for seven years and Clarke uses this fact rather than the more well-known facts about this prophet as a jumping off point for dealing with a rather unusual question for poetic inquiry: whose pleasure is greater in love-making, the man's or the woman's? This idea came to Clarke via Ovid; in the Metamorphoses there is a passage (which Clarke notes at the end of the poem) from which he began:

They tell that Jupiter, by chance, well drenched with nectar, laid aside all weighty cares, and engaged in some free jokes with Juno, in her idle moments, and said 'Decidedly the pleasure of you, females, is greater than that which falls to the lot of us, males.' She denied it. It was agreed between them, to ask what was the opinion of the experienced Tiresias. To him both pleasures were well known.¹²⁶

Frankness is, as usual, natural for Clarke as he plays with this sensitive issue:

One fine day
During siesta I gazed in reverence at my naked
Body, slim as a nespoli tree, dared to place my shaving
Mirror of polished silver, a birthday gift from mother,
Between my legs, inspected this way and that -- the fleshly
Folds guarding the shortcut, red as my real lips, to Pleasure
Pass.¹²⁷

There are hints that woman, at least the first time, has no enjoyment, is merely a victim:

Clepsidra warmed me at midnight of mother's instructions.
'Oh! Oh!' I cried out, when my husband and I were bedded,
'How it hurts.. No, no, don't stop, don't stop! I must suffer
Pang without pleasure that I may be truly your loving
Wife. Ah! Ah! I groaned, tightly gripping his loins.¹²⁸

Duty is mixed with pleasure - but pleasure is there, as we soon see;

Be sure we melled several
Times, impatiently urged into bliss by pinch, word, niplet.¹²⁹
And at the very end of this fairly long poem, there is a hint that
woman's joy is, after all, the greater:

Diarist, take
Care what you dictate for Jupiter has deceived you."
"Why?"
"In order to win his wager."
"how?"
"Guess."
"Thought is
Getting hotter..
I have it!
You mean that little
Series of ..."
"Yes."
"I'll question my wife tonight in our pillow
Tale."
"By you sebum, don't do that, old man! No wife has
Ever blabbed about her bliss, even on the bolster,
Even when she is lying on her back."¹³⁰

But there is no conclusive ending -- we are left to decide for ourselves
the answer to this puzzle. Maybe woman is left intact while he (and
masculinity) fade into the distance.

Footnotes - Chapter V

¹Augustine Martin, "The Rediscovery of Austin Clarke," Studies (Winter 1965), p. 426.

²Austin Clarke, Flight to Africa (Dublin: Dolmen, 1963), p. 125.

³Clarke, p. 11.

⁴Clarke, p. 20.

⁵Clarke, p. 21.

⁶Clarke, p. 21.

⁷Clarke, p. 22.

⁸Clarke, p. 23.

⁹Clarke, p. 26.

¹⁰Clarke, pp. 47-48.

¹¹Clarke, p. 48.

¹²Clarke, p. 26.

¹³Clarke, p. 34.

¹⁴Clarke, p. 30.

¹⁵Clarke, p. 33.

¹⁶Clarke, p. 34.

¹⁷Clarke, p. 35.

¹⁸Clarke, p. 35.

¹⁹See Chapter 4 and Later Poems for other Martha Blake poem.

²⁰Clarke, p. 37.

²¹Clarke, p. 45.

²²Clarke, p. 127.

²³Clarke, p. 68.

²⁴Clarke, p. 128.

- ²⁵Clarke, p. 94.
- ²⁶Here again we often see nouns become verbs.
- ²⁷Clarke, p. 94. Italics mine, not in original.
- ²⁸Clarke, p. 95.
- ²⁹Clarke, p. 98.
- ³⁰Clarke, p. 102.
- ³¹Clarke, p. 108.
- ³²Cf. poems in Later Poems. See above, e.g. The Horse-Eaters.
- ³³Clarke, p. 117.
- ³⁴Clarke, p. 118.
- ³⁵Clarke, p. 118.
- ³⁶Clarke, p. 118.
- ³⁷Clarke, p. 120.
- ³⁸Clarke, p. 120.
- ³⁹Clarke, p. 121.
- ⁴⁰Clarke, p. 121.
- ⁴¹Clarke, pp. 121-122.
- ⁴²Clarke, pp. 122-123.
- ⁴³Clarke, p. 123.
- ⁴⁴Clarke, p. 123.
- ⁴⁵"Summer Lightning" comes closest to Mnemosyne. See Ch. 4
p. 87.
- ⁴⁶Austin Clarke, Mnemosyne Lay in Dust (Dublin: Dolmen, 1966),
p. 9.
- ⁴⁷Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 49.
- ⁴⁸Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 32.
- ⁴⁹Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 8.
- ⁵⁰Clarke, Mnemosyne, pp. 7-8.

- ⁵¹Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 8.
- ⁵²Anonymous, Studies (Autumn 1966), p. 327.
- ⁵³M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets (New York: 1967), p. 7.
- ⁵⁴Rosenthal, p. 15.
- ⁵⁵Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 19.
- ⁵⁶Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 12.
- ⁵⁷Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 26.
- ⁵⁸Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 31.
- ⁵⁹See especially section XV, pp. 41-44.
- ⁶⁰Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 35.
- ⁶¹Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 36.
- ⁶²Clarke, Flight to Africa, p. 111.
- ⁶³Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 40.
- ⁶⁴Clarke, Mnemosyne, p. 47.
- ⁶⁵Although for the student of Clarke, it is interesting to see what he is learning in this volume.
- ⁶⁶Clarke, Flight to Africa, p. 128.
- ⁶⁷Clarke, Flight to Africa, p. 128.
- ⁶⁸Austin Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage and Other Poems (Dublin: Dolmen, 1967), p. 9. Italics mine.
- ⁶⁹Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 29.
- ⁷⁰Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 12.
- ⁷¹Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 16.
- ⁷²Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 17.
- ⁷³Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 17.
- ⁷⁴Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 18.
- ⁷⁵Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 22.

- 76 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 16.
- 77 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 34.
- 78 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, pp. 36-37.
- 79 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 55.
- 80 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 38.
- 81 See above.
- 82 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 55.
- 83 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 45.
- 84 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 46.
- 85 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 52.
- 86 Clarke, Old-Fashioned Pilgrimage, p. 53.
- 87 Austin Clarke, The Echo at Coole and Other Poems (Dublin: Dolmen, 1968), p. 9.
- 88 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 10.
- 89 See chapter two.
- 90 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 13. Italics mine.
- 91 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 77.
- 92 Jon Stallworthy, Between the Lines, W.B. Yeats's Poetry in the Making, p. 41.
- 93 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 14.
- 94 Austin Clarke, Poetry in Modern Ireland (Dublin: 1967), p. 32.
- 95 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, pp. 16-17.
- 96 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 17.
- 97 See chapter 2.
- 98 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, pp. 21-22.
- 99 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, pp. 26-27.
- 100 Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 31.

- ¹⁰¹ Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 45.
- ¹⁰² Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 46.
- ¹⁰³ Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 54.
- ¹⁰⁴ Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 56.
- ¹⁰⁵ See Pilgrimage in Later Poems for the first.
- ¹⁰⁶ Clarke, The Echo at Coole, p. 75.
- ¹⁰⁷ Clarke had some personal disagreements with Dolmen -- they were too slow for him, he too idiosyncratic for them, and so he returned to the practice of publishing his verse himself.
- ¹⁰⁸ Austin Clarke, A Sermon on Swift (Dublin: Bridge, 1968), p. 10.
- ¹⁰⁹ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 11.
- ¹¹⁰ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 12.
- ¹¹¹ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 12.
- ¹¹² Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 14.
- ¹¹³ See Twice Round the Black Church, Chapter 3, above.
- ¹¹⁴ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 17.
- ¹¹⁵ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 13.
- ¹¹⁶ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 15.
- ¹¹⁷ Clarke confirmed this conversation I had with him, Summer 1971.
- ¹¹⁸ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 21.
- ¹¹⁹ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, pp. 22-23.
- ¹²⁰ Clarke has written about them on innumerable occasions in his poems, plays, and romances set in medieval Celtic-Romanesque period.
- ¹²¹ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 35.
- ¹²² Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 35.
- ¹²³ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 49.
- ¹²⁴ Clarke, A Sermon on Swift, p. 48.

¹²⁵ I was able to read it when in Dublin, summer 1971, I was lent the manuscript by Mr. Clarke.

¹²⁶ Should be page 31 in manuscript - but unnumbered.

¹²⁷ Austin Clarke, Tiresias, manuscript page, 135.

¹²⁸ Clarke, Tiresias, ms. page 13.

¹²⁹ Clarke, Tiresias, ms. p. 15.

¹³⁰ Clarke, Tiresias, ms. p. 29.

CHAPTER VI: Clarke's Criticism: The Task of Definition

When asked about his work as critic Clarke, thinking primarily of the numerous review articles he has written throughout the years in order to make a living, tends to dismiss the query lightly. He has written several hundred reviews, some under the name of Austin Clarke, some anonymously, some using the initials A.C., and some using the initials M.D. which stand for Maurice Devane, a pseudonym assumed, says Mr. Clarke, for no particular reason. (Maurice Devane, it will be noted, is the name of the protagonist of Mnemosyne Lay in Dust). Clarke has kept no file-book of clippings, admits it would be a most difficult task to try to make a complete bibliography of his critical output, and decries such work as rather worthless since so much of his critical oeuvre was churned out of him, hack fashion.

Clarke began writing criticism when he was twenty-one, in 1917.¹ After his arrival in England he made his living writing occasional articles for various small literary journals of the day.² Since his return to Ireland in the mid-thirties, Clarke has written several articles of genuine critical importance for the Dublin Magazine, for many years Ireland's leading literary magazine/journal, and has been (and still is) a steady critic for Ireland's best newspaper, The Irish Times; his articles usually appear on the Saturday literary page. He has also, in recent years, contributed articles to the London Mercury and The Observer as well as to the Fortnightly Review and TLS.

The most important works of Clarke's criticism are easily distinguished: they are two books (or booklets). One, Poetry in Modern Ireland, was published as part of a series written for the Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland in 1951. It was later revised and slightly lengthened (the revised volume bears no date). The other is The Celtic Twilight and the Nineties, a compilation of lectures delivered at U.C.D. in 1965, published in book-form in 1969. Two articles which appeared first in the Dublin Magazine in the late 'thirties and have been occasionally reprinted, sometimes whole, sometimes fragmented, in several other places, should also be placed among Clarke's most important criticism. They are an article on W.B. Yeats and an article entitled "Irish Poetry Today."

One reason Clarke may almost disregard his work as a critic is the position in which he sees himself in relation to the tradition of criticism in Ireland. He acquired his seminal ideas about Irish literature at the beginning of the century while a university student from his teacher, the poet Thomas MacDonagh; since then Clarke has worked to clarify the definition of Irish literature.³ The validity as well as the dignity of Irish national poetry has been, throughout Clarke's career, one of his greatest concerns. His analysis of the growth of Irish poetry is a product of the tradition as well as his own theory of literature.

Poetry in Modern Ireland begins with a credo of Irish literary independence. Clarke contends that, essentially, there had been no poetic revival during the early years of this century but that Irish literature had had a continuous tradition.

Owing to present confusion and neglect, the particular

conditions of our poetry are often misunderstood -- indeed the fact that critics speak of an Irish literary revival shows in itself a certain measure of inaccuracy. We do not speak of an English, French, or American literary revival and, in the strict sense of the word, therefore, it is inaccurate to speak of an Irish literary revival. The movement which expanded so quickly, so imaginatively, at the beginning of the present century was the result of a gradual development. We can trace that development back to the eighteenth century when the English language spread more widely throughout Ireland and the native language and its literature were in decline. 4

Although Clarke believes this is a moot question, nevertheless it has remained a complex and often debated issue.

Clarke's theory is the following: when all Europe was turning to realism, poets in Ireland turned to Irish mythology;⁵ theirs perhaps was a delayed reaction to romanticism but it was, in any case, individual and independent. Irish verse, which had become highly political, was re-formed and the ground for the Celtic Twilight laid: "This mingling of landscape and lore, this topographical excitement, as we might call it, was the expression of a new emotional experience."⁶ When this experience became coupled with a mood of mystery, the Celtic Twilight was born. Clarke credits the rapid spread of the Celtic Twilight to A.E. (George Russell),⁷ but although he reveres A.E., Clarke contends that the vogue of the Celtic Twilight at the turn of the century temporarily concealed the real direction of Irish poetry which was being fostered by the translations of Douglas Hyde and George Sigerson, enthusiasts who were trying to honor, to save and to rejuvenate the Irish language.⁸

The revival of the Irish language and the growth of nationalism ushered in what Clarke called a "folk phase"⁹ which included in its ranks most of the greats of the first quarter of the century: Pearse, MacDonagh,

Stephens, and Higgins. Although the national quality of this poetry was not glaringly obvious, Clarke sees nationalism as one of its most important attributes: "these poets, while avoiding obvious comment, reflected indirectly the impoverished state of our country during centuries of alien rule."¹⁰

Formal concerns became more overt: the oral tradition helped to spark Yeats's creation of a new lyric drama (see chapter seven) and the poets of the Easter Rebellion also became interested in literary problems.¹¹ It was at this time, according to Clarke, that Irish poets turned to Spanish poetry.¹² (Spanish poetry, it will be acknowledged, has had an influence on Clarke's own work, on both his relation to prosody and his subject matter--see e.g., Clarke's Poetic Interludes after the prose of Cervantes.)

Clarke personalizes his history midway through the volume beginning at the point where his historical narrative merges in time with his own career as a poet. At first, he acknowledges, his work was more influenced by older poets than by the contemporary and more by his own psychological needs than by the current temper of the country:

My own early poems were of an epic kind for I had been influenced by Ferguson and Herbert Trench, and it seemed to me that only in a remote way could the primitive forces still in civilization be expressed. Life itself was an epic struggle, for I had spent my childhood resisting the mightiest of fallen angels, intent on seizing my small soul. Youth itself, though a transitory possession, seemed as valuable for the Great Powers of the militant world demanded it from the new generation everywhere. In the Toruigheacht Dhiarmuda agus Ghrainne I found what I wanted, for this Gaelic pursuit-tale is about two young lovers who fled from violence, night and day, through the glens and forests of Ireland, wishing only to be happy and left alone. Later I wrote of the cattle war which was the start of the Cuchulain epic, for great miserable

droves from the cattle market of Dublin passed our garden gate every Thursday on their way to slaughter in England and affected me in dreams. 13

Although Clarke was to denigrate literary modernism, his own Celtic Romanesque, we can see, was strongly affected by it: "The Celtic-Romanesque era with its intricate patterns in verse, in stone, metal and illumination, its conventionalized impersonal forms, attracted us as objective writers in an age of self-dramatization and display."¹⁴ He sees even Yeats as standing mostly outside the modernist tradition:

Regarding his work as a whole, however, we may suspect that Yeats never really left the Celtic Twilight ... The modernists, by their interest, undoubtedly stimulated Yeats and gave perhaps a mischievous zest to the speculation of his old age. Had his earlier reputation not been assailed by them, he might have been content to settle down as a dignified, stately figure -- in his own words, 'a smiling public man.' But he was resolved in his own way to comment on the poetic din across the sea. 15

And yet what Clarke distinguishes as the two aims of recent poetry stand within the bounds of modernism:

It is important, however, to distinguish between the two aims of recent poetry. The first is artistic, the attempt to intensify the medium and to express in it complex moods and ideas; the second is to make poetry utilitarian by using the general vocabulary and rhythms of prose, and by discussing in it topics of political, social and economic interest. 16

Clarke is concerned about the small public available to Irish poetry and expresses his fear rationally. He believes that private editions and a small readership tend to increase the strain of pedantry in a poet.¹⁷ The only way he sees to circumvent this is to use the media available to twentieth-century man: "But considering that this is a small agricultural country, sparsely populated, we cannot complain overmuch if poetry must depend again on word of mouth I am told that poetry is rarely heard on the American broadcasting system, but here Radio Eireann helps, by

regular broadcasts, to spread a knowledge of poetry in general, and only trained verse speakers are used."¹⁸ Clarke himself, with the founding of the Dublin Verse Speaking Society, began this trend and to this day still personally tapes a ten minute portion of the weekly program "Here and Now."

Clarke's other book, Celtic Twilight and The Nineties, is deceptively titled: only one-half of the book is really devoted to the Celtic Twilight and the Nineties. The volume is divided into five chapters, one on each of five subjects: the Nineties, the Celtic Twilight, Victorian Verse Drama, Yeats's Early Plays and Yeats's Later Plays. Strangely enough, it overlaps the preceding book very little.

The first chapter, a survey of the Nineties, was done primarily for two reasons: because Wilde was Irish, the fin-de-siècle movement was appropriated by Clarke as an Irish movement as well as an English one, and also because Clarke saw the Decadent, aesthetic movement of the nineties as the principal predecessor of the Celtic Twilight. The chapter is made up of personal reminiscences, of a description of foreign influence on the fin-de-siècle in Ireland, and of a general evaluation of the period. Clarke thinks that much of the verse is not as good as it had once been thought to be but that the prose and the stories and essays are definitely not as depraved as they had been imagined.¹⁹ In discussing Wilde himself, Clarke emphasizes his debt to eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish writers: "So he revived with superb skill the method of eighteenth-century comedies, most of which were written by Anglo-Irish writers: George Farquhar and William Congreve--really belonging to the Restoration period--Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and lesser known dramatists such as Arthur Murphy and John O'Keefe."²⁰

The second chapter describes how the Celtic Twilight phase spread, how it was influenced by the Fin de Siècle mood abroad, and, in turn, how it, too, exercised some influence since for a few of the Irish writers it was more than a literary phase because it involved visionary experience. Clarke attempts to place the work of the early Yeats in its context within the movement; and he does this as a professed reaction to those critics who either neglect the work of the early Yeats or treat him as an isolated figure.²¹ Clarke notes that in 1965 no study of the Celtic Twilight as a whole had been published and although an increasing number of books about Yeats had been written, in all of them the early work is labelled pre-Raphaelite, with only an occasional reference to a vague Celticism.²²

Clarke's analysis sets out to dispel these notions: he sees no distinct boundary between the Celtic Twilight and the Fin de Siècle and interprets them both as national Irish movements with Yeats at their head. "The Celtic Twilight School, of which Yeats was the acknowledged leader, became fashionable during the nineties and had considerable influence: its delicate impressionism, its shadowy themes, other-worldly longings and subtle wavering rhythms were in accord with the Fin de Siècle movement."²³

Thomas Moore and Samuel Ferguson emerge as central influences on the style of the Celtic Twilight. Thomas Moore contributed the "delayed rhythm" which he had discovered in Irish folk music and which found its way into Yeats's poetry. It was A.E. who showed Clarke how Ferguson precipitated the tone of the Celtic Twilight:

Although I had known that lyrical Ulster ballad, 'The Fairy Thorn,' by Ferguson, I did not realize until A.E. told me so that it anticipated all the elements of the Celtic Twilight. Here are the dim hues and the long

Irish twilight, the mystery and suggestion, the delayed rhythm and vowel-music suggested by Gaelic internal assonance. 24

Another proof for Clarke that the Celtic Twilight was an Irish movement very unlike anything innately English was his own youthful initial reaction to it:

When I first discovered for myself the poetry of the Celtic Twilight period, as a young student, I found it almost impossible to understand. I groped through a mist of my own over lines which I could not scan according to the rules. It was quite unlike English poetry which we learned in our class or the Gaelic poetry which we studied in another class. I had never heard of symbolism or impressionism. However, when I had made the Grand Tour of English literature, the difficulties were gone. It was pleasant to escape for a while from the law and order of English poetry into that shadowy world of subdued speech and nuance. 25

Clarke sees the Celtic Twilight as all important to an understanding of Yeats. He thinks that Yeats may have consciously rejected the Celtic Twilight but that he never escaped from it:

The legendary music of the Sidhe is still in the background. As late as 1917, Yeats was still enthralled by it, although his poetry had become austere.

At the grey round of the hill
Music of a lost kingdom
Runs, runs and is suddenly still.
The winds out of Clare-Galway
Carry it: suddenly it is still.
I have heard in the night air
A wandering airy music;
And moldered in that snare
A man is lost of a sudden,
In that sweet wandering snare.

Other examples might be quoted. For instance, in The Tower, written in 1928, the section with the elaborate subtitle, 'I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness,' shows the twilight mood still expressed and contrasted with the new age of violence. Surely also there is significance in the fact that the last two legendary poems written by the poet in 1939, a few weeks before his death, 'Cuchulain Comforted' and 'The Black Tower,' though stark in manner and obscure in their symbolism, are a

return to the Celtic Twilight. 26

The symbolist and the Emersonian impulses are seen to be an auxiliary to the Celtic Twilight and Clarke traces their appearance in the work of both A.E. and Yeats. For Clarke, the last of the "greats" to be affected by the Celtic Twilight was James Joyce. "In his first phase, Joyce was fascinated by the Celtic Twilight mood and this is obvious as we read The Portrait of An Artist."²⁷

Oddly enough Clarke closes his defense of the movement of the nineties by extolling its acceptance of Ireland's lowering skies. "Much of English poetry exists in an ideal sunshine, that of Greece and Rome. We have almost to go back to Anglo-Saxon alliterative staves to find the mists and twilight of the northern latitude. And how exact some of the images and descriptions are! Yeats, in his masterly way, could express in a single line the atmosphere of Connemara, 'the west winds are blowing out of the clinging air.'"²⁸ This awareness of landscape and lighting has been noticed by others in their analysis of Clarke's own work: John Montague, especially, remarks on this.

There are certain things I particular admire in Austin Clarke. The first is the way, like the painter Patrick Collins, he has made the Irish landscape the background of his work: those changing veils of rain and mist could not be anywhere else; yet they are not painted to attract visitors, but because they are part of the permanent furniture of our lives, like the rocks and thorns beneath. 29

"Victorian Verse Drama," the title of the third chapter of the book, is, I believe, another misnomer. The chapter is rather more like a concise history of verse drama, with emphasis on the nineteenth century. Although verse drama was continually on the stage, after the Jacobean very little

was actually written.³⁰ Clarke passes over Dryden in silence. During the Restoration period, prose comedies and those often distinctly Anglo-Irish ones prevailed (e.g., plays by Congreve and Farquhar.) Later the sequence of Anglo-Irish comedies was continued with works of Goldsmith and Sheridan. At the beginning of the Romantic movement several historical and gothic blank verse tragedies were being written by both English and Irish writers. But pseudo-Elizabethan type drama began with Thomas Lovell Beddoes, known best for his delicate lyrics (Beddoes was a cousin of Maria Edgeworth, the Irish novelist--but otherwise himself quite English.) George Darley, a neglected Irish poet, whom Clarke sees as akin to Beddoes (they both died in 1849) created one of the last pastoral dramas, "Sylvia or the May-Queen."³¹ In this attempt to fill in the gaps in the history of verse drama Clarke surveys a whole catalogue of other very minor nineteenth-century dramatists.³² He admits however that despite interest in the form of poetic drama which was revived during the Romantic movement and continued into the Victorian age, (poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Landor, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne all wrote five-act blank verse tragedies) no verse drama of consequence was ever written because none of the nineteenth-century authors had the slightest practical knowledge of the stage; most of their plays were unactable. A new form was created by the nineteenth-century poets: closet drama, in which the several acts and the speeches of the characters within them gradually became so large and unwieldy as to make actual performance impossible. A few were performable: among them plays by Tennyson and the Irish dramatists, Wilde and John Todhunter. Todhunter

reversed current usage turning from long to short verse plays. This was to have far-reaching effects: his short plays were privately produced and he became friendly with the still young W.B. Yeats. Clarke sees the auspicious meeting of these two Irishmen in London as "the beginning of modern Irish verse drama,"³³ because Clarke asserts, whether Yeats realized it or not, in order to renew the dramatic power of verse drama it was necessary to break with the stale Victorian pattern of the five act pseudo-Elizabethan tragedy and, with more humility and less flamboyance, turn to lyric plays in one act.³⁴

Clarke, who has always been committed to the idea of a living verse drama, has done much to foster its acceptance in Ireland. His Lyric Theatre³⁵ was to sustain the function of the old Yeatsian Abbey since the new Abbey seemed unwilling to continue to sponsor verse drama. There are many things about which Yeats and Clarke would disagree and Clarke, in no way, sees himself as standing in direct line of descent from Yeats, except perhaps as verse dramatist. The Lyric Theatre produced Yeats's plays (as well as those of Fitzmaurice, Clarke's own and numerous others) and Clarke in his criticism, is eager to see them both appreciated and understood.

Clarke thinks it most likely that Yeats stumbled into poetic drama and was not entirely conscious of what he was doing with it: "Yeats theorized a great deal in essays about his own poetry but said little about his plays. Had he realized that he was approaching drama from a different angle in his first play and said so, he might have attracted more critical attention. But he did not know what he was doing...."³⁶ Although Clarke defers from judging whether Yeats's plays are dramatic, he refers to "all the critics" who said The Shadowy Waters was "unactable."³⁷

He cites Ernest Boyd in particular and quotes him as saying:

The dramatic claims of the play may be said never to have existed; from the earliest to the latest version the theme remains fundamentally incapable of dramatic expression. 38

Because of all the adverse criticism, Clarke infers, The Shadowy Waters is now to be found only in the Collected Poems not the Collected Plays of Yeats. One specific reason for its failure which Clarke emphasizes seems a logical one: judging by the criterion of underlying unity of images as a norm for poetic drama, (which Catherine Spurgeon had pointed out in Shakespeare's plays) Yeats's play does fall apart.³⁹ But Clarke's assessment of Yeats's work often degenerates into personal quibbles and his criteria for criticism become scarcely valid:

And now to come back to the verse plays of this period. Did practical experience, the fact that he had, lucky poet, a theatre of his own, help his technique? I would say certainly. But I would suggest that his method of chanting his verse while composing slowed down the rhythm. Also his aloof temperament added a difficulty. In illustration there is another amusing story told by St. John Irvine. Yeats was moving absentmindedly in the scene-dock one day when a young lady, in passing, said, 'Good day, Mr. Yeats.' He stopped and asked, 'Who are you?' She replied 'Oh, Mr. Yeats, I am playing the leading role in your play this week.' 40

Clarke admires the middle plays of Yeats (On Baile's Strand, The King's Threshold, Deirdre) because they "observe the three unities" but he doesn't think that Yeats showed any concern for strictures of the Poetics of Aristotle. Clarke's own attitude toward the Poetics is ambiguous: "I do not think Yeats was much interested in that text book, 'Aristotle's Poetics!'"⁴¹ Yeats's plays have often been criticized negatively because they are "unrealistic" and over-stylized but on this point Clarke defends his elder.

Many critics tell us that Naoise would not have been so simple as to walk into the trap prepared for him and that the wily old Conchubar would not have let Deirdre to mourn over the corpse, but would guess that she had a knife concealed. But poetic drama is not realistic. The audience will accept stage effects as Shakespeare well knew. 42

In the last chapter in the book, on Yeats's later plays, Clarke's criticism is again mostly personal and descriptive (e.g., recalling at length his first meeting with Yeats.) Although he does not say so explicitly, he finds elements in Yeats's Noh plays (spirits, ghosts, demonic possession) which are reminiscent of the qualities of the Celtic Twilight.⁴³ He notes that Yeats sometimes returns to the tone of his early work, "it is noticeable here how Yeats leaves his new stark style at times and returns to a rich romantic music..."⁴⁴

Clarke's likes and dislikes of themes and subject matter all too often influence his critical opinion, leaving any possible objective literary analysis in the background:

Against current critical opinion, I find the play unpleasant: patricide and filocide all in one short act is too much; and I still wonder why the hefty young son in the play did not even struggle when his father was getting rid of him. The style is as bare as the set should be and the factual lines show a new development of detail... 45

(about Purgatory)

And too frequently Clarke relies on the scholarship of others to do his work for him, for example when he explains how Yeats's plays differ from the real Noh by paraphrasing the work of Hiro Ishibashi in Yeats and the Noh: Types of Japanese Beauty and their Reflection in Yeats's Plays.⁴⁶

Although Clarke was very disappointed that Yeats wrote any plays at all in prose, the fact that Clarke wrote half a book about Yeats's

plays and that his drama group, The Lyric Theatre, did give the first performances of some of Yeats's plays, displays Clarke's ultimate faith in their importance.

Clarke's article on Yeats (1939) is tainted with the envy that seems to be inevitable for him. He envies him his environment, his acquaintance with poets and writers of the nineties when "old and new impulses were mingling,"⁴⁷ his patrons, his own theatre, his private press and publishers.⁴⁸ But he tries to remain unbiased in his judgement of Yeats's work: "the Yeatsian line itself was always unique and self-sustained, despite the poet's own susceptibility to the literary moods of his time."⁴⁹ Clarke respected Yeats because he utilized native Irish elements in his work: "Yeats as an artist, was wiser than his contemporaries, for he blended this (vowel) music with the Irish folk lilt and, in the wavering rhythms developed by Moore and Ferguson, found a medium of unusual charm."⁵⁰

Clarke sees Yeats's career divided in two--the early Celtic Twilight period and a later period of stripped desiccation. The two, he believes, were divided by Synge's influence.⁵¹ Clarke thinks it would have been possible for Yeats to have "forced his way into a new form of expression which would (have been) direct, personal, and beyond general appeal"⁵² but instead he did return to the main stream of English poetry and a new freedom within the bounds of traditional meter. But Clarke does not think that the Irish note is entirely missing even in the late work:

But this new eloquence is not, I think completely English. It has that individual Anglo-Irish note which one finds in Burke and Grattan and through all this later work there runs the earlier tremulo starting here and there to surprise us in a sudden snatch. 53

Clarke has always yearned to be as free as he felt Yeats was. His assessment of the late Yeats shows this envy and its resolution in rationalization: "Yeats's later phase proves the advantage the sheer artist has over the poet who merges his own identity with a personal creed. The mental world of Yeats's last poetry is like that of Renan in his old age, mischievous, volatile, passingly profound and secretly diverting in its sophistries. The artistic gain is a spiritual loss."⁵⁴ Clarke bemoans the loss of Yeats but he pictures himself as a more committed, dedicated nationalist, and he does not try to hide this aspect of himself in his criticism. Parochialism, he realizes, is the consequence of letting his nationalistic fervor color all his work as much as it does; he does not mind, for he is not only a proud man, but an altruistic man as well; his heart goes out to his country:

In these days of our new materialistic Irish state, poetry will have a harder, less picturesque task. But the loss of Yeats and all that boundless activity, in a country where the mind is feared and avoided, leaves a silence which it is painful to contemplate. ⁵⁵

When Clarke wrote "Irish Poetry Today" in late 1936, he began with the glum statement, "Irish poetry seems to be rapidly approaching a state of destitution."⁵⁶ The reasons for that were the passing away of the great doyens of the Literary Revival, the increasing scarcity of publishers and periodicals, and the lack of a national school of poets to attract the young. "Today our youngsters, with a few exceptions, are attracted to the predominant school of English contemporary verse. We are faced once more with the dangers of provincialism and fashions at second hand."⁵⁷ The controversial issues of the day were to become the main subjects of contemporary Irish literature: the land, moral problems, and the expansion

of the influence of the Church.⁵⁸

English publishers were not eager to print Irish poets and the English public was not eager to read Irish poetry. This bothered Clarke greatly although he understood why it was so:

But there is a critical tariff against Irish verse, and this need not concern us if we are content to write for ourselves. The reaction is partly due to the oversea exploitation of the earlier movement, partly to the patriotic and quite reasonable self-defence measures taken by the Georgian school of poets immediately after the war. 59

Again, he can not resist blaming Yeats for selling out, for being almost traitorous in his assimilation: "An important event which cannot be ignored in any discussion of the present state of Irish poetry is the return of Mr. Yeats to the main sources of English literature."⁶⁰ And again, "Magnificent as the poet's later work is, we have to realize that it is steeped in the rich imaginative associations of English literature and expressed the clear measures, the eloquence of that historic mode." He sees no danger of himself succumbing to the same temptation:

his flightiness belongs to the adventurous, restless Anglo-Irish type of the past, those writers who, lacking cares of their own, were extraordinarily responsive and adaptable to any environment in which they happened to find themselves.⁶¹

Yeats's poetry appeared too soon before the "new forces of racial recovery"⁶² leaving Yeats unable to share in this complete identification of poetic form with national fervor which according to Clarke others after Yeats were to have. But that gap was bridged, "with rare artistic integrity," in the prose of James Joyce. Yeats continued searching, "turning to the metaphysical Anglicans and modern intellectual encyclopaedism." Clarke's dedication to an autonomous Irish school has been a constant throughout

his career: "If we can express eventually our own scholastic mentality in verse, I believe that our art will lead us not towards, but away from English art."⁶³

Clarke would like to see Ireland approach English literature objectively, neutrally;⁶⁴ he makes a case for the foundation of Anglo-Irish literature in the Irish, not the Anglo tradition. He tries to argue that English poetry is inflexible, "an unyielding mass"⁶⁵ but that Irish poetry written in English can be freer, more malleable. He exhorts the Irish to look to Gaelic song and ballad⁶⁶ which gave Irish poetry its first impulse. He refers them to Daniel Corkery's study which drew attention to a long-neglected school of rich sensuous Gaelic poetry, and to the neglected native religious poetry: "Reading it, reviving for ourselves its formal diction, we forget the abasement of religious imagination today."⁶⁷ Clarke enthusiastically describes the wealth of possibilities he sees in the Gaelic tradition:

Glancing through Irish poetry we notice that it was a medium in which could be expressed the drama of conscience and of inner conflict. We find medieval forms which expressed the natural man as well as his sublimated self of romantic and classical convention. These forms were common in medieval French lyric, but did not pass into the English lyric tradition. As an example of surviving form, I may mention the Love Songs of Connaught. Their wealth of imagery blinded their first discoverers to the mental conflict, the depth of temptation expressed in them.

Our elder poets gave to English verse a subtle rhythm and style of their own. In the system of Gaelic assonance we can find a legitimate means now of varying our medium to suit our particular needs. 68

It is this credo which has guided Clarke's own work for many years; he still subscribes to it. Although he is now less dogmatic (he is presently working in hexameter and using the Greek mythological story of Tiresias in a long narrative poem being readied for publication), he works by the same princi-

ples that he chose for himself forty years ago. He believes Ireland will always be Ireland, a small country outside the main stream, not very powerful on the international scene, religious and nationalistic in tendency and essence, a non-mechanized society separate from the European tradition.⁶⁹

Footnotes - Chapter VI

- ¹Personal conversation with Clarke, summer 1971.
- ²See Chapter 2 above, for list.
- ³See Chapter 3 above.
- ⁴Austin Clarke, Poetry in Modern Ireland (Cork: Mercier Press, no date), pp. 6-7.
- ⁵Clarke, pp. 7-8.
- ⁶Clarke, p. 12.
- ⁷Clarke, p. 16.
- ⁸Clarke, p. 24.
- ⁹Clarke, p. 30.
- ¹⁰Clarke, p. 33.
- ¹¹Clarke, p. 37.
- ¹²Clarke, p. 38.
- ¹³Clarke, p. 42.
- ¹⁴Clarke, p. 45.
- ¹⁵Clarke, p. 49.
- ¹⁶Clarke, p. 54.
- ¹⁷Clarke, p. 55.
- ¹⁸Clarke, p. 66.
- ¹⁹Austin Clarke, Celtic Twilight and the Nineties (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1969), p. 19.
- ²⁰Clarke, Celtic Twilight, p. 29.
- ²¹Clarke, C.T., p. 31.
- ²²Clarke, C.T., p. 31.
- ²³Clarke, C.T., p. 31.
- ²⁴Clarke, C.T., p. 34.
- ²⁵Clarke, C.T., p. 35.

²⁶Clarke, C.T., pp. 38-39.

²⁷Clarke, C.T., p. 46.

²⁸Clarke, C.T., p. 45.

²⁹John Montague, A Tribute to Austin Clarke on His Seventieth Birthday (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1966), p. 8.

³⁰Clarke, C.T., p. 51.

³¹Clarke, C.T., p. 53.

³²Clarke, C.T., pp. 57-65.

³³Clarke, C.T., p. 72.

³⁴Clarke, C.T., p. 73.

³⁵See Chapter 7.

³⁶Clarke, C.T., p. 75.

³⁷Clarke, C.T., p. 78.

³⁸Clarke, C.T., p. 79.

³⁹Clarke, C.T., p. 79.

⁴⁰Clarke, C.T., p. 81.

⁴¹Clarke, C.T., p. 84.

⁴²Clarke, C.T., p. 89.

⁴³Clarke, C.T., p. 93.

⁴⁴Clarke, C.T., p. 94.

⁴⁵Clarke, C.T., p. 99.

⁴⁶Clarke, C.T., p. 101.

⁴⁷Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats", Dublin Magazine XIV (April 1939), p. 6.

⁴⁸His envy is justified. Clarke not only has had to endure standing in Yeats's shadow throughout his career but he has had none of the happy accidents of fortune that Yeats had.

⁴⁹Clarke, "W.B. Yeats", p. 7.

⁵⁰Clarke, "W.B. Yeats", p. 7.

- ⁵¹ Clarke, "W.B. Yeats," p. 7.
- ⁵² Clarke, "W.B. Yeats," p. 8.
- ⁵³ Clarke, "W.B. Yeats," p. 8.
- ⁵⁴ Clarke, "W.B. Yeats," p. 9.
- ⁵⁵ Clarke, "W.B. Yeats," p. 10.
- ⁵⁶ Austin Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today" Dublin Magazine (Jan-March 1935), p. 26.
- ⁵⁷ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 26.
- ⁵⁸ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 27-28.
- ⁵⁹ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 28.
- ⁶⁰ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 28.
- ⁶¹ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 28.
- ⁶² Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 29.
- ⁶³ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 29.
- ⁶⁴ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 29.
- ⁶⁵ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 30.
- ⁶⁶ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 31.
- ⁶⁷ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 31.
- ⁶⁸ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 32.
- ⁶⁹ Clarke, "Irish Poetry Today," p. 29.

CHAPTER VII: The Drama

It was not until Austin Clarke's student years at University College Dublin that he was introduced to the theatre, although by that time the Abbey had been in existence about ten years. At first, as Clarke explains, the influence of the Abbey on him was slight: "In some vague way, I had heard of Irish drama and its traditions, for knowledge of outside affairs comes painfully and confusedly to a young student living in the shadow of examinations."¹ But his first direct experience at the Abbey Theatre an eye-opener for him:

As I grasped the back of a seat and sank down, I could make out dimly on the stage two robed figures. When my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I saw that they were standing before an immense locked gate. At first, in my confusion, I thought that this must be some ancient tragedy and that these two shadowy figures were stricken souls in Hades. But gradually, I realized that they were shawled women and that this unabashed hullabaloo was the famous 'caoine.' It seemed to me as if the dismal Muse of Irish history were present, adding her own groans to those embarrassing cries. The shock of that sudden encounter with Irish tradition was so great that to this day, I cannot remember what play followed The Gaol Gate by Lady Gregory. But the experience was so strange and exotic that I determined to return again.²

From then on, Clarke went regularly to the theatre. At the time, each program consisted of a short farce, always preceded by a one act play or a verse drama by Yeats; sometimes the order was reversed and the farce was confined to a curtain-raiser. The plays Yeats produced were a "deeply imaginative experience" for the young Clarke:

There were a few people in the stalls, including Lady Gregory and just after the last gong had sounded, Yeats would dramatically appear at the top of the steps leading down into the auditorium. Perhaps the actors spoke the lyric lines in tones that had become hollow-sounding with time, borrowing the archaic voice which is normally reserved for religious services. It seemed right that the poetic mysteries should be celebrated reverently and with decorum. Moreover, the presence of the poet himself in the theatre was a clear proof that all was well.³

At this time, Yeats often staged his own plays for a very small audience, and he gave a little speech after each of them:

Scarcely had the desultory clapping ceased, when Yeats would appear outside the stage curtain, a dim figure against the footlights. He swayed, and waved rhythmically, telling humbly of his 'little play,' how he had rewritten it, and what he had meant to convey in its lines. As the twenty or thirty people in the pit were more or less scattered, I was isolated usually in one of the back seats. On such occasions, I felt like Ludwig of Bavaria, that eccentric monarch, who sat alone in his own theatre. I enjoyed the poet's curtain-lecture, almost as if it were a special benefit performance for myself.⁴

There is no doubt that this and similar experiences were the impetus and influence that made Clarke turn to verse-speaking and the stage. "I was fortunate in catching the last of that imaginative movement which inspired so many writers here and in seeing all of Yeats's plays before they disappeared from the theatre he founded. So I remember gratefully that sunlit Saturday when I stole into the Abbey Theatre for the first time and heard with astonishment the wailing women."⁵

But before Clarke began to be actively immersed in the writing of plays, prose drove poetry from the Abbey Theatre. There were many causes for this: economic, personal, even political.⁶ While Yeats was alive, his own plays were all performed -- but his encouragement of other poets was rarely more than half-hearted.

Even while Yeats's theatre was active in producing verse plays, Austin Clarke saw a problem arising:

The problem of verse drama to-day is not only one of a new form and exciting poetry; it is not even the difficulty of finding a producer, actors, a theatre and an audience sufficiently obliging to sit out several hours of poetry. The problem involves the contemporary relations between poetry and speech itself: and the moment we consider the question of spoken poetry of any kind, we are faced by a tremendous wall of self-consciousness.⁷

He found that poetry was mostly an art of silent reading; for this reason, poetic drama was seen essentially as closet drama. In transferring the unspoken to the spoken, the convention most often relied upon to effect the transfer was the chanting and intoning of verse fashionable in Victorian drawing rooms before the turn of the century, a kind of hypnotic reading. Intoning might have been suited to certain kinds of poetry, but usually it sacrificed both rhythm and meaning to meter.⁸

The Victorian elite were not the only ones to blame for the monotonous readings of verse that had become standard; society at large had the feeling that the poet was endowed by his mystical profession with all the skill of voice production. Clarke thought that this was nothing but "sentimental nonsense," and that "some of our younger Irish poets, judging by broadcasts, would not be harmed by a three months' course in speech training."⁹ After he himself published his first book of verse, he went to Frank Fay for such a course because he felt "this cult of the poet as sacred being is purely adolescent."¹⁰

Clarke thought dramatists and actors as a group devote too little time and thought to the problems of verse speaking. As Denis Donoghue points out in The Third Voice¹¹ the responsibilities of the verse-dramatist consist partially of a responsibility to the

actor in the play: in any passage a pattern of sound should exist and be readily ascertainable. This pattern should be inseparable from the words, i.e. it should be unnecessary for the actor to impose an artificial pattern on speeches. Also, the sound pattern should work in service of the rhetoric and not inhibit it. Clarke intuited these dictums; he did not underestimate the importance of verse-speaking and concentrated on that as a preparation for drama itself. With Robert Farren he founded the Dublin Verse Speaking Society in an endeavor to set "a reasonable standard" of verse speaking in Ireland.¹² The society produced weekly broadcasts of twelve minutes which caused furious controversy and complaint. In an article called "Verse-Speaking," published in The Bell, Clarke defined his own standards of verse-speaking:

Verse speaking is a very delicate and exact compromise between different tendencies, and requires, therefore, perfect control of the voice. The basis of all verse is meter or recurrent pattern, and its direct expression in sound is monotone. If we emphasize this basic element we get sing-song, chanting or intoning. If we break down monotone and emphasize the meaning of the words, the result is elocution or the dramatic method of the actor. Lyrical speaking is a delicate balance between opposites, in which meter, rhythm, meaning are all held in control.¹³

It is interesting to note that in this article Clarke does give credit to Yeats for the actual revival of spoken poetry, but he tempers this praise by reminding us that Yeats initiated this practice during the period of aestheticism and that Yeats went to extremes, emphasizing the monotone and insisting that all verse must be chanted. Clarke felt that intoning, without doubt, suited Yeats's incantatory lyrics but that he had annoyed many worthy people by drawing so heavily on the hypnotic power of the voice.¹⁴ Clarke criticizes Yeats, it appears,

for over-emphasizing formal purity and as a result neglecting to utter a message for general modern theatre audiences.

It should be recognized that the Clarke and Farren Dublin Verse Speaking Society performed an enormous service: their broadcasts on Radio Eireann spread an interest in poetry at a time when there were few publishers willing to print poetry in Ireland. In this way they were instrumental in keeping the Irish literary revival alive. The interest in the spoken lyric helped to break down the barriers of self-consciousness which had, with the exception of the productions of Yeats, kept verse drama from the stage.

Yeats's cycle of plays took their subjects from the heroic period; Clarke hoped to write a similar cycle about early Christian Ireland.¹⁵ Yeats had learned his craft slowly in a practical way, by rehearsals in his own theatre. Clarke did not have that advantage, but he did have that tradition as foundation and support; and -- in addition -- he had the work of Shakespeare, Eliot, Gordon Bottomley and George Fitzmaurice to use as models. From Elizabethan drama he learned the value of the poetic use of the rhythm of daily speech although he sensed that he could not necessarily borrow the practice simply: he realized that the more nervous rhythms of the twentieth century are individual and that each poet must therefore deal with them in his own way.¹⁶ So Clarke studies what Yeats had done. Yeats's lyrical temperament rejected the Shakespearean blank verse tragedies¹⁷ and so, inspired by ballads, he sought a "medieval simplicity of imaginative speech."¹⁸ Clarke admired the "cold, clear ascetic" quality of Yeats's poetry although he objected to the reverential manner of the Abbey actors who resisted the action and the rhythm needed to

make the plays a success.¹⁹ Clarke respected Yeats's decision to substitute short one-act plays for the full-length verse plays of the past; he admired Yeats's elimination of violent actions and long prosy speeches, and he hoped to emulate the intense lyrical quality Yeats was able to achieve.

Clarke, like many others, was at first startled by the novelty of T.S. Eliot's plays, but he felt that when the first shock of the novelty is over, Eliot's verse is essentially the kind of prosaic verse that defeats itself. He said of it: "In the first place, it can be imitated too easily, in the second place it is both too crude and too subtle for the audience, it has not the rapid spontaneity of good prose rhythm, and it lacks the emotional intensity of the poetry."²⁰ Moreover, he was not impressed by the conversational idiom of urban life that Eliot used because this colloquial type of speech keeps changing and quickly becomes old-fashioned. The meter of Eliot's later plays was another thing Clarke rejected; Eliot's was a loose uncertain measure which Clarke thought "so uncertain in its stresses that it is difficult to scan and so to differentiate from prose."²¹ Clarke would acknowledge Eliot's understanding of the necessity of confronting the common man and he would recognize Eliot's attempts at such as a compromise but he saw clearly that Eliot, although using the words of the common man, makes them accommodate elitist meanings. Denis Donoghue has stated Eliot's problem accurately: Eliot, he says, tries to assume the remnants of the Christian code but tries to hide this from his audience. But this self-consciousness is inhibiting and his distaste for the common man shows."²²

In essence, Clarke was trying to strike a balance between the two "extremes" -- Yeats and Eliot. Another Irishman, George Fitzmaurice, helped him find an alternative to Yeats. Yeats's characters are heroic and tragic and Yeats is serious about them; Fitzmaurice's are the antithesis of Yeats's heroes: his characters are comic and totally anti-heroic. "In the renditions of the Irish myths, the heroes perform mighty deeds and the supernatural beings know their own dignified place. Fitzmaurice's heroes are likable, bullying frauds or ineffectual dreamers, and the supernaturals are every bit as petty as the humans."²³ In 1967 Clarke wrote the introduction for the volume of the Dramatic Fantasies of George Fitzmaurice; in it he only indirectly acknowledges his own debt to him, but there is never a question of his admiration for the overly neglected experimenter:

George Fitzmaurice discovered what Yeats, Lady Gregory and others were looking for and, as I have said, it is almost incredible that the interest of his experiments should not have been seen at the time. There are signs that our folklore may quicken an Irish ballet, and, since we must assume that Irish drama will continue to develop, it is possible that dramatists will interpret our folklore before it is too late. If that is so, the precarious difficult art-form in which George Fitzmaurice experimented at the expense of immediate recognition will be its real starting point.²⁴

Clarke's conception, of stage speech is that it "only resembles natural speech" (italics mine) and that its movement is easiest when it is set to definite patterns. The accented syllables should never be separated by more than three unaccented syllables, yet when "rhythm takes control" secondary stresses become light and quick and the verse moves not in units of lines or individual syntactic units but paragraphically, line beyond line.²⁵

It was not until after Clarke's final return home from seventeen years as an expatriate that he had a chance to learn more about stagecraft than he had been able to learn before his exile from watching Yeats's productions during and before World War I at the Abbey. In 1926 he wrote his first play, Son of Learning, but the bulk of his plays, nine in number (not including the two interludes, and the Third Kiss, as yet unpublished), were written between 1939 and 1953. At the rehearsals of the Lyric Theatre Company of his own and other plays, he was able to work out technical problems and details in a practical way.²⁶

Reacting against what he felt was the reverential mood of the Abbey, he began with a comedy based on a high-spirited Gaelic story; he found it imaginatively exciting to explore the Celtic Romanesque period because it had been, he believed, deliberately avoided: "the island of the Saints and Scholars is no more than a hyperbolic phrase used in pulpit and on hustings."²⁷ He wanted to break the convention of the past by the use of more action and shorter speeches. So he deliberately attempted to keep the speeches brief until the audience's interest was sufficiently aroused to let the poetry expand itself in a lengthy central speech.²⁸ It was perhaps Gordon Bottomley's writings which made him so very conscious of the relationship between action and speech in verse drama; Bottomley says: "Dramatic poetry's relations with action are indeed, at the core of the present day's attitude to its use in the theatre. There is something important to be considered with regard to theme also; for the contemporary theatre-goers value greatly an element of novelty and surprise; whereas it would seem from past experience that the supreme

achievements of dramatic poetry have been reached with themes universally known (at least in their general outline.)"²⁹ And again, "Most essentially of all, poetry differs from other uses of language on the stage in being, in itself, action. Colloquial conversation may illuminate the play's action or complete it; but the magic there is in the poetry, the transfiguration that is its essence, can carry on the play without other action. In poetic drama at its supreme moments words are themselves a form of action: at such times they do not even need to be reinforced by movement, and drama at its highest reaches a sound in stillness."³⁰ And so, Clarke consciously used strict meter in his plays because he felt the rhythm of free verse differs little from that of prose except when it is based on old-fashioned parallelism.³¹

Clarke's subject matter is very different from Yeats's; Yeats's plays attempt to be pagan in spirit even when they deal with Christian times: Clarke emphasizes the Christian elements in those of his fables that are borrowed from history even while giving them a personal emphasis. While Yeats's Catholic Church consists almost entirely of saints, Clarke is cognizant of the fact that, laity apart entirely, the Catholic Church is made up much less of real saints than of ordinary clergy (nuns and monks) in various degrees.³²

The Son of Learning, written in 1926, in three acts, was Clarke's first play. It was, like his next two plays, The Flame and Sister Eucharist, first printed in Dublin Magazine. It is a Gaelic story, a tribute to a medieval tale, Goliardic in type, called Aislinge Meic Conglinne (The Vision of Mac Conglinne), in which a poet exorcises a hunger-demon from the gluttonous King of Cashel.

The play was dedicated to George Moore because he had renewed Irish romance and had influenced others to learn the verbal and auditory delights of story-telling from him.

The Son of Learning captures a special quality of medieval life. While among present-day "popular" Catholics, lust is often thought of as the greatest of sins, in the Middle Ages there were six others equally terrible and equally tempting to the average man -- Clarke here demonstrates this with his treatment of gluttony. The play is set at the Abbey of Torc where the king had gone for a "blessed cure." It gets off to a bit of a clumsy start: it is difficult at first to ascertain exactly what the subject is. The Old Blindman and Amadan, the natural man, give us the necessary clues that the King has sinned, that holy men are praying for him, and that his sin was demonstrated most strikingly when he not only ate the people of his kingdom "out of pot and pocket"³³ but spent his own designated wedding day eating instead of marrying. He has a Demon inside him which makes him eat constantly. The Son of Learning, who appears on the scene to exorcise the Hunger Demon, is more a poet-musician than a scholar, and according to Vivian Mercier, more of a juggler and confidence trickster than anything else.³⁴ From the play itself, we find out that MacConglinne, the Son of Learning, wrote ranns, knows magic, was in Hell and was assumed to be an unbeliever yet could, with his spectacular gift, "dry a cow with seven rhymes." In Clarke's stage directions he is described as similar to a Wandering medieval student of Europe, the vagi scholares goliardi seu bufones, but with a racial or bardic (assuming they are synonymous) touch: in the play itself he describes himself:

Harper I am now, a rogue for merriment,
A ballad maker, a juggler of the fair
Of gaping, a wandering scholar in the glens.³⁵

The scholar is vehicle for some of Clarke's first jibes at the Church:

Lady, you are more beautiful
Than the bright-sided women that caress
A hermit in his dreams and turn his bed
Of rock to down: but what is sin to man,
Even in the thinking, matrimony
Makes virtue and his duty.

and

There would be
No sin if troubled lovers could be married
As quickly as confessed; for, to be good
Is to have pleasure freely.³⁶

Ligach baits the scholar, telling him that he can never cure the King; he, however, tells her he is able to because a passion is the King's demon and imagination alone can release him; the King's prayer and fasting only represent desire. Equating prayer and religious activity in general with desire is something Clarke often does in his plays and later poetry: he sees ritualistic religious activity as sublimated desire.

At the end of the play there is a thunder clap. The audience may believe it the signal of the miracle wrought by the scholar and the cue for his disappearance or they may think the noise just part of a thundershower. They must decide for themselves whether the demon was carried off by the scholar or whether the ventriloquial voice they heard was the scholar's own fabrication. There is no question here, however, that "for once, the poet and scholar lords it over Church and State, as all good poets and scholars think they should but as they rarely do in real life."³⁷

The uncertainty with which the poet leaves the audience at the end of the play in regard to the 'miracle' they have witnessed, is a characteristic trait which Vivian Mercier pointed out in "Austin Clarke, The Poet in the Theatre"; it is an intentional device and becomes the hallmark of almost every Clarke play.³⁸ Augustine Martin has suggested that the Scholar is an especially important figure for Clarke because Mac Conglinne, the renegade clerical student, is Mr. Clarke's alter ego, "a man who has thrown off the discipline of the Church yet retains his clerical habit, and finds himself irresistibly drawn to shrine and monastery; not always, be it said, with pious intent."³⁹ Although Martin's theory may have an element of truth in it, his tone seems overly insinuating, and his ad hominem argument seems to have little function in an evaluation of this, Clarke's first play. I believe it is a light and airy creation, unusually graceful and fluid for a first dramatic attempt by a poet.⁴⁰

The Flame, written in 1929, was first published in the Dublin Magazine and dedicated to its editor Seumas O'Sullivan. It is the first of many plays to be written in one act. The flame of the title is the flame of St. Brigid, which was tended at Kildare for many centuries. The practice was ultimately condemned as superstitious by the Norman archbishop of Dublin. Clarke believes his action was probably due to a new ecclesiastical policy but that his "little play was sufficiently casuistical to comprise his point of view."⁴¹ In this play, as in most of his others, Clarke has endeavored to express the moral and religious imagination of Irish life and to relate it to the rich yet austere period of what he called the Celtic-Romanesque.

The subject of The Flame is a young novice nun's passion for and struggle to retain her own beautiful hair, to keep it untouched by the convent scissors. The novice leaves the flame unguarded because she cannot pray. She is afraid and does not dare to stay alone. When the Abbess finds out her secret, she is mortified:

Are women not unchurched
By scandal of bare head? Has not St. Paul
Written that demons strike their fiery tents
And hasten to such hair?⁴²

Hair is the symbol of worldly vanity for these nuns.

At the end of this play again the reader (or audience) has to solve the usual problem of the significance of a miracle: did the flame ever really go out? Why? Did it reappear because the novice succumbed to prayer and was "punished" by God by falling into a coma? It seems clear from the corpus of Clarke's work that he wants us to sympathize with Attracta, the novice, and believe that the flame did wholly go out.⁴³

Nine years were to pass before Clarke was to write another play. In 1938 Sister Eucharía appeared in Dublin Magazine. Sister Eucharía was dedicated to Gordon Bottomley in admiration of his lyric plays; G.B. Saul believes Bottomley's neglected poetic dramas may well be the spiritual ancestors of Clarke's.⁴⁴

Although this time the play is set in the present, its location is again in a convent. The protagonist is a nun who prays continuously and who seeks but is refused absolution from a priest even though she herself is assured of her imminent death. In the end when Sister Eucharía does die, it is discovered that she wore chains to insure that she would endure pain on earth. When they are

disclosed, it is declared in the convent that Sister Eucharía was a saint. As if by miracle, the bell of the convent rings. Does this ratify the declaration of her sainthood? Clarke would not let the end be that simple. The lay sister enters declaring:

Sister, I rang the bell
But it was not my fault, no, not my fault.
I saw the bell rope and it seemed to move...
Then something made me put my hand upon
The second knot and something made me ring
The bell. But it was not my fault, no, no,
Truly, for I have not been my own self
Today.⁴⁵

The mystery remains.

In both The Flame and Sister Eucharía Clarke followed much the same pattern: both are set in a convent and, though The Flame is set in the Middle Ages, there are many intentional similarities. Each singles out an individual from the group, each ends with the characteristic Clarkean "miracle," and there is even one brief choral passage in which the nuns of The Flame confess the weakness of their faith (in Sister Eucharía even identical words are used); it has the effect of a litany as the nuns reply to the questions of the Abbess or Reverend Mother. And this effect is reinforced by the litany for the dead which is heard echoing outside at the end of Sister Eucharía.

Black Fast, a one-act play written in 1941, is unique among the Clarke plays because for it, the Abbey, which had never performed Clarke's plays, made exception and amends: the Abbey theatre group performed Black Fast at two special performances in January of 1942.

The play is a humorous setting of the seventh century controversy over the exact date of Easter; it dramatizes the debate of Ulster factions and the Munster factions about which of their two

calendars was accurate. This was a serious issue; no easy resolution was apparent, but as Clarke has pointed out, the venerable Bede was able to see that this problem had its lighter moments. It is those moments which Clarke acknowledges.

The scene is set in the home of Connal More of Ulster. His household is torn by debate because he and his wife Blanaid Fairnape do not follow the same religious leaders and thus they observe Easter, and consequently Lent, at different times. Easter in the South is a month later than it is in the North. Blanaid, therefore, insists that her husband respect her Lent and abstain from various foods. She has her servants remove things from Connal More's table even though he swears he had observed Lent earlier.

The play is light and witty, a gentle swipe at the inflexibility of religious ritual which sometimes causes conflict and aggravation to followers of even closely allied factions of one religion. In this play Clarke also tries to make his audience aware of the needless division between Northern and Southern Ireland -- a source of strife which, he hints, was already present in the Middle Ages: the culinary complications in the play Clarke gleaned from a debate which was actually recorded between an Ulster saint and a Munster saint over the observation of Lenten practices.⁴⁶

The Kiss, a comedy in one act, written entirely in rhymed couplets, is after the French of Theodore de Banville, and is one of the two plays that Clarke wrote in 1942 (the other, see below, is As the Crow Flies). It has supreme lightness: with gusto Mr. Clarke counterpoints loose everyday speech with the tightness of rhymed couplets.

The translation of a tale much like the Chaucerian Wife of Bath's tale of an old woman who becomes young again because of a favor done her by a handsome youth, provides only the skeleton of the play. The latter half of it seems to function as a light-hearted setting for some serious criticism of current affairs in twentieth-century Ireland; consequently it makes good sense that the names of the characters have not been changed but that the action has been shifted from France to Ireland to a wood near Clonsilla, where we meet the protagonists Uirgeal (the Columbine) and Pierrot.

What Uirgeal says after "the kiss," seems to me to be an indirect comment on Yeats's poetry:

A poet loved me once when he was young
And foolish. He spent half his time among
The woods with me. In fact we were engaged.
But he grew famous and the more he aged,
He dealt in rags and bones, in dirty delph,
Then seized and tried to make me like himself.⁴⁷

And after the kiss, this criticism becomes even more blunt as Pierrot declaims satirically about Ireland, as seen by him in a way analogous to the kiss he gave:

All property is sacred in this land.
When patriots can pick the public purse
But not the private pocket, what is worse
Than petty larceny? To rob mere pence
And not a bank increases the offense.
If company directors are promoted
For fraudulence and deputies have voted
Large pensions for possession of a rifle,
It is indictable to steal a trifle.⁴⁸

and:

Lady, however business men invest
Some fraction of their total, they insist
On quick returns. Would the industrialist
Compete when he can have monopoly
Of tariffs and unship the Irish sea?

The poor ratepayers groan, are apprehensive?
Dam every river, make their light expensive!
Charity fund and social service bless
Obedient rollers of the printing press
Until the Constitution shakes with laughter.
What did I say? This country makes me dafter
Than my own heart. I touch a floating mine.⁴⁹

Inevitably religion, albeit disguised, enters the discussion
when Uirgeal says:

But mortal longings are the deathward flight
Of midges towards the dusk -- and must I sigh
For transitory pleasures, learn to die
When all my sisters are content to be?⁵⁰

She tells Pierrot that he forgets the one all-important thing:

Morality. We must be married first,
If I am to be yours.⁵¹

After she accepts his proposal, they contemplate their own utopia, a spoof on the dreams of a utopian Ireland: they would not only have a garden, but children, regardless of the expense -- the major concern of even good Catholic families in Ireland. They'd teach their children The Irish tongue, and tell them of the heroes of Easter Week.

As the Crow Flies, a lyric play for the air, was written appropriately enough, for broadcast on Radio Eireann in 1942. It fully exploits the potentialities of words and sounds divorced from sight which create a world of the imagination where the anthropomorphic legend of evil from the pagan past is played against the background of a violent stormy night in the late summer on the River Shannon near Clonmacnoise in the seventh century. Its reviewer in Dublin Magazine, Padraic Fallon, says that it has all the "murderous innocence" of this period of Clarke's work. "Externally it derives from that Celtic Romanesque vision of Ireland which he has described ... a world like

a medieval map, peopled by voids and holy guesswork where the Celtic imagination was moulding in itself, in the manner of a miracle play, the first striking elements of the new European learning."⁵² Clarke has changed what was a simple tale into something which fills us with terror because the fundamentally naive folktale is retained but overlaid now with grotesquerie and sly humor.

Clarke's technique is startling in this one-act play. He achieves a variety of effects by the introduction of other meters besides his customary blank verse here reserved for the humans. Rhyme, both internal and terminal is used as well as internal and terminal assonance.

The essential meaning of the play is to be found in the last scene when Virgilius asks Aengus to tell him why he is so frightened. He answers:

Father, Father, I know
The ancient thought that men endure at night.
What will or ^{cave} can hide us from that
knowledge?⁵³

The thought is unquestionably the thought of original sin and death and it is not until the sudden climax when this vision of nature is stripped of all the romanticism that domesticates it that we realize Clarke was here creating a realistic picture of the world, dramatizing for us the old riddle of the universe that is the beginning and end of all thought.

Unlike many of his other plays this one does not end with a miracle or accident that faith could possibly claim as a miracle. Here, in what until the end has seemed like a very innocuous play, Clarke has taken his first firm stand, and what he has to tell us is

bleak and without hope -- there is no possible salvation for man or beast.

The Plot is Ready, a blank verse play in four scenes, written in 1943, is based on one of those semi-historical tales of the Irish kings which exemplify the 'drama of conscience.' This play, which has its source in the Yellow Book of Lecan is, according to Douglas Sealy, his best play⁵⁴ and according to G.B. Saul, his most moving.⁵⁵ I believe their judgments are valid -- it is in this play that Clarke's craft as dramatist reaches its apex. The Plot is Ready is a return to tragedy but with a new mastery of stage technique (probably owing to the skill attained by working with his newly formed verse-speaking society.) Each of the four scenes flows naturally into the next; each presents concisely, but with intensity, an aspect of the theme.

The "plot" of the title is Muriadach Mac Erca's burial plot. He, the High king of Ireland, in 53 A.D., as the original tale goes, had fallen in love with a supernatural being called Sin (Irish for storm) who caused his death by enchantment. The monks who transcribed the tale could not allow this supernatural element, or Sin's contempt for the clergy, to be recorded, so they interpolated passages that attempted to show that Sin was of earthly origin.⁵⁶ They shifted the emphasis of the tale to the conflict between pagan and Christian ideals, of course making the Church the ultimate victor. The pagan element, however, was not fully deleted, although the signs of clerical handling are obvious, especially in a short poem where Sin says she is descended from Adam and Eve and then goes on to announce that she could create sun, moon and stars.⁵⁷

Clarke, adapting the tale to his own purposes, has almost completely removed any residue of pagan elements in order to make the play into a vehicle reflecting direct conflict between individual and Church. The ending is the characteristic Clarkean ending and is credible only as a marvel of fairy-tale quality. The king has not conformed to the demands of the Church, but somehow even in his death and defeat, triumphs over them. Clarke has given extra power to the ending by telescoping all the action from Muriadach's awakening to the very end in less than one-hundred lines of crisp verse. As Vivian Mercier has pointed out, "the rapid succession of coups de théâtre is overwhelming in its effect."⁵⁸

The priest, although Clarke has made him equal to the king in strength of poetic effect, is the weaker in the end. The clergy have perhaps won a temporal battle but they have lost a spiritual one; they may have Muriadach's body but they have lost his soul.

The Viscount of Blarney, written in 1944, a one act play indicated by Clarke to be either for stage or radio, is based on a Wexford folk story taken down by Patrick Kennedy.⁵⁹ Rhyme and end-
assonance are used in this play in which half-doggerel octosyllables accent its folklore naivete. Clarke sets it seventy years ago near the Blackstairs Mountains but as Padraic Fallon correctly notes in a review in Dublin Magazine, "the eighteenth century glimmers like phosphorus through the queer escapades of the story and gives it traditional reality."⁶⁰ The dream-vision tale is structured like a "märchen. There is a young innocent girl, an evil foster mother, and of course a young man. But, as usual, there is more to it than these

entertaining simplicities: the play is a vehicle for more of Clarke's jibes at religion. He speaks of the fear it engenders:

Noah's flood

That's sent to castigate the young
At night. They huddle half asleep
Because their minds have grown too big
For them and keep on falling, falling
Into the pit their terror digs.
Then, wide awake, all of a sudden,
They see that flood-gleam, hide their heads
Beneath the bedclothes, see that flood-gleam
And are so much afraid of it,
They cannot scream until the fit is over.⁶¹

When the foster mother appears and explains what brought her, we see that this is just another excuse for Clarke to throw some blame on Catholic Ireland's disturbance of the innocent young:

Your wicked thoughts. Don't dare
To contradict. Too fine a comb
Will break its teeth in that wild hair!
....
I tried to send you back to heaven
And save the angels all this bother
Before you reached the age of seven.
But you grew faster than the lie
That hid your birth, with every cry
Struggled for your foolish life on earth.⁶²

It is understood that the Viscount, an idealized figure, is unlike the materialistic people of present Ireland. But since his qualities are too good to be true, he too can be used for poking fun at the parochial Irish of today. Cauth, the young girl, asks suspiciously of him, "But is he...a Protestant?" The answer, "Convert... newly/Received."⁶³

The Second Kiss, 1946, a comedy in one act, like its predecessor The Kiss, is written in rhymed pentameter couplets. It has the same lightness of The Kiss with the similar interjections of criticism about the state of affairs in modern Ireland.

Clarke coyly instructs that the kiss with which the play begins should exceed by three seconds the "emotional duration" allowed by the Film Censor; the Film Censor is used as a guideline because there was no Irish stage censorship at the time Clarke wrote the play. This heroine is different from her namesake in The Kiss; here Pierrette much of the time masquerades as Columbine. The play begins with Pierrot urging Pierrette, "Let's misbehave! Do something shocking!" She thinks that's quite impossible for a simple reason, "We're married now."⁶⁴ As Clarke knows, only a good Irish Catholic would make a retort like that.

Throughout Pierrot reacts to Pierrette nervously saying the right things consciously, as if by rote, proving he is really more intrigued with the extramarital. At the end the extramarital is fully equated with the imaginative when the couple recall their metaphorical prophecy of the bonds of marriage:

Dear, the week of our engagement --
The travelling crane -- you asked me what the cage meant
The chain, the steam that grovelled in mud and marling.⁶⁵

This industrial age machine prefigures the bondage of the mechanical marriages which Clarke sees around him in contemporary Ireland.

The Plot Succeeds, first performed in 1950, entitled a poetic pantomime, is based on one of the medieval Gaelic tales which deal with Mananaun Mac Lir, the sea god. The Son of Lir was said to appear in various humorous disguises and sometimes to lend the power of transformation to others.⁶⁶ Like The Plot is Ready, its closest companion piece, it deals with the never ending intricacies of war between the sexes which in Clarke's plays is often complicated by religious observation.

The meter used is experimental in English; apart from the Prologue it consists of modified heroic couplets; one of the rhyming words in each pair is dissyllabic and only the first syllable of it is rhymed.

The prologue is the only place Mannanaun Mac Lir actually appears, but the principle of changing shape at will which is his -- "Three times I changed my shape for sport"⁶⁷ -- dominates the structure of the play. Clarke pits northern against southern when he chooses Mongan Mor of Ulster to oppose Branduv of Leinster.

In this play many of the issues Clarke has criticized elsewhere reappear. Second marriages are frowned upon and thus the clerics attempt to circumvent them. This is taken very seriously by Clarke who in Twice Round the Black Church speaks of his grandfather, the family pariah: "In the middle of overheard words, a sister whispered to me the dire offense of which our grandfather had been guilty. Some years before, he married a widow who owned a fruit shop on Ormond Quay, near the corner at Capel Street Bridge. Had the medieval notion that second marriages are almost adulterous lingered in Dublin or had my mother and her two sisters been shocked because of loyalty to their own mother, Ellen Dardis of County Meath, who died when they were all young? I cannot tell."⁶⁸

And there are jests about late marriages in Ireland,

Manus --	Can I believe my eyes?
Mongan --	They taught you prudence
	at Clonmacnoise.
	How old? Would it be rude
	to ask?
Girl --	Of course not, I am five-and-ninety.
Manus --	You want to marry?
Girl --	Why should I decline?
	Late marriages are customary, dear,
	In Ireland. ⁶⁹

Clarke envisions the Church's ideal of marriage as a state of suffering.

Courting as a prelude to marriage is not befitting:

Such courting is no prefix to the state
Of matrimony. Monk, emaciated
By fast and vigil, hand joined to hand in struggle,
Though winter freeze him, will not even hug
Himself.⁷⁰

Even in this medieval cosmos Catholic clergy can be bought if the price is right. When the pseudo-Fergus and Grainne enter, Branduv falls in love with Grainne on sight and decides to marry her that very night. The Abbot protests that it would be irregular so Branduv offers to double the usual marriage fee, but not until he offers to treble it is consent given.

At the end, the north-south argument is reintroduced. Mongan declares that Branduv will awake in the morning to find himself with an old hag and then will realize that wonders are unceasing. Clarke uses this to draw an analogy: Ireland's political situation also needs a miracle or wonder to ameliorate it:

Mongan -- Why then, to prove that wonders are unceasing,
May Ireland, north --
Dulaca -- and south,
All -- remain at peace.⁷¹

This ending is appropriate because Branduv represents the south, Leinster, and Mongan the north, Ulster.

After the play is over the spectator is again left with the question of whether prayer or miracle had the upper hand in resolving the situation -- and if the last Grainne we see is the real one. For the reader, however, this time there is no ambiguity because Clarke has given him a clue by indicating the pseudo-Grainne throughout with single quotation marks around her name. The last Grainne is the pseudo-

Grainne and so it is clear that miracle triumphed, or let us say -- it is clear to the reader. What would happen to the audience's understanding in a production of this play remains a big question. But in any case, a reading of the play assures us that Clarke would have us acknowledge that Ireland's real heritage is at least as much fantasy as religion and that appearance and reality are, by most, considered synonymous -- it is significant that it was the pseudo-Grainne who was again accepted for a second time, at the end, when she no longer looked like a hag.

The Moment Next to Nothing, dedicated to James Whittaker, in three acts, was written in 1953. It is based on the same story that is used for Clarke's prose romance The Sun Dances at Easter, a medieval Irish tale, Altram Tige Da Medar (The Fosterage of the Houses of the Two Methers) edited by Lilian Duncan in Eriu XI. Clarke notes that a remote origin of the story may have been a myth of the struggle of two gods for a goddess.⁷²

Set in Ireland at the time of Saint Patrick, it is a play which, until the end of the third act, has only two actors. The body-soul tension is central in this play in which Ceasan, a monk who is spending a year alone in the woods in a vow of silence, falls in love with Eithne, a renegade, originally a human, wife of the High King. From the very beginning Ceasan tries to teach Eithne about good Christian customs, but Ceasan's reactions throughout put into question religion, the vows of silence, time spent alone, and celibacy; Eithne's adulterous, mysterious behavior is somehow accepted, the sincerity of her character never doubted. Eithne is finally understood as a being who stands outside the scheme of Original Sin and Redemption, and

despite all of Ceasan's efforts throughout, incapable of benefitting from Christianity. Clarke does not explicitly indicate to us how we should interpret her, but it is difficult to see her as a she-devil and not the spirit of poetry. Again it seems the message of this play is a negation of Christianity -- this time because it stifles the creative, the vital.

It was not until 1965 that Clarke turned to drama again, this time doing two short poetic adaptations of Cervantes' Interludes. Considering the link Clarke found between Spanish and Gaelic metrics, it is understandable that his interest in Spanish Clarke should have spilled over into the prose of Cervantes. Although Cervantes' dramatic works are little known, he was, according to Clarke, the first to reduce the plays from five acts to three.⁷³ His success, again according to Clarke, was moderate; of his dramatic works Cervantes himself said modestly, "I composed at that time no fewer plays than thirty at least, all of which were acted without anybody's interrupting the Players by flinging cucumbers or any other trash at them."

These two interludes (*entremés*) are from among a group of eight which were originally published in Madrid in 1615, the year before Cervantes' death. The interlude, usually a short comic incident farcical in tone, is meant to be performed between acts of a full-length play in order to quiet the audience. It usually deals with stock characters and a temporarily unresolved situation; at the end there is often a reassembling of all the characters by a token banquet, dance or marriage. La Cueva de Salamanca (The Cave of Salamanca) is in prose; Clarke's version is a free one. The second

piece, El Viejo Celoso, Clarke calls The Silent Lover although he acknowledges the jealous old husband of the title is the main character.

As a reader of Clarke's Later Poems would know, there was an Irish monastery in Salamanca (see chapter on Later Poetry) and that makes La Cueva de Salamanca all the more relevant for Clarke. Clarke has adapted each of the two interludes so that they are characterized by their erotic imagery -- (Cervantes' interludes were not so characterized) -- both these playlets are seemingly built around displaying verbal sensuality. In The Student from Salamanca, at the beginning, Pancraccio takes leave of his wife to go to his nephew's wedding; we see that his wife Leonarda is eager to get rid of her over-verbal but physically sexless spouse:

Goodbye to that foolery
The front and back o' my farthingale to you!
Cristina, he's never done, taking me out of
My flounces, my petticoats, my nothings-on, Fancy,
He wants to suck my cream and pink, as though
I were a sweet to roll around on his tongue,
Touch everywhere all at once, impossible
In matrimony, melt my sugar'd plums
Between his gums. What wife could be contended
With similes?⁷⁴

(N.B. Clarke has changed the emphasis here; in Cervantes' this speech reads, "Good-bye, and good riddance to you! Go, and don't come back! Vanish, go up like smoke in thin air! Good God, this time all your bluster and squeamishness don't move me a bit!"⁷⁵

Clarke, never content to spoof without a moral, has again elevated the secular above the religious in this little adaptation, following Cervantes' lead in subverting the image of authority. He rails against what the church has done to marriage, how the pleasure is gone from it since partners must turn elsewhere for pleasure, even to servants. It does not seem accidental that the husband is made the

object of fun, that marriage has essentially de-manned him, and that the scholar of the Church is eager to learn the joys of the secular world -- "how to pluck" and to take advantage of religious misery to "conjure up" a hoax for fun and profit. The husband's persistent gullibility enhances the illusion when his idealized view of his wife is shown to be comparable to his own belief in magic.

The Silent Lover is very similar in message and tone and as is traditional, this interlude ends with all on stage celebrating together in song. Authority is again subverted -- the compulsively watchful jealous old husband is betrayed and his wife left unpunished after her intimacies with the gallant. In the Cervantes interlude this outcome is a result solely of the folly of jealousy of the husband. In Clarke's, not only jealousy is punished but old age, stern morality and the lack of joy in earthly pleasures all receive direct criticism. The husband is betrayed most by the combination of his own jealousy and the gross misconception of earthly realities.

Clarke's second interlude matches his first; both are lyrical, buoyant short comedies in praise of the joys of physical love as set against the constraints and stringencies enforced by the Church. Because he has now mastered his art and the Church's tightness is not over-emphasized, these two succeed more than many of his earlier, more heavy-handed attempts.

The experience of writing for the theatre affected Clarke's work in much the same way that it had Yeats's many decades earlier: it gave him sharp, precise diction and a new sense of dramatic conflict; both were to come to good use when he returned to the writing of poetry.⁷⁶

It is clear that the most obvious way in which Clarke has diverged from and enlarged the scope of verse drama, as Yeats used and understood the term, was by infusing it with comic irony. Yeats's humor is to be found more in his prose -- his verse seems reserved for far more serious things.⁷⁷ Yeats did not see comic fantasy as a suitable vehicle for serious subjects and therefore avoided the anti-heroic and satirical. Even the most serious of Clarke's plays have their comic moments, because Clarke deliberately tries to follow every climax with an anti-climax.

And Clarke's subject matter, as we have seen, is radically different from Yeats's: Clarke stays with medieval Irish characters and legend for the most part and when he departs from them, generally retains the themes he used for them. Clarke's plays, it has been reported, unlike Yeats's, perform better than they read.⁷⁸ "By the use of black drapes and modern stage lighting, he has restored to poetic drama the speech and fluidity of Shakespeare's theatre. A simple device like blocking-out the stage without dropping the curtain is God's gift to the poet. Turn the lights off and on again, and the stage has ceased to be a room -- it is the inside of a man's mind. Or the action can move from place to place in full view of the audience. Spotlight one half of the stage and leave the other half in darkness. When it is time to move, black-out that side of the stage and spotlight the other half." And perhaps most important of all, Clarke always consciously heeds the advice of Gordon Bottomley:

It is in the sound of poetry that half the dramatic poets' advantage lies. The theatre of today takes little account of the beauty of the speaking voice, though it is not less than that of the singing voice. Indeed, there

is as great a kinship -- if not greater -- between poetic drama and opera as there is between poetic drama and prose drama. Beauty of sound counts all the time -- in Sophocles, in Racine, in Shakespeare -- and there is no point in which the contemporary English theatre has been more impoverished.⁸⁰

Clarke's plays can be discussed in religious terms: the agon of the strait-laced orthodox Catholic versus the independently minded, but not necessarily non-religious man; political terms: authoritarianism versus individual liberty; and moral terms: the conformist versus the man with a mind of his own, and group guilt versus individual conscience. Clarke's vehicle usually is the medieval church because he saw that unlike the present Church, it had its freer side -- it and its members understood all too well that piety and restraint could be overdone, and thus it provided safety valves even in its 'use' of and belief in the supernatural. Clarke valued this, for its common sense and its sense of humor, two qualities he feared modern Ireland was losing sight of. Clarke's plays became, with the experience gained over the years, excellent drama and excellent poetry, as with each play his range widened and his technique became more and more simple and direct.

Although the Lyric Theatre Company, Clarke's own company, an outgrowth of the Dublin Verse Speaking Society, has performed his plays on numerous occasions in Ireland, I believe they have not been performed enough in Ireland or at all elsewhere. I hope that they soon will be. As Vivian Mercier so perceptively noted, "Modern or medieval, the Catholic mind would appear at first glance to have little relevance for a twentieth-century audience which should happen

to consist neither of Catholics nor -- quite probably -- of believers in any religion whatsoever. But, in fact, what Clarke has to say is often of supreme importance to our time."⁸¹

Footnotes to Chapter VII

¹Austin Clarke, A Penny in the Clouds (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 3.

²Clarke, p. 3.

³Clarke, p. 4.

⁴Clarke, p. 4.

⁵Clarke, p. 7.

⁶Vivian Mercier, "Austin Clarke, The Poet in the Theatre," Chimera (Spring 1947), p. 26.

⁷Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," Threshold XIX (Autumn 1965), p. 16.

⁸Ibid. p. 7.

⁹Austin Clarke, "Verse Speaking," The Bell XV, 3 (December 1947), p. 53.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Denis Donoghue, The Third Voice (Princeton, 1959), pp. 237-38.

¹²Austin Clarke, "Verse Speaking," p. 55.

¹³Austin Clarke, "Verse Speaking," p. 54.

¹⁴Austin Clarke, "Verse Speaking," p. 54.

¹⁵Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 26.

¹⁶Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 19.

¹⁷Although in his first play, The Countess Cathleen, he chose two Elizabethan plays, The White Devil and The Dutchess of Malfi as models.

¹⁸Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 21.

¹⁹Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 23.

²⁰Austin Clarke, "Plays in Verse," The Bell XIII, 3 (December 1946), pp. 75-81.

²¹Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 26.

- ²²Denis Donoghue, p. 241.
- ²³John P. Conbere, "The Obscurity of George Fitzmaurice," Eire-Ireland (Spring 1971), p. 22.
- ²⁴Austin Clarke, Intro. to George Fitzmaurice, The Plays of George Fitzmaurice (Dublin: Dolmen, 1967), p. xv.
- ²⁵Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 26.
- ²⁶Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," pp. 26-27.
- ²⁷Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 26.
- ²⁸Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 27.
- ²⁹G. Bottomley, Essays and Studies (Oxford, 1934), p. 145.
- ³⁰Bottomley, p. 140.
- ³¹Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats and Verse Drama," p. 26.
- ³²Vivian Mercier, "Verse Plays of Austin Clarke," Dublin Magazine (April-June 1944), p. 40.
- ³³Austin Clarke, Collected Plays (Dublin: Dolmen, 1963), p. 4.
- ³⁴Vivian Mercier, "Austin Clarke, Poet in the Theatre," p. 13.
- ³⁵Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 180.
- ³⁶Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 204. These jibes at the Church are meant to refer to the Church of present-day Ireland as well as, if not more than, the past.
- ³⁷Mercier, "Verse Plays of Austin Clarke," p. 43.
- ³⁸Vivian Mercier, "The Poet in the Theatre," Life and Letters, LIII (April 1947), p. 14.
- ³⁹Augustine Martin, "The Rediscovery of Austin Clarke," Studies (Winter 1965), p. 416.
- ⁴⁰It should be noted that the lyric called "Summer Delights the Scholar" in the second act is a free paraphrase of an anonymous poem from the latter part of the twelfth century, "An MacLeighinn" discovered at the Maynooth Library in Gaelic and never translated. In assonantal pattern, it is more or less equivalent to the Classical meter of the original. Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 398.
- ⁴¹Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 398.

⁴²Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 68.

⁴³The Flame was revised after it appeared in Dublin Magazine; it was elaborated and certain new passages were added, notably one describing the novice's conscience -- the stricken dream of Absalom, the son of David who met his death by getting the long tresses of his hair caught in the forked branches of trees.

⁴⁴G.B. Saul, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke," Celtic Cross, p. 33.

⁴⁵Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 113.

⁴⁶Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 117.

⁴⁷Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 151.

⁴⁸Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 152.

⁴⁹Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, pp. 152-153.

⁵⁰Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 184.

⁵¹Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 155.

⁵²Padraic Fallon, Dublin Magazine (March 1944), p. 45.

⁵³Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 188.

⁵⁴Douglas Sealy, "Austin Clarke: A Survey of His Work," Dublin, (Jan.-Feb. 1963), p. 28.

⁵⁵G.B. Saul, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke," Celtic Cross, p. 33.

⁵⁶Sealy, p. 28.

⁵⁷Sealy, p. 28.

⁵⁸Vivian Mercier, The Poet in the Theatre, p. 15.

⁵⁹Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 401.

⁶⁰Fallon, p. 57.

⁶¹Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 229.

⁶²Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 235.

⁶³Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 243.

⁶⁴Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 250.

- 65 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 268.
- 66 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 401.
- 67 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 273.
- 68 Austin Clarke, Twice Round the Black Church (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 16.
- 69 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 306.
- 70 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 307.
- 71 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 314.
- 72 Austin Clarke, Collected Plays, p. 402.
- 73 Austin Clarke, Two Interludes adapted from Cervantes: The Student from Salamanca and The Silent Lover (Dublin: Dolmen, 1968), p. 5.
- 74 Austin Clarke, Two Interludes, p. 9.
- 75 Honig, trans., Cervantes' Interludes (New York, 1964), p. 128.
- 76 Richard Loftus, Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry (Madison, Wisc.: U. of Wisconsin, 1964), p. 262.
- 77 Vivian Mercier, "Verse Plays of Austin Clarke," Dublin Magazine (April - June 1944), p. 39.
- 78 Mercier, "The Poet in the Theatre," p. 9.
- 79 Vivian Mercier, "Austin Clarke, The Poet in the Theatre," Chimera, v (Spring 1947), pp. 27-28.
- 80 Gordon Bottomley, "Poetry Seeks a new Home," Theatre Arts Monthly, XIII (December 1929), p. 924.
- 81 Mercier, "Austin Clarke: Poet in the Theatre," p. 29.

CHAPTER VIII: The Prose Romances

In the middle of his career, before his return to Ireland in 1937, Clarke first turned to prose narrative. The Bright Temptation was published in 1932; another work, The Singing Men of Cashel, in 1936; both were full-length volumes. He has noted¹ that he deliberately called them romances because he was aware that they were not truly novels; they merged fantasy with a narrative akin to that used for historical novels. His shift to prose, he said, had two purposes: namely to revive interest in the Celtic Middle Ages, a period practically unknown in Ireland, and to make a little money--since opportunities for reviewing at that time were proving meagre. He did not make as much money as he had hoped, and no more prose romances were forthcoming until sixteen years when The Sun Dances at Easter, his third and last prose romance, was published.

There seems to have been a very clear third reason for writing prose that Clarke, so used to wedding the propagandistic to his work, has been hesitant to mention. Beyond romantic reconstruction of the medieval monastic society lies a deliberate comment on present-day Ireland which crops up time after time, persistently maintaining an obligation throughout all three works. This third purpose, especially, has not gone unnoticed by earlier critics: "Obviously the poet is examining, from his own peculiar stance, the moral and religious structure of Ireland using history as his stalking-horse: the 'drama of racial conscience' is restlessly in progress."² More than charming historical romances about

medieval Ireland these works are protests of a satirical nature against the complacency of the Irish of Clarke's own day.

The Bright Temptation, Clarke noted, links up with his early narrative poem of the legend of Diarmuid and Grainne, but the story as he created it, even though analogous, is original. A celebration of youth and innocence, this work chronicles the adventures of Aidan, a neophyte scholar of the Abbey of Cluanmore. Aidan is first kidnapped as a result of mistaken identity, then wanders through the countryside of Ireland accompanied by Ethna, young "bright temptation" of this monk-to-be. We witness their naive approaches to love, his subsequent capture by a gigantic batman, Prumpolaun, and his Dantesque experiences at the Glen Bolcan: "As he stepped back he heard all the fruit-trees stirring around him. Grey, dead faces were staring at him from their leaves"³ and "he peered closely; he seemed to see grey faces among rags. Madman had disguised themselves as stumps, keeping motionless there under the moon as the waters passed them,"⁴ followed by his mysterious bird-guided reunion with Ethna.

The book has charm; there are many beautiful, languid scenes (too long to quote) which gain a more specifically Irish flavor from the descriptions of the countryside, its flora, mountains, cairns, cromlechs and caves. But the timing-pacing betrays the poet in Clarke. Unused to prose rhythm, he makes some sections go too quickly; others are protracted unduly, hindered by climaxes that never seem to come and, unfortunately, the atmosphere of innocence and wonder, the naturalness, the youth and spontaneity, the rhythm of joyful discovery are marred by the excessive satiric jibes at the Church's indoctrination which Clarke cannot seem to avoid.

For a moment he stared in surprise at his bright thighs, for never in his life had he seen himself completely naked. He had been trained by early confession and the catechism to avoid curiosity over his own body, for the pious clergy always guard over holy purity. They know the dangers of knowledge, the temptations that surround a youth, especially when he is alone. They know from experience how easily a chance look or touch may lead to a bad habit. Caught unawares by his own curiosity, Aidan stared down at himself.

Suddenly he raised his head again. A glow of shamed modesty and fear swept over him. He had sinned with his eyes. He had lost innocence for ever. 5

His hyperbole is such that even the dogs of Ireland seem to have been trained by the clergy:

Into the eyes of that noble Irish wolfhound there came a look of disgust. Aidan saw the great dog turn with a reproachful glance. It went back a little distance in the grass, and crouched down, keeping its head modestly averted.

'O, how shameful must my condition be!' thought the poor lad. 6

He compounds his criticism of the Church; it has stifled the common man's knowledge of and respect for Irish tradition:

How often have I told you not to listen to those stories of the bad old days! Don't the clergy denounce them as immoral and injurious to young minds? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and on the very night, too, when your own match is to be made. The sooner you are married the better! 7

It is precisely that knowledge of the legend of Diarmuid and Grainne which the young Ethna uses to further her romantic adventure with Aidan; she is shocked when she finds that Aidan, a scholar, has never heard the story, that he knows no stories at all, that he has learned only the Latin commentaries on "the blessed epistles" and the rudiments of grammar and logic.⁸

She, his master in the affairs of everyday life, tells him that he is handicapped: "You cannot run as lightly as I do, Aidan, for you read too much. But I would teach you to be as happy and free as I am," she cried, as they

came back through the pines."⁹ The description of her willing pupil's reaction displays the felicitous images that we sometimes do find in Clarke's prose, even when embedded in bitter satire:

Little wonder that Aidan ran to attend her and was lost in surprise. He had but known the teachings of celibates and that dark legend of womankind with which young minds in Ireland are still frightened. In a day, in an hour, a moment, 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, ever hurrying as we pursue. 10

But the same old lecture is always interfering, recurring it seems, in every chapter:

Even in childhood we are taught by the pious clergy to battle against bad thoughts, so that we may preserve our holy purity. In youth we learn the dangers of idle talk, the temptations of self-sin, the need of avoiding stories that may incite passion. For passion in Ireland is denounced as evil and obscene. Women are the snares set for us by the Devil. Even to think of a woman's body with pleasure is a mortal sin. Only by the practice of frequent confession, therefore, can the young fortify themselves against temptation. 11

Part of Clarke's didactic message is that sensuality and innocence are linked to poetry.

They had found in each other the knowledge which alone could content them. Happy are they who are hidden at last in that imagination against which the dark creed of renunciation, the cruelty of middle age, is vain. Eager as light that brings back all at day and is ever delighted were they who might have seen everything anew and named it again. They were lost in that imagination which

poetry alone remembers, for it is in joy that we discover ourselves. 12

Diarmuid and Grainne are only one analogue; Adam and Eve are another, as we see when Ethna feeds Aidan an apple.¹³ After losing Ethna and witnessing the damned at Glen Bolcan, Aidan tries to return again not to his countryside Eden, but with guilt-feelings dogging him, to the Abbey of Cluanmore. On his arrival there he finds the Danes have come, routed out all the monks and students, and taken over the Abbey. Because this romance has miracle elements and the fantasy of fairy-tale, in the end Aidan and Ethna are reunited, led to each other by a flock of little birds. They finally consummate their love, but since moralistic comment must inevitably have the final word in this tale, Ethna's father comes to the forest, discovers the two asleep together and decides

No need of Gospel book had those scandalised matchmakers at the sheiling to tell them that those youngsters must be sent to Confession as soon as possible and restored to Irish virtue by holy matrimony. 14

The Singing Men at Cashel tells the legendary story of Gormlai, wife of Cormac Mac Cuillenan. Clarke had already sketched in a poem in Pilgrimage the tale of the life adventures of the three husbands of Gormlai, poet-daughter of the Ard Ri. Gormlai is first married to Cormac, but that marriage is never consummated because Cormac is an ascetic given to self-flagellation and mortification. He has secured an annulment in order to join the church as a priest and when he cannot persuade Gormlai to join the Church too, she is married for a second time against her will to Cormac's foster brother, Carroll of Leinster. Carroll is the opposite of his brother; his carnal excesses insult Gormlai, but it is not until after he is killed a few years later by the Danes that she is able to marry her child-

hood friend and kinsman, her stepmother's son, the widowed Niall Glundubh.

More complex than his first prose attempt, The Singing Men incorporates a subplot; Anier Mac Conglinne, the renegade clerical student who figured in The Son of Learning, Clarke's first play, sustains the comic subplot of the romance. He is wayward, irreverent; he has thrown off the yoke of the asceticism of the Church yet still wears his clerical habit and finds himself magnetically drawn to monasteries and shrines. Although The Singing Men of Cashel is unquestionably the finest of the three romances, the subplot is not very effectively joined to the main thread of the story. Douglas Sealy was the first to point this out:

It is true that the Rabelaisian sub-plot that figures Anier MacConglinne is not effectively joined to the main plot, being like those interludes in pantomime when, the curtain having been lowered, the comedian comes on in front and the scene is changed behind, but it is very funny none the less, especially where the jealous old husband forces Anier to disguise himself as a priest and hear his young wife's confession. 15

In The Singing Men Clarke has opportunity to portray the Church in various guises--when young Gormlai first visits Cashel it seems ideal, the epitome of the perfect society based on learning, chastity and grace. But as soon as Malachi, the wild anchorite, appears when Gormlai is alone outside the chapel, we are forced to see the second side of the church's influence; we are persuaded to acknowledge the dangerous nearness of the two extremes. Malachi is impressed on us by means of "relentless physical description and priapic symbolism."¹⁶ Malachi, the hermit, sadly enough is only one of the products of the Church's austere discipline; Cormac, the too holy, is another.

The first chapter, which begins and ends with water symbolism, introduces us to Anier MacConglinne who is sitting beside a stream trying

to complete a poem. The initial description of him shows us how closely he resembles his creator, Austin Clarke, and how much the world of nature has meant through the ages to Irish poets:

The best poems are composed beside murmuring water,
and Anier was proud of the practical hints concerning
the poetic craft which he had picked up while
eavesdropping outside the small doors of the lay-
colleges. He had seen from a distance the gleam of
the water and hastened toward it, hoping to spend
a busy hour by the shallows. With good luck he would
find the last three assonances he wanted ... 17

The wedding of Cormac and Gormlai provides opportunity for Clarke's satiric comment: lengthy courtship is spoken of as frequently the cause of sin.¹⁸ the consummation of the marriage night as the humiliation of the Evil One.¹⁹

It is to remind us of our sinful nature that we must experience the same pleasure as lechers and wantons, that the primary sensation differs only in mildness of degree, in brevity of time and the purity of our intentions. The wise and godly man, as Saint Paul says, knows 'how to possess his vessel in holiness and honour.' 20

Clarke never seems to know when he has made his point--he cannot resist saying just one more time: "Centuries of spiritual refinement in Ireland have wrought us all to a delicate pitch of conscience and wish."²¹

Cormac spends much time agonizing over what to do about the problem of his marriage. Finally he rationalizes a solution which he broaches tentatively to Gormlai:

As the state is imperfect owing to its physical aspects, we are in a position to transcend it. In other words, we can sacrifice what is permitted to all in matrimony. We can choose the spiritual alone and in that way achieve a victory of a very high kind over the nastiness of the instincts. Many pious laymen do so, though in the early ages the practice was much more common. Some who found the temptations of a single life insufficient have even entered the married state deliberately in order that they might submit themselves to a more difficult

test of spirituality. St. Ammon and his wife lived in this ideal state, as we are told in the books; St. Abraham and his wife parted as virgins on their nuptial night. I could tell you of many, indeed, who shared the same bed and board and kept their marriage unconsummated. St. Jerome expresses this noble ideal in an eloquent phrase when he tells us that the wood of matrimony may be cut down by the axe of virginity.²²

But, needless to say, it is an impossible solution and Cormac is impelled to seek an annulment.

Gormlai has other troubles too. She is a poetess and, even in the Middle Ages, when poetic orders had political influence in Ireland, the Church was against poetry and folklore--the Abbot wants to abolish the impious stories of the past. He tells Gormlai that were he to have his way, it would be a sin for anyone to listen to poetry; the word of God is enough. Clarke shows the constant struggle poets had with the Church in Ireland to keep the poetic tradition and the legends alive. His argument is particularly forceful in this volume where it is enriched by the implications of a tremendous backlog of old tales, poems and traditions:

There was no hill or wood in all the land which had not been remembered in poetry. Had not those Greek teachers of the past taught that matter was holy as the mind, that hill and wood were an external manifestation of the immortal regions? ²³

The story of Gormlai should attract more readers today than when it was published because the underlying theme, the status of women, is especially timely now. When they were just married, her first husband took her to a very famous place, Glenalua, but her visit was spoiled because she realized that women were not allowed to be part of a place of learning like that;²⁴ Clarke sympathizes with Gormlai when, unable to conceal her naivete, she demonstrates her ignorance of what was happening to her first marriage; she could not understand what it was that her husband so feared.

No one had explained the meaning of matrimony to her, so, secretly, she searched ecclesiastical tracts for a definition for herself: "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."²⁵ Clarke sees no reason why women should not be equals in the eyes of the Church and, to defend his point, he dredges up the little known fact of clerical marriages endorsed by Saint Patric.²⁶

Clarke is also a pacifist; and in this book, he analyzes the causes of war: "In Christian centuries, the triviality of events which bring a quarrel to its climax is even more noticeable. To some extent this is due to the fact that men guard themselves zealously against the greater causes of dispute and therefore the powers of darkness concentrate their energy on those minute details which tend to escape human attention."²⁷ The indifference of the Church figures in his arguments against war too: "Men did not ask permission from Heaven when they were moved by rage or the fury of power. They did not think of religion when they declared war, but religion was content to bless their rage, to prepare their souls."²⁸

It is not until near the end of the book that we discover one of the reasons why Clarke chose to write specifically about Queen Gormlai: "She had aided the revival of secular art and poetry. She had established new poetic colleges and endeavored to give influence to those orders which had been deprived of their educational power long ago, by the ecclesiastical decree of Drumceat."²⁹ One would suspect another reason to be the need to justify multiple marriages, since the Irish, as Catholics, still deny them;

Clarke, himself a Catholic, was married twice and had to submit to the repercussions of a disapproving society just as Gormlai had had to almost a thousand years earlier. On the final page of the book, we see Clarke's stoic resignation, his acceptance of the status quo, "Truly we can only know pure happiness when our desires are in conformity with divine and human custom."³⁰

The Sun Dances at Easter, Clarke's third romance, came after a silence of sixteen years in 1952. The first romance had had one story line, the second had woven two together; in this there are three tales: one main tale and two tales within that tale, loosely linked. The main tale is about Orla and the young monk Enda and their journey to the well of fertility; the first tale within a tale is based on a Gaelic tale and echoes the play The Moment Next to Nothing: the second tale within a tale gives an account of Congal More turning into a goat. (Clarke says that part of the latter story, the actual transformation into goat form, comes from the Gaelic, although it originates in a short fragment. All of Congal's adventures as a goat are embellishments of Clarke's own.³¹)

Orla is the wife of a Connaught chieftain who has not been blessed with child. She goes on a pilgrimage to the half-holy St. Naal's well with her maid Blanaid. On their way the two women meet Enda, a young red-haired scholar who resembles Orla's husband, and helps to shorten their journey by telling them the stories of The House of The Two Golden Methers (about Ceasan and Eithne) and the Only Jealousy of Congal More. When the first tale is done their paths diverge--he goes off to a monastery, and they join the other childless women at a guest-house where they listen to the other women exchanging stories about their conjugal lives. The scene is a rowdy scene with singing, dancing and drinking. The husbands who

brought their wives to this holy place wander off and meet other ladies and pair after pair of them go into the nearby woods together. Orla is pursued by one of her dance partners, but Enda rescues her and takes her off to the monastery with him--but they end up in the same bed.

During the second interlude or tale, a fantasy, it becomes clear that the odd hermit who sent Orla on her pilgrimage is Aongus of the Birds, the Irish god of lovers, who has the divine intent of giving her a son. The plots of all the stories are delicately juxtaposed; they are Chaucerian in both subject and freshness. But unfortunately the characterization is not nearly as vivid as Chaucer's; all the people in Clarke's third romance have a fuzzy vagueness about them.

The book is, more than the two that preceded it, very Clarcean in tone; the outstanding carryover from his poetry is the frequent transformation of nouns into verbs. But, like the other two, it is a lyrical evocation of medieval Ireland where Christianity is not so deeply entrenched that it cannot be shaken out of complacency by pagan spontaneity. Again in this book, the heroes and heroines find happiness a reality only if they can overcome their Christian sense of guilt, especially concerning sex, and are able to follow their own natural inclinations.

The first interpolated tale deals with a young neophyte's awakened sensuality, his monastic solitude interrupted by female visitation. In recounting Orla's thoughts after hearing the story, Clarke tells us what was to be learned from this incident:

Never had she realized that salvation was so difficult or that the mind could be tempted in so many ways. Truly knowledge was dangerous and mortals could only be guided by grace. She had taken too much for granted, had not been grateful enough to Heaven for the great joy which had come to her; but Enda trusted her and she could help him, though she was simple and

ignorant. She had been right in thinking that they had been brought together in order that she might lead him back to grace. 32

Only when one reaches the end of the romance does the satiric thrust of this passage really become glaringly obvious. In the second tale the criticism of present day Irish conditions emerges a little more obviously:

For several years Congal had supported the Lord Abbot-Bishop in his great campaign to remove all direct and indirect incitement towards passion. In a country where there is much breeding of cattle, sheep, pigs and other animals, farmers become as coarse as their hands and lose all sense of shame. Indeed they never think about the moral aspects of the matter, for they have too often to assist an impatient animal in difficulties. Knowing the power of ancient customs, the Lord Abbot-Bishop had made it a reserved sin for anyone to bring a cow to the bull, let a mare be served or loose a raddled ram within the fold except under the cover of darkness. Women were strictly forbidden to be present, and only married men over forty years of age and of good character might go into byre, stable or paddock on such occasions. 33

And in this book, too, hostility and criticism of the Irish dictum against second marriages comes up in the explication of Congal's transformation into goat shape:

Was it the Evil One himself who had assumed that blasphemous shape and lured him into the wood, pretending to be the ancient love-god in order to arouse pagan superstition in his mind? Had he been punished in this way for the sins of his past life, for the wicked promptings which he had failed to stifle for seven years? While his first wife was alive, had he not looked frequently towards her younger sister with unclean desires? Unworthy motives had led him to that second union and he had tried in vain to deceive his own conscience by performing many good works and keeping others from temptation. Now he was humiliated and he would never escape from the foul outward shape which was but the image of his own nature. 34

The major fault in this, as in the other two romances, is that there are too many polemics. Too often the characters become shrill and

insistent; lectures and sermons are forced out of their mouths in the context of a narrative quite unsuited to the didactic, the dogmatic.

All three romances, however, have a common strength -- they bring to life the medieval traditional Gaelic wander literature; they are not really labelled romances for want of a better word as Clarke claims; they follow the tradition not of the modern romances of Tolkien or Charles Williams but of medieval Irish romance. They also have something of the quality of Irish fairytale; in modern literature they can best be compared with the work of another Irish author, James Stephens (see e.g., The Crock of Gold.)

Sadly, the romances have been almost totally ignored over the years, and they are now almost impossible to obtain, partially because the last, The Sun Dances at Easter, is still on the Censors' list.³⁵

Footnotes - Chapter VIII

- ¹Conversation, summer 1971, recorded on tape.
- ²Augustine Martin, "Rediscovery of Austin Clarke" Studies (Winter, 1965), p. 415.
- ³Austin Clarke, The Bright Temptation (Dublin: Dolmen, 1965), p. 214.
- ⁴Austin Clarke, The Bright Temptation, p. 220.
- ⁵Clarke, p. 19-20.
- ⁶Clarke, p. 22.
- ⁷Clarke, p. 59.
- ⁸Clarke, pp. 91-95.
- ⁹Clarke, p. 105.
- ¹⁰Clarke, pp. 106-7.
- ¹¹Clarke, p. 135.
- ¹²Clarke, p. 161.
- ¹³Clarke, pp. 175-6.
- ¹⁴Clarke, p. 263.
- ¹⁵Douglas Sealy, "Austin Clarke: A Survey of His Work" Dubliner (Jan., Feb. 1963), p. 24.
- ¹⁶Augustine Martin, p. 415.
- ¹⁷Austin Clarke, The Singing Men of Cashel (London: Allen and Unwin, 1936), p. 11.
- ¹⁸Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 49.
- ¹⁹Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 46.
- ²⁰Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 67.
- ²¹Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 70.
- ²²Clarke, The Singing Men, pp. 135-136.
- ²³Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 276.

- ²⁴Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 89.
- ²⁵Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 162.
- ²⁶Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 175.
- ²⁷Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 250-251.
- ²⁸Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 303.
- ²⁹Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 315
- ³⁰Clarke, The Singing Men, p. 382.
- ³¹Conversation, Summer, 1971. Recorded on tape.
- ³²Austin Clarke, The Sun Dances At Easter (London: Melrose, 1952), p. 135.
- ³³Clarke, The Sun Dances At Easter, p. 205
- ³⁴Clarke, The Sun Dances At Easter, p. 190.
- ³⁵However, one of Clarke's best critics has recently commended them as the most enduring of Clarke's early work, (Denis Donoghue, A Tribute to Austin Clarke on his 70th Birthday (Dublin: Dolmen, 1966), p. 20) and has said that they are notable especially for their vigor and the force of their syntax. Another critic, G.B. Saul, praises Clarke's prose while damning his poetry: "But I still feel that while Clarke is a poet with moments only of greatness in his verse, which too often has substance without satisfying discipline, he is something better in the more furious tensions and natural felicities of his prose romances, whose protagonists, as John Buchan once remarked of Wuthering Heights, 'belong to poetry,' and whose pages are--like Yeats's poems--musical with the crying of birds." (G.B. Saul, "The Poetry of Austin Clarke," The Celtic Cross, Purdue, 1964, p. 38.)

APPENDIX

As Donald Davie noted, Austin Clarke's innovations change the pivotal movement of the usual lyric stanza. Because of Clarke's regular use of assonance and his special use of rhyme, i.e. off the beat on the unstressed part of the foot, Davie noted that "... the reader who knows no Irish can applaud this effect (if the poems were better known, it would be a momentous innovation in the whole tradition of Anglo-American verse) while having only a hazy idea of the way in which it was done." Davie's injunction to look at Clarke is to be supplemented by a glance at the later Yeats and at Dylan Thomas' end-rhyme practice. The typology for Thomas' practice has been well outlined by R. Astley ("Stations of the Breath: End Rhyme in the Verse of Dylan Thomas," P.M.L.A., LXXXIV, 6 (Oct. 1969).)

I should like here to append a few words on Clarke's practice. The early Clarke is committed to true rhyme. The later Clarke makes very extensive use of true rhyme but between accented (masculine) with unaccented (femine) syllables. In discussing Thomas, Astley refers to that as a "practice common enough to need no remark." (p. 1597) What does require comment is that "whereas in traditional usage all consonants following the vowel agree, in this instance (Astley is referring to Thomas) one word has an extra consonant." (1597-1598). Clarke's variations are somewhat more drastic than this; he will have a masculine ending followed by a feminine ending with all the feminine endings not in accord with anything, just lying over: To get the situation clear, see the following examples from Clarke's poetry:

Standard practice = true rhyme.

play, ray; clock, dock.

True rhyme with standard variation = rhyme between principal stress and secondary stress.

providence, expense.

Word Boundary variation on true rhyme (e.g. employ, for a boy) is standard but Clarke has a particular liking for it.

Rich rhyme (rime riche) = accord as above and accord with one or more of the elements to the left of the stressed vowel (whether or not word boundaries are crossed).

aware, beware; benighted, united; cogwheel, bogland.

Rima franta = rime riche where the syllables involved in the rhyme in one case belong totally to one word and in the mate belong to two words.

knees bent, monuments; would glow, Wicklow.

The above can have stress accord or be without stress accord.

Equivocal rhyme = a special instance of rima franta where the same group of sounds appears in one mate as one word and in the other as two or more words.

wit man, Whitman; sigh press, Cypress; whisks key, whiskey.

Anagrams (perfect or imperfect) are also often present at line end in Clarke's verse:

skin, Hopkins.

Clarke is also fond of using identical or near-identical syllables in different positions for rhythmic variety.

Rebellion, church bells; Bennett, workers bent; cradles, credo.

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