

John F. Burrows: His Natural Life and the Capacities of Melodrama

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IT IS just a hundred years since *His Natural Life* was first published as a book.¹ As its many editions attest, it has always held its place with the reading public. In the last twenty years or so, it has commanded a renewed critical attention. Clarke himself has been made the subject of a scholarly and sensitive biography. And enough of his lesser writings have lately been reprinted to show that *His Natural Life* was no literary accident but rather the most sustained expression of a genuine, though fitful, talent. If one need no longer strenuously defend the belief that *His Natural Life* easily surpasses all other Australian novels of the nineteenth century, perhaps one may still usefully attempt to distinguish its precise quality. Perhaps its strengths can better be understood as intimately associated with its weaknesses than as separate from them: where some have discovered tragic moments as well as melodramatic lapses, we might find instead an essentially melodramatic vision and try to assess the novel in terms of the potentialities of that mode of writing. If such an argument holds good, it also has a bearing on the kind of English and French fiction which helped to form Clarke's literary consciousness and on which he drew for some of his leading effects.

To speak of the potentialities of melodrama is at once to defy a widely received assumption that that form has no qualities worthy of serious consideration. Such an assumption is reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and, indeed, in the fact that there is almost nowhere else to turn. Except for a passing reference to the Greek root, "melos"—the long-forgotten musical element in those early nineteenth-century plays to which the term was first applied—*O.E.D.* holds mostly to familiar ground, touching on "romantic" and "sensational" qualities of plot and incident; on mechanical stratagems; on bandits and disguised noblemen; on violent and exaggerated appeals to the emotions; and on contrived poetic justice. *His Natural Life* meets these terms with dismaying facility. The dissolute Lord Bellasis has two bastard sons, one by his cousin, Lady Devine, the other by a woman unnamed. Each is ignorant of the other's existence. One is brought up as son of Sir Richard Devine, and hating the avarice and tyranny of his supposed father, becomes a reckless runaway. The other is brought up as son of Rex, once valet to Lord Bellasis, and becomes a professional criminal. Old Devine, inclined to disinherit his supposed son in favour of his nephew, Maurice Frere, employs a private inquiry agent to trace the runaway's misdoings—and chooses none other than John Rex. Rex afterwards becomes connected through gambling with Lord Bellasis and without knowing their relationship, murders him. But Richard Devine is convicted of the crime. Both he and Rex, who has been convicted of another crime, are transported on the same ship to Van Diemen's Land, where their careers as convicts run uncommonly close together for a dozen years. For all those years, moreover, their chief persecutor is Maurice Frere. Deprived of the Devine inheritance by the old man's dying suddenly with his will unchanged, Frere had become a convict-officer, had also travelled out on "Malabar", and while knowing nothing of their identity, had made particular victims of them both. Both Devine (now known as Rufus Dawes) and Frere fall in love with Sylvia Vickers, the innocent, fair-haired daughter of the original commandant. In the mistaken belief—made possible by her own amnesia and by the death of other witnesses—that Frere, not Dawes, had stood nobly by her at a critical juncture, she eventually marries him. After finding that Dawes is "really" Richard Devine, Rex escapes to England and—much assisted by his earlier work as inquiry-agent—impersonates him successfully enough to claim the inheritance. When his imposture is finally discovered, the true relationship between him and Devine and the truth of their father's murder are also brought to light. Overwhelmed by these accumulated revelations, Rex suffers a stroke from which he recovers only sufficiently to live on as invalid-prisoner of his long-suffering mistress, the once dark and ravishing Sarah Purfoy. Dawes, in turn, escapes from Norfolk Island only to be drowned in a tempest—but not before being recognized by his beloved Sylvia, who has fled in loathing from her husband and who dies blissfully in the arms of her good Mr Dawes.

Although a summary gives too uniform an emphasis to these events, the absurd improbability of Clarke's story warrants our attention because it makes for difficulties too central to be lightly set aside. There are novels, it is true, where lapses into the melodramatic can be regarded as peripheral or inconsequential. One smiles at the machinations of Kate Morrison, Boldrewood's idea of an evil genius: but Kate Morrison is not what one remembers of *Robbery under Arms*. Even Starlight, bandit *and* disguised nobleman, is too shadowy a portrait to damage the novel as much as his ostensible importance might suggest. Certainly Boldrewood uses Starlight in suggestive contrasts with Morringer, his more law-abiding counterpart, and with currency lads like the rascally Marstons and the deserving Storefield. But *Robbery under Arms* depends, for its power as for its *longueurs*, less on the figures out of melodrama than on its realistic appraisal of the colonials themselves and their native setting—the bush, the goldfields, and (not least) the gaol. Just such a line of extenuation lies behind some of those accounts of *His Natural Life* which demonstrate Clarke's remarkable fidelity to the convict records and memoirs on which he drew. But, if chroniclers like Martin Cash give all and more of the historical atrocities, they give nothing of the melodrama.² We learn from Cash of the hideous brutality of the penal system and of the wicked ingenuity of John Price, the historical original of Maurice Frere; we learn there and elsewhere of unendurable labour, savage crimes, brutal punishments, and even of the refinements of the torture-cell: we hear nothing whatever of convicts who are (all unknowingly) half-brothers to each other, who are (unrecognized) first cousins of the commandant, or whose only talisman through all their sufferings is a pure and abiding love for the commandant's wife. It is right to insist on Clarke's faithful and restrained dealings with his documents and on the telling realism with which he depicts such compounds of truth and fiction as the “murder” of old Mooney. But, if that insistence becomes a means of evading the sensational improbabilities of Clarke's main narrative, then the novel he wrote is no longer being seen in focus.

Perhaps it is possible, while freely acknowledging the importance of these improbabilities, to establish that the novel somehow transmutes them. Such a course is encouraged, if not much assisted, by two recent books which give melodrama a more attentive hearing than has been usual. In the slighter of them, James L. Smith very reasonably insists that:

*Any art form deserves to be judged by its highest, not by its lowest achievements. We value epic not for Horne's Orion but for Homer's Odyssey. We value tragedy not for Johnson's Irene but for Oedipus Rex and King Lear. We should value melodrama not for Tommy Atkins and The Great Escape, but for Henry V, Mother Courage and The Trojan Women.*³

As the last three titles may suggest, the line of argument that Smith (as well as Heilman) follows is that melodrama deserves more attention because the genre “really” includes great works that have customarily been regarded as tragedies or problem plays. Smith makes much of *The Trojan Women*, Heilman of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Both have much to say of Ibsen, Brecht, and O'Neill. But Smith finds little to praise in nineteenth-century melodrama and Heilman scarcely refers to the nineteenth century at all. There is not much virtue, I believe, in notions of melodrama that do not give due weight to the nineteenth century. And, however that may be, such notions of melodrama cannot bear very directly on *His Natural Life*.

Heilman's object, it emerges, is not to reconsider melodrama but rather to increase our regard for tragedy by purifying our conception of it. Few would dissent from his just, if unoriginal, distinction between the profoundly divided mind of the tragic hero and the comparative narrowness and singlemindedness of the hero of melodrama; so, again, with his distinction between the complex and enduring forces the tragic hero finds himself obliged to oppose and the mere villains who seek to victimize the heroes of most melodramas. But the concessions Heilman extends to melodrama prove less rewarding than a brief comment of Northrop Frye's: “In melodrama two themes are important: the triumph of moral virtue over villainy, and the consequent idealizing of the moral views assumed to be held by the audience”.⁴ The possible looseness of any writer's assumptions about his audience and the precise force of “idealizing” may well give rise to problems: yet Frye does raise the possibility of an intelligible connection between melodrama itself and the serious attitudes of those who watch it—the possibility, that is to say, that melodrama may at times offer something more than mere excitement or mere escapism. How are we to recognize those times? Finally, no doubt, by private taste. But discussion can usefully proceed in terms of a criterion of expressiveness, of dramatic logic and dramatic consequences. Instead of being content simply to ask whether such and such

an episode is probable, we might ask what follows, in a given case, from an author's recourse to a particular attitude or convention.

Clarke's chief assumption about his readers seems to be that, given due opportunity, they can see the man beneath the uniform, can recognize evil even when it is sanctioned by "the King's regulations" and human virtue even when it is clad in a convict's yellow rags. Given due opportunity? Looking back from our time to theirs, we may find it surprising that Clarke's Australian readers at least should have needed any reminder of what had, until so recently, gone on before their very eyes. But Clarke is not writing of the ordinary convicts, familiar to the inhabitants of Hobart Town or Sydney:

The typical convict was an urban thief, single, aged twenty-five, previously convicted at least once and transported for seven years for larceny. He was well-treated according to the standards of the day on the voyage to Australia and when he arrived was assigned to a settler. He probably had a number of masters and suffered punishment five times, mainly for such offences as being absent without leave or drunk. If he were a rebellious spirit and his master turned nasty, his transportation could become a very severe punishment, which it was meant to be. He might be flogged; but no more than approximately 15% of prisoners were ever sent to a penal settlement, and most convicts were not flogged. Usually men secured a ticket of leave within three years and this enabled them to work for themselves provided they reported regularly to the police. Upon fair behaviour (not necessarily exemplary behaviour) the prisoner would be granted a conditional pardon before full sentence was completed.⁵

Clarke's emphasis is almost entirely on the penal settlements, and the life of the "typical convict" is denied Rufus Dawes from the moment he is falsely arraigned as a ringleader of the mutiny on the voyage out and so condemned to Macquarie Harbour. It is a decisive turning-point in the novel and a decisive step beyond the System as most of Clarke's readers could have observed it. Even, indeed, while she is insisting on the need to distinguish Hobart Town from the penal settlements, a Tasmanian novelist of the convict era resorts to a language that, for the most part, only distinguishes the known from the nightmarish unknown:

... the Tasmanian reader ... knows too well that between the worst set of the Launceston or Hobart Town barracks, and the worst set of Macquarie Harbour or Norfolk Island, there exists a difference as distinct as between the spirits in Hades and the spirits in the place of torment. He knows too well that with a fearful significance, and not in a wanton waste of imagination, has the entrance to the former settlement been called 'The gates of hell' and 'The devil's toll-gate', whilst not less significantly is the latter still named 'The bottomless pit'.

These are places of which no one likes to speak, or only to speak in that whisper that expresses 'thereby hangs a tale!' No one dares ask within hearing of a Government officer:

'Why is it said of Macquarie Harbour, "Whoever enters here must give up all hope of heaven?" And of Norfolk Island, "Here a man's heart is taken from him, and there is given him the heart of a brute"?'⁶

To judge from its frequent recurrence in our early literature, the identification of all convicts—or, as here, the convicts of the penal settlements—with brutes must not only have given the John Prices a convenient way of justifying themselves but must also have served many decent people of that time as a more or less uneasy means of rationalizing their half-awareness of what was going on in the penal settlements. Even the hideous flippancy with which the *Sydney Herald* could jest about convict discipline or sneer at Maconochie's proposed reforms for Norfolk Island might claim some justification from the assumption that convicts were not really human. So, again, when the *Herald* grows serious about what it regards as an altogether more serious aspect of the convict-system—the vexed question of its economic value.⁷ Working-bullocks, like other beasts of the field, do not call for moral reform: they merely need sound management; and, if they cease to offer adequate returns, the investor must seek alternatives.

Irrespective of his capacity to do so, Clarke therefore finds no occasion to cast doubt on the very possibility of human justice. His questioning of the *application* of received standards, his evident desire to

shock his readers into applying them to the System and into asking themselves whether convicts are really beasts, is accompanied by an unwavering confidence in the validity of those standards once applied. In the way it uses the word “English”, as in its references to “the wholesome influence of public opinion” and to “just administration”, Clarke's Preface to *His Natural Life* makes that confidence plain:

I have endeavoured in ‘His Natural Life’ to set forth the workings and results of an English system of transportation carefully considered and carried out under official supervision; and to illustrate in the manner best calculated, as I think, to attract general attention, the inexpediency of again allowing offenders against the law to be herded together in places remote from the wholesome influence of public opinion, and to be submitted to a discipline which must necessarily depend for its just administration upon the personal character and temper of their gaolers. (p. xxv)

In his declared intention, then, Clarke conforms to Frye's account of melodrama not in the sense that his readers can simply feel confirmed in their own rectitude but in the richer sense that, though confirmed in their essential standards, they are brought to painful awareness of a situation in which those standards have been forgotten or debased. No doubt this is remote from high tragedy, from King Lear's profound challenge to our whole idea of justice. To deny it that value is not to deny it value altogether.

But declared intentions are not achieved realities. The larger purposes set out in Clarke's Preface can be dismissed as a *post hoc* rationalization of his original desire to write a “sensation novel” about a penal system which had long fallen into desuetude and which had finally been abolished two years before.⁸ And Clarke's use of his historical sources, faithful as it is in particulars, can be taken as amounting to a cumulative falsity. No convict would again suffer the barbarities of Norfolk Island. No one convict had ever seen, much less suffered, them all. Dickens's treatment of the Marshalsea is open to the same charge of obsolescence, his treatment of Chancery to the charge of cumulative falsity. Both Dickens and Clarke foresee the objections and touch, in their Prefaces, on surviving instances. But, for Clarke as for Dickens, a more appropriate defence might be couched in terms of the representation, in a dramatic symbol adequate to its purposes, not only of “what man has made of man”⁹ but also of what man can still make of man. How far Clarke meets that high demand is a question implicit in all that follows.

The mechanical stratagems too characteristic of melodrama often serve no higher end than the author's immediate convenience. If Richard Devine, who had grown up on Hampstead Heath, had been recognized by the landlord of the Three Spaniards, his masquerade as Rufus Dawes could never have begun: on a few such occasions, Clarke finds it easier to affront our intelligence than to work matters out more thoroughly. Although some of Clarke's coincidences also smack of the mechanical, the most implausible instance of all can be accounted for, though not justified, as a mistakenly preserved relic of the original version of the novel. In the revised version, the careers of Rex and Devine overlap repeatedly and we shall eventually need to consider what is implied in their being connected in so many different ways. But only Rex's prior knowledge of Devine, suddenly revealed at a late stage of events, is entirely gratuitous. In the original version, however, there is no Lord Bellasis, Rex and Devine are not half-brothers at all, and Rex has nothing to do with the murder of Devine's associate, Hans Blinzler. In this version, it is largely because Sir Richard had employed him to inquire after his son that, when they are convicts together, Rex conceives the idea of impersonating Devine. Hence, by changing the whole direction of events, the revision leaves Rex's former inquiries without adequate support. Clarke would have done better, surely, to omit them altogether and to find another way of accounting for Rex's recognition of Devine.

But Clarke turns to coincidence, more commonly, for quite other purposes than the mechanical. In the midst of a conversation about what imprisonment at Macquarie Harbour might mean to an innocent man, Frere notices a light on Grummet Rock, the place of solitary confinement: Vickers casually explains that it is Dawes's fire, and leads his guest indoors. On an occasion when Dawes for once is master of his situation, he decides to desert the trio whom the other convicts had marooned, whom he had saved, and from whom, as they have shown, he can expect little future good: but the sight just then of the words, “Good Mr Dawes”, scrawled on the sand by Sylvia arouses the conscience he has striven to extinguish and recalls him to a human duty few but he would accept. His reward is to be betrayed by Frere and imprisoned once again. In Hobart Town five years later, he escapes captivity and appeals to Sylvia who, remembering almost nothing

of those earlier events, fails to respond as he had so long imagined she would do. He flings something down in rage and then resigns himself to arrest. Next day they find what he had thrown away:

"It is a piece of a dress," says Sylvia.

It was Rufus Dawes's talisman—a portion of the frock she had worn at Macquarie Harbour, and which the unhappy convict had cherished as a sacred relic for five weary years.

Frere flung it into the water. The running stream whirled it away. "Why did you do that?" cried the girl, with a sudden pang of remorse for which she could not account. The shred of cloth, caught by a weed, lingered for an instant on the surface of the water. Almost at the same moment, the pair, raising their eyes, saw the schooner which bore Rufus Dawes back to bondage glide past the opening of the trees and disappear. When they looked again for the strange relic of the desperado of Port Arthur, it also had vanished. (pp. 340-41)

"Almost at the same moment." All these and many others are, literally, coincidences whose effect is to evoke the pathos of Dawes's situation. From "coincidence" and "pathos" to "spurious" and "sentimental" is an habitual step in the criticism of melodrama. Instead of taking it, we should reflect that, at least in such instances as these, we are faced not with cheap substitutes for dramatic action but with moments in which that action is epitomized, with potent images of things already brought into association with each other by dramatic means. In defending Clarke, moreover, one is defending his more distinguished contemporaries, who often have recourse to such images at climactic moments—as when Steerforth dies in no other place than Yarmouth shore:

... on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children—on that part of it where some lighter fragments of the old boat, blown down last night, had been scattered by the wind—among the ruins of the home he had wronged—I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school.¹⁰

Steerforth's death is brought about by a great tempest, "the greatest ever known to blow upon that coast", which strikes with "the full might of its wrath" and leaves even "stout mariners" looking at the sea "as if they were surveying an enemy".¹¹ Such language gives rise to questions, no less pertinent to *His Natural Life*, about a congeries of associations between nature and human life that pervades the melodramatic fiction of that time.

All too commonly, such associations reflect no seriously felt belief and define no particular attitude. For, when nineteenth-century descriptive prose becomes flabby, inert personifications of nature are seldom far to seek. Following Ruskin's celebrated comments, Fowler is justly scathing about this habit of—*is it?*—mind: "Sphinx-like, siren-sweet, sly, benign, impassive, vindictive, callously indifferent the sea may seem to a consciousness addicted to pathetic fallacies" (*Modern English Usage*, s.v. "pathetic fallacy"). When Clarke writes in this way, he is usually conscious enough of what his words connote to offer an uneasy gesture of defence. Sometimes the idea is guarded by an authorial "seem": "It would seem as though nature, jealous of the beauties of her silver Derwent ..." (p. 106). Sometimes it is disguised by a transition from more literal epithets: "All around is the fruitless, shadeless, shelterless bush. Above, the pitiless heaven. In the distance, the remorseless sea" (p. 459). Sometimes it is attached, more or less firmly, to the consciousness of a particular character: "the sea, crawling at his feet, seemed to grin at him with a thin-lipped, hungry mouth" (pp. 157-8).

Given Dawes's state of mind at that time, this last example can serve to mark the transition from clichés guarded by defensive gestures to more purposeful and suggestive associations between man and nature. To begin with, Clarke takes satirical advantage of the pathetic fallacy when he locates it in the minds of Hobart Town society. Those petty dignitaries are most of them persuaded that providence—or even Providence—is marvellously at one with properly constituted authority. How else to account for the fortunate geography of the Tasman Peninsula, for the way both bush and sea are allied against the excesses of convictism (pp. 311, 393)? Convictism, however, holds to a less metaphysical hypothesis: in another image that runs through

our early literature, the convicts are so prosaic as to blame the authorities themselves for making an earthly paradise into a hell on earth.

Nature and man are variously associated in Clarke's set pieces of heightened description. But, if the heightening is the mark of an imagination aroused by his visit to Port Arthur, the variousness comes rather from the variety of literary sources on which he draws. After Dawes has fled from the glade in which he has come upon the first unequivocal evidence of Gabbett's cannibalism, he sees that:

... the sun, redly sinking behind a lofty pine which topped the opposite hill, shot a ray of crimson light into the glade below him. It was as though a bloody finger pointed at the corpse which lay there, and Rufus Dawes, shuddering at the dismal omen, averting his face, plunged again into the forest. (p. 156)

In *Maud* (1855), in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and often in Poe's *Tales* (c.1840), a morbid response to real or imaginary horrors likewise transmutes a natural redness into a bloody omen. When John Rex hides all night in the cavern beneath the Blowhole, "the bitter intellectual power which had so long supported him succumbed beneath imagination—the unconscious religion of the soul" (p. 452). The idea, perhaps, is Coleridgean. But as Rex, tormented by "phantoms of his past crimes", falls into a hysterical belief that "all the horrible unseen life of the ocean seemed to be rising up and surrounding him", the language takes on quite another colouring: "some shapeless mass of mid-sea birth"; "some voracious polype, with far-reaching arms and jellied mouth ever open to devour"; "some globular sea-spider ... with its viscid and clay-cold body"; "some mis-shapen and ungainly abortion of the ooze"; "countless blisterous and transparent shapelessnesses" (pp. 451-2). Not merely in its extravagant tone but even in many of these epithets the whole passage can be matched with Hugo's description of Gilliatt's encounter with the great octopus.¹² Elsewhere again there are Wordsworthian moments: an echo of "Resolution and Independence" in the finely-developed description of a gigantic, sea-girt rock as "a motionless but sentient being" (p. 446); and a suggestion of "The Thorn" or of some of the mountain-pieces of *The Prelude* in the last paragraphs of the revised version, where "a tempest of the elements" and "a tempest of the soul" are shown not as vaguely synonymous but as fitting analogues. In each of these last-mentioned passages and elsewhere, there are also echoes of Shelley, especially *Prometheus Unbound*. Even these few instances from a multitude might imply that Clarke is a literary lyre-bird. The metaphor will serve provided it is not read as merely derogatory. In *His Natural Life*, as in Dickens himself, when the susurrus of the pathetic fallacy is shut out of mind, there remain not only distinct echoes of Romantic poetry but also a deeper resonance of the Wordsworthian sublime: the predominant effect is to set the affairs of individuals within a larger scheme. Through an idiosyncratic view of man and nature, Emily Brontë—but she alone?—achieves comparable effects by less derivative means. But Clarke's ability, especially on leading occasions, to turn what he has derived to purposes of his own should not be overlooked. John Rex's Hugoesque extravagance is set in perspective by the narrator's comment on "the harmless life of the Australian ocean" (p. 452). And, whereas the narrator describes the giant rock in Wordsworthian imagery, John Rex notices only the wreckage lying there and feels "a sensation of the most vulgar pleasure.

'There's wood for my fire!' thought he" (p. 447). However various its sources, a coherent portrait of Rex emerges. So, too, with Clarke's novel at large.

In those moments of natural description they allow themselves, such educated convict-writers as J. F. Mortlock and James Tucker draw rather on Shakespeare and eighteenth-century literature than on the nineteenth-century literature that pervades *His Natural Life*. Clarke is even more remote from them when he ventures beyond the world of natural phenomena. Rufus Dawes cries "A sail! a sail!" (p. 234) where no sail is and drives the coracle far into the Southern Ocean—where an American whaler picks them up next day. On first meeting Sylvia Frere, North, "a man whose morbidly excited brain was prone to strange fancies", feels that "beneath the clear blue eyes that flashed upon him for a moment, lay a hint of future sadness, in which, in some strange way, he himself was to bear part" (pp. 375-6). His "strange fancies", of course, are to be justified by the events that also justify Dawes's clairvoyant dream that North has become a threat to Sylvia (pp. 575-6).

Fancies no less strange are among the staples of melodramatic fiction. Rochester cries "Jane! Jane! Jane!" and a young woman thirty-six hours' journey away rejects a rival suitor (*Jane Eyre*, 1847). Marian

Halcombe, vainly wishing for Hartright's aid and comfort, "sees" him in the Central American jungle and discerns aspects of his situation which she cannot know but which he describes long afterwards (*The Woman in White*, 1860). In the same novel, Anne Catherick dreams of the future of Laura Fairlie and Sir Percival Glyde in a manner only partly accountable by her knowledge of them. (The imagery here is strongly reminiscent of *Clarissa*, but it may have come to Collins through some of the subterranean passages of the Gothic novel.) Heathcliff and Cathy reach out to each other across the barrier of the grave itself (*Wuthering Heights*, 1847). And few novels of that time, surely, are quite without that form of prescience which consists in justifiably dark forebodings.

To dismiss all this out of hand, as some of Patrick White's early critics dismissed the telepathic episodes in *Voss*, is to allow personal disbelief to obscure some worthwhile distinctions. Such distinctions, of course, are no less obscured by an indiscriminating historicism, willing to defend all these things as equally valid expressions of a Victorian religiosity that manifested itself in mesmerism, spiritualism, clairvoyance, and the like. (Religiosity, I say, because *The Woman in White* is unusual in its attempt to account for para-normal phenomena in a seriously religious way; and, even there, the references to a theology of Design are scarcely assimilated into the novel's own design.) In the fifties and sixties of the last century, when "There are more things in Heaven and earth ..." seems to have had all the air of an inspired truth, it is not surprising that so many novelists responded extravagantly to ideas that were soon to be examined with more rigour. By the early eighties, the elder Myers's first important study of mesmerism and spiritualism was nearing completion, Charcot and William James were seriously at work, and Janet and Freud himself were among Charcot's students at the Salpêtrière. While acknowledging the effects on the earlier novelists of a season in which so rich a crop was about to germinate, we must yet distinguish between one clairvoyant episode and another, one dream and another, one novel and another. So far as those distinctions depend on ordinary literary processes like the motivation of characters and the establishing of an appropriate mood, Clarke emerges more than creditably. Dawes's dream is far more solidly grounded in his waking life than Marian Halcombe's. His clairvoyance reflects an intensity of concentration, a focussing of every thought and every feeling, which quite matches anything we are shown in Rochester but which, at the same time, much surpasses Charlotte Brontë in maturity and restraint. On the other side of the account, however, North's prescience is of the same half-formed stuff as appears in a score of "strange fancies" and a hundred "Had he but knows".

"Had he but known", of course, leads us out of the territory of para-normal perception and into that of a novelist's own foreknowledge of the events of his story. At times, authorial foreknowledge expresses itself in a kind of fair dealing with the reader. Stephen Blackpool is associated from early in *Hard Times* (1854) with the disused pits; and the association epitomizes one of the chief themes of the novel. The name of Lionel Crofton and the hour of nine o'clock are associated with the murder of Lord Bellasis often enough to remain in the mind of the attentive reader until he learns that Lionel Crofton is one of the aliases of John Rex; the question of thematic appropriateness will occupy us later. But some novelists go beyond any implicit requirement of fair dealing and plainly foreshadow the main lines of what is to follow. In the second chapter of *East Lynne* (1861), the narrator comments: "Strange—strange that she should make the acquaintance of those two men in the same day, almost in the same hour: the two, of all the human race, who were to exercise so powerful an influence over her future life!" A little later in the same chapter, Captain Levison breaks Lady Isabel's gold cross. She passes it off cheerfully, but afterwards:

"I can only think of my broken cross. I am sure it must be an evil omen."

"An evil—what?"

*"An evil omen. Mamma gave me that cross when she was dying. She told me to let it be to me as a talisman, always to keep it safely; and when I was in any distress, or in need of counsel, to look at it, and strive to recall what her advice would be, and to act accordingly. And now it is broken—broken!"*¹³

At an immense cost in what is usually regarded as the only currency of melodrama, the suspense she might have maintained and the excitement she might afterwards have developed, Mrs Henry Wood thus adumbrates the moral choice Lady Isabel will have to make. In compensation, she establishes the first foundations of a highly symmetrical structure and takes a first long step towards confirming her readers

in their assumed moral views. It is not yet clear, of course, that Lady Isabel will succumb to Levison's blandishments (and so there can be no suggestion yet of the complications that begin when she does so). Yet the moral significance of a choice between this dissolute scion of the aristocracy and Archibald Carlyle, the idealized representative of the bourgeoisie, is unmistakable. It seems to follow that, as enactments of the foreknown, such highly conventional melodramas as *East Lynne* may above all be social, even tribal, rituals occupied with scapegoats and lost sheep; and that their extraordinary popular success may have arisen because the generality of readers so precisely fulfilled the writers' assumptions about them. But this is no place to pursue such hypotheses: like Dickens, as was suggested earlier, Clarke seeks to challenge the views of his readers, at least in their application; and, accordingly, he gives less emphasis to "Had he but known" and all that it seems to imply.

Hypotheses aside, the difference between melodramas that confirm and those that challenge their readers' views is also evident in certain recurrent imagery. Like most of his contemporaries, Clarke is accustomed to define moral alternatives through strongly antithetical images. Much of this imagery—metaphors of the angelic and the diabolical, of paradise and hell, of redemption and damnation—is religious in origin but is so blurred by overuse that it seldom retains that force and even more seldom makes for any exactitude of meaning. When so many heroines are called angels, so many villains devils, the impression usually conveyed is not that worldly good and evil are being examined in essentially religious terms or extended into an essentially religious dimension but rather that they are being loosely translated into a stock vocabulary. In melodramas like *East Lynne* and *It is Never Too Late to Mend* (1856), where good and evil are unfailingly distinguishable, even a loose translation is exact enough and the original readers presumably found in these images a further broad endorsement of their existing views. Accordingly, we need not inquire whether Mrs Henry Wood and her readers believed in a literal or only a metaphorical hell: sufficient for her purpose and their satisfaction that Levison is last seen trying vainly to close out "the light of the future", which is "dazzling his brain as with flames of living fire".¹⁴ When a similar imagery is applied to more complex characters and situations, the novelist, having induced in his readers a more inquiring mood, is likely to find himself in difficulties. Clarke is safe enough in having the convicts call Frere a devil and Port Arthur a paradise transformed into a hell. His difficulties begin with Dawes and become intractable with North. As Dr Hergenhan has shown,¹⁵ each of them is described, from time to time, in "redemptive" imagery. But the more seriously we take the religious implications of that imagery, the greater the difficulty of reconciling it with the actualities of the novel. With Dawes, Clarke seems torn between the idea that such generous sacrifice and self-abnegating love is, in some measure, Christ-like and the idea that such sufferings as Dawes experiences must work irreparable damage. With North, the conflict is between the priest who would save Dawes "though I redeem him with my own blood" (pp. 558, 591) but who falters always in his purpose, the free-thinker who is nevertheless more aware than the novel's conventional priests of the living blasphemy implicit in the System, and the sinful man but for whose original crime and later cowardice poor Dawes would never have been condemned for murder. It is fair to say, as Laura Trevelyan says of Voss, that each of them "had in him a little of Christ, like other men": for Dawes finds consolation in North, his fellow-sinner; and, on hearing Dawes's story, North comes to understand love more fully than ever before. To make either of them a fully-developed Christ-figure, however, is to play down too much else of what the novel shows us and so to resolve difficulties that Clarke brought on his own head by his intermittent recourse to an only partly appropriate set of images.

The most ironical aspect of North's redemptive role is that it exists chiefly in the mind of Dawes, who knows only that the clergyman is somehow responsible for his escape and who is never (in either version of the novel) to learn of the compound of confusion, despair, fatalism, admiration of Dawes, and loathing of himself through which North accepts an escape which he had not intentionally brought about and which, by the time he realized what was happening, he could have done little to prevent. Clarke's difficulties with North are also evident in the changes he made when he revised the novel: suffice it to say that, at one time, he even contemplated making North the murderer of Lord Bellasis.¹⁶

It might be argued, nevertheless, that some of Clarke's revisions indicate that he took his quasi-religious imagery more seriously than I have suggested, that Sylvia, for example, is "purified" for the sake of her angelic role. Certainly Sylvia is less colloquial of speech, less outspoken in her opinions, less coquettish in her relations with men, and less ardent in her early married life than the original Dora had been.¹⁷ But

this is not to say that she is more angelic. Her increased gravity is in keeping with the more sombre mood of the revised version. And the more subdued treatment of her sexuality is not peculiar to her: the revised version treats all sexual matters less openly than the original had done. Sarah Purfoy's inn in Hobart Town is no longer so frankly a brothel; the story of Lucy Barnes, the young girl whom Frere reduces to prostitution, is softened a little; Sarah's own breasts and lips heave and burn less freely; and, though she can still bare a "shapely member" when she shows her arm to the amorous Blunt (Oxford, p. 61; Penguin, p. 170), she is no longer possessed of a "too redundant bust" (Penguin, p. 185: cf. Oxford, p. 266). If Clarke had been seeking to enhance a spiritual contrast by purifying his angel, he would hardly have purified his "she-devil" (Penguin, p. 393: omitted in revision, Oxford, p. 289). In sexual matters at least, he seems rather to have "refined" the whole novel in recognition of a changing taste or, perhaps, of a putative readership more fastidious than the original serial was meant for.

The images in which men are associated with or distinguished from beasts are altogether more appropriate to Clarke's subject. He manages them with more assurance (though one might cavil at his allowing North to see his drunkenness as "bestial") and, among the fifty or so instances I have examined, he finds little to revise. Presumably from a wish to show Frere in a worse light, he excised the last sentence of the following passage:

"Terrible!" says the clergyman, with a shudder. "You speak of them as if they were wild beasts."

"So they are," said Maurice Frere, calmly.

That was the general opinion in those days.

(Penguin, p. 426: cf. Oxford, p. 321)

Whereas the original Dawes had been directly likened to a beast on several dark occasions, the Dawes of the revised version, though so described by some whose opinion we are to reject, is nowhere shown as more than partly brutalized except at the time of his worst degradation: "It was as though each blow of the cat forced out of him a fresh burst of beast-like rage. He seemed to have abandoned his humanity" (p. 368). All in all, Clarke insists unfalteringly on the two main aspects of this potent set of images: that, to the extent that convicts are beasts, they are made so by the System; and that the System bestializes the gaolers no less than the gaoled. The bluff humanity of Pine, the ship's surgeon, makes for some telling contrasts without being exposed to the extremities of the penal settlements. Vickers, for the most part, is in a position to hold himself aloof though not unimplicated, an increasingly impersonal instrument of "the King's regulations". But Troke and Burgess can scarcely be distinguished from those who suffer under them. All this is plain and strong: with Gabbett and Frere, however, the imagery is extended further.

Although Gabbett is presented as bestial from first to last, his bestiality is not innate. Alone among the major characters, he has previously endured a term in the penal settlements: as he puts it, in one of his longer speeches, " 'You think the chain's fine sport, don't yer? But I've been there, my young chicken, and I knows what it means' " (p. 69). And yet, in the course of the novel, even Gabbett can grow worse. During the mutiny on "Malabar", he is allowed a measure of reluctant admiration as savage but courageous, as boar, bull, and ape. The cannibal and sodomite of the middle action exists only for the gratification of his brutish appetites.¹⁸ And, by a horrifying reversal, he is shown at last as a maniac intent only on sharing his appalling worldly goods.

The progressive degeneration of Frere is subtler and more closely studied. He first passes from a coarse but manly courage to a callous pride in his "efficiency" and a complete unconcern for what it costs. From the turning-point of his betrayal of Dawes's heroism at Macquarie Harbour, he remains only so much a man as to need to suppress a few fleeting impulses of conscience and of responsiveness to Sylvia's increasingly troubled affection for her "rescuer". It is no long step to the progressively more exquisite sadism of the commandant at Norfolk Island, the tormentor of Sylvia and North, the torturer of Dawes. When last we see him, he wishes only for the departure of Sylvia and North so that he can "pursue his 'discipline' unchecked" (p. 567). His last remark, a grudging apology to Sylvia for being " 'a brute' " (p. 568), cannot be taken at any more than its barest colloquial value: not merely because he does not mean otherwise but

because he has escaped the reach of the implicit metaphor. No member of the brute creation shares the capacity for calculated and cheerful evil that is realized in a Maurice Frere—or a John Price.

In Clarke's original version, the central contrast of the novel was between the cousins, Devine and Frere. Not only in the middle action at the penal settlements but in the excised sections, both earlier and later, their careers run side by side. Frere is at the Bell Inn on the night that Hans Blinzler is murdered there. At the very end, Frere is about to recapture Dawes when he himself—like the historical John Price—is murdered by convicts. More importantly, there is little to choose between them at the beginning of the novel: but as Dawes rises above his sufferings, Frere succumbs to his opportunities. In the revised version, where John Rex takes on increased importance, this contrast is no longer so predominant. Yet it retains enough force to make Sylvia's amnesia one of the novel's most powerful centres of meaning. In a “mechanical” analysis of Clarke's melodramatic strategy, her loss of memory is not so much a convenience as an embarrassment, an embarrassment that increases as he insists more and more strenuously on her struggles to recall what had occurred at Macquarie Harbour and to understand why the name and sight of Rufus Dawes strike other chords than, seemingly, they should. In figurative terms, however, all this epitomizes the novel's effort of moral definition. Against all the sanctions of Meekin's church, her father's official standing, and the fixed opinion of her elders, Sylvia's vestigial recollections of Macquarie Harbour increasingly coincide with her deepest instincts to hint at the inconceivable—not merely that convicts may not congenitally be beasts, not merely that King's officers may become so, but that she herself has married with a beast and cast a man aside. When Dawes confronts her in Hobart Town, when she encounters the wretched children of Point Puer, when she comes upon her husband's torture-cell: blow by blow, received opinion crumbles until it is swept away by the climactic tempests of mind and sea and, in full memory and understanding, she accepts that the inconceivable is the truth.

But Clarke goes beyond defining the meaning of the System and showing his readers how falsely English justice can be applied. By another of those metaphoric processes on which melodrama relies, he seeks also into origins. As everyone knows, Victorian melodrama is much occupied with inheritances: too often an ill-gotten fortune or a missing will but sometimes also, as in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), a moral burden imposed by one generation upon another. Perhaps one can see a broader version of that idea, after a sea-change, in what Dr Elliott calls the “political and national” aspect of Clarke's original later episodes.¹⁹ As Dr Elliott suggests, those episodes, for all their ramshackle structure, treat with deep conviction of Devine's slow recovery of self-respect in the free colony of Victoria until he can return to England a better man than England made him. But one must qualify the point a little; for, as his minor characters cast off the trammels of the bad old world, Clarke over-strains his symbolism. A young Devine, seeking his fortune on the goldfields, falls in love with Richard Devine's foster-daughter, the child of Dora's marriage to Maurice Frere. A young Quaid practises law less sharply than his forbears. A young Blick is not a “fence” but only a shrewd businessman. A surgeon is called to attend the dying Frere—none other than young Pine. And the ringleader of Frere's murderers is his bastard son, brought up to exact revenge on him. The idea of a repudiated inheritance and a fresh beginning is obviously, too obviously, in Clarke's mind.

All this is gone from the revised version. The material added there is concerned, very largely, with John Rex. He had served in the original as a conspicuously shrewd and resourceful specimen of a wild beast, one who, like Frere, rejects a decisive opportunity to become otherwise; as the false claimant of Devine's material inheritance; and, in his subsequent degeneracy, as a surrogate for Dawes, mutely testifying to the force of experiences such as Dawes must put behind him before he can be accepted as fully a man once more. In the revised version, however, Rex is more closely woven into the metaphoric pattern. For now he is no mere parallel character but Devine's half-brother and morally his *alter ego*. Thus Clarke shows, more exactly than before, the different operations of the System on one most eligible to become a beast and one who struggles always to sustain his manhood. And Rex's eventual state now testifies to Clarke's having accepted, however unwillingly, that even Devine can no longer live among men who do not share the experience of long years in the penal settlements.

Beyond that, however, lies the parricide of which the one is guilty and the other held so. To my mind, Clarke's much-abused Prologue sketches his final insight into the meaning of the novel he had written. In the genealogy of the Wotton Wades and in the life and times of Lord Bellasis lies a figure for the origin of the System. In part it is an expression of deep-seated corruptions in English society: an abandonment

of responsibility by natural leaders like the Wotton Wades, whose sense of duty no longer transcends their private dispositions; their replacement by self-seeking *parvenus* like old Devine and his true heir, Maurice Frere, who is dependent on his favours because “the abolition of the slave trade had ruined the Bristol House of Frere” (p. 7); the making, thereby, of untrammelled opportunities for rogues like John Rex, only the better fitted by the talents they inherit and pervert; and the development of a gross failure to distinguish between the truly criminal and the weak or unfortunate, all of whom are caged together between decks on “Malabar”. Part history, part myth, it is the English inheritance that was repudiated, with a brash but touching optimism, by so many Australians of Clarke's time and afterwards, fired by the belief that they could start afresh.

But, drawing on a convention of faith in natural aristocracy that goes back beyond melodrama into romances like *Cymbeline* and *Arcadia*, Clarke corrects the balance. Marred as he is by his upbringing, Richard Devine is yet a Wotton Wade, scion of the more admirable among his ancestors. He lacks the unscathed innocence of a hero from romance. He is no tragic hero: his situation, if nothing else, allows too little scope for that. But, in a capacity for leadership that is given no other exercise than among the members of the “Ring” at Norfolk Island, in the energy and resourcefulness he displays at Macquarie Harbour, in his endurance of intolerable trials and his rising once more from his abasement, in his sensitiveness of response, and in his deepening comprehension of love, embracing Blind Mooney and the wretched North as well as Sylvia Frere, he is indeed a disguised nobleman, a hero indeed of melodrama.

1 *His Natural Life* was originally published as a serial in the *Australian Journal* from March 1870 to June 1872. Much revised and shortened by about half its length, it appeared as a book in 1874. The more familiar but less pregnant title, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, was not used for any edition during Clarke's lifetime. For the revised version, on which my argument is chiefly focussed, the text referred to is that edited by L. H. Allen (Oxford, 1952), and my unassigned page-references are to that edition. For the original version, the text referred to is that edited by Stephen Murray-Smith (Penguin, 1970).

2 J. L. Burke (ed.), *The Adventures of Martin Cash* (1870). Although Cash reads like an untrustworthy witness, shifty and self-justifying, his general drift is corroborated by others—like Alexander Harris, John Knatchbull, J. F. Mortlock, and James Tucker—most of whose writings were not available to Clarke. For the Norfolk Island version of the “System”, Cash is closely corroborated by the Rev. Thomas Rogers (the original of the novel's Rev. James North) whose correspondence on the subject was seen by Clarke. See also Henry Beresford Garrett, “The Demon”, an unpublished biography of John Price by one who had been a convict at Norfolk Island: a transcript is held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and some lengthy extracts are quoted in John Vincent Barry, *The Life and Death of John Price* (Melbourne, 1964). Garrett lived to read *His Natural Life* and, as Harold J. Boehm points out, to comment on Clarke's restraint: see “*His Natural Life* and its Sources”, *ALS*, v (1971), 49.

3 James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London, 1973), p. 14. See also R. B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle and London, 1968).

4 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 47.

5 L. L. Robson, “The Historical Basis of *His Natural Life*”, *ALS*, i (1963), 121. But Dr Robson concedes that Clarke deals with “what *could* happen to convicts”: *ibid.*, 108.

6 Caroline Leakey [“Oliné Keese”], *The Broad Arrow* (1859), ch. xi., p. 69.

7 The *Sydney Herald*, 6 September 1832; 4 March and 20 April 1840; 17 May and 7 June 1832: cited in C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, ii (1968), pp. 193-5 and iii (1973), pp. 174-5.

8 See Brian Elliott, *Marcus Clarke* (Oxford, 1958), p. 145 and L. L. Robson, *loc. cit.*, 104-5. Dr Elliott's ensuing argument that the novel is essentially “a psychological romance” lays great, perhaps undue, weight on the individual sufferings of Rufus Dawes. In his Introduction to a new edition of the novel (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1973), Dr Elliott opens a larger range of ideas by arguing that, in the original version of the novel, Devine/Dawes is an allegorical representative of “natural man”, fallen and restored, but that, with the excision of the episodes following his escape from Norfolk Island, the restorative action is lost. There is a surviving hint, one may add, in the fact that, in the moment of his death, Dawes is referred to as Richard Devine.

9 L. H. Allen, Introduction to *His Natural Life* (Oxford, 1952), p. xviii.

10 *David Copperfield* (1850), ch. lv: (Oxford, 1948), p. 795.

11 *ibid.*, p. 788.

12 *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (Paris, 1866), Two, IV, ch. i-iii. As *The Toilers of the Sea*, the novel had appeared in English by 1868. But Clarke may well have drawn on the original: he had an “unusually competent command of the French language” (Brian Elliott, *Marcus Clarke*, p. 9). Clarke's Preface alludes to *Les Misérables* (1862); and his debt to that novel, especially for the section of his original version which shows Dawes rehabilitating himself after his escape from Norfolk Island, has long been recognized. The elder Dumas and Eugène Sue, whose novels were immensely popular at that time, would also need to be considered in any full account of Clarke's debt to French melodrama.

13 *East Lynne* (1861), ch. ii: (London, Bentley, 1888), pp. 8, 10.

14 *ibid.*, ch. xxii, p. 458.

15 L. T. Hergenhan, “The Redemptive Theme in *His Natural Life*”, *ALS*, ii (1965), 32-49. Dr Hergenhan sees Clarke's attempt at a specifically Christian affirmation as partly compromised by uncertainties of intention and execution.

16 See Clarke's letter to Gavan Duffy, quoted by Brian Elliott in his Introduction to *His Natural Life* (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1973), p. xxxviii.

17 The transformation of Dora into Sylvia has been closely studied: see Joan E. Poole, “Maurice Frere's Wife: Marcus Clarke's Revision of *His Natural Life*”, *ALS*, iv (1969-70), 383-94.

18 Although the revised version is less explicit than the original, few nowadays would dispute that young Kirkland suffers homosexual rape. Kirkland's later behaviour indicates that Gabbett is among the rapists. (p. 351)

19 Brian Elliott, Introduction to *His Natural Life* (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1973), p. xxvii.

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