

Catherine Runcie: Rufus Dawes : His Natural and His Spiritual Life

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A PHILOSOPHER and no poet, John Stuart Mill did not declare his era was "wandering between two worlds, one dead and the other powerless to be born". But he did say the same thing. In "The Spirit of the Age" of 1831, some twenty years earlier than Arnold's famous lines,² Mill diagnosed the intellectual ailment of his times, the crisis he saw inherent in his century's liberalism. While he was able to praise the "march of intellect", the defeat of "error and prejudice", he could see that the victory was costly, that to defeat error and prejudice was at the very least to leave a gap, and at the very most to induce "intellectual anarchy". "Now, it is self-evident," says Mill, "that no fixed opinions have yet generally established themselves in the place of those which we have abandoned; that no new doctrines, philosophical or social, as yet command, or appear likely soon to command an assent at all comparable in unanimity to that which the ancient doctrines could boast of while they continued in vogue ... We have not yet advanced beyond the unsettled state, in which the mind is, when it has recently found itself out in grievous error, and has not yet satisfied itself of the truth."³

And being a philosopher and no prophet, Mill did not see the calamitous effect this "unsettled state", this loss of authority, was to have on individual minds of his time, and he would not countenance wandering foolishly between two worlds for too long. If it was bad to have prejudices, it was worse to have nothing. "To have erroneous convictions is one evil," says Mill, "but to have no strong or deeply-rooted convictions at all is an enormous one. Before I compliment either a man or a generation upon having got rid of their prejudices, I require to know what they have substituted in lieu of them."

"Substitution" is no easy task. To find a new authority, to find something absolute amid contending hypotheses and provisional half-truths, involved much searching, much grief, and much courage. Nothing in the cool, analytic vocabulary of Mill's "The Spirit of the Age" really suggests the actual spirit of the age so much as figures like Carlyle or George Eliot or Matthew Arnold. But another figure should belong here—that of Marcus Clarke. His reputation is that of Bohemian, ironic raisonneur, or to borrow his own words, a "clever, scornful and intellectual materialist".⁴ Whatever his ironies, his sardonic flams, Clarke is far more than that. He enacts just as much as any other eminent figure of his time the spiritual and intellectual heroism of the nineteenth century. Like Carlyle or Eliot or Tennyson or Arnold, Clarke felt grief at the loss of a central authority. Like his more famous counterparts in England, he found a way out of the liberal humanist dilemma. He found a "substitute", to use Mill's word. Clarke found for himself an authority and that authority is moral and religious. What's more it is absolute.

It would be handy if Clarke had written the opus on world religions he was planning at the tender age of nineteen or twenty.⁵ But except for a letter to Cyril Hopkins, some scattered journalistic remarks and Clarke's skirmish with Dr Moorhouse, the Bishop of Melbourne, Clarke leaves nothing that lends itself to exegesis. Instead he leaves us what is, after all, what we would prefer to have, his major novel, *His Natural Life*, and a task of interpretation.

Some help with interpreting this huge and complex novel can be gained by surmising his intellectual position. Clarke had read the usual disturbing books young men read in his day, including Froude's *Nemesis of Faith* and Renan's *Life of Jesus*, and that other disturbing book, the Bible, and like other young men of his time, he early lost whatever faith he might have had. Presumably he did so with the decisive help of Tyndall

and Darwin and Huxley and his own curious upbringing. “Happy is the man who can believe!” he wrote to Cyril Hopkins in 1867, “I cannot!”⁶

But to see this as Clarke's last word on religion is to stop too soon. He deplored loss of faith. He was as aware as George Eliot or Arnold that the loss of religious faith was painful. “I am no advocate for the writing and publishing of infidel books,” he writes in 1867. “For they can destroy; they cannot build up. The most ignorant peasant that prays to his wooden image of Divinity is happier and perhaps nearer salvation than the clever, scornful and intellectual materialist whose stern logic tears away all the sweet, delusive ornamentation of belief ... Belief in something is essential to happiness.”⁷

That “something” Clarke swiftly comes to. It wasn't in his nature to wander between two worlds for long. Although his position is avowedly rational, scientific and anti-metaphysical, Clarke does not accept either the intellectual anarchy or provisionalism of “simple liberalism”. He affirms a central authority that shapes all experience and makes it meaningful, and passionately—or I should say, compassionately—embraces it. His final salvo to Dr Moorhouse is: “We have long had Religion without Morality; let us try, then, Morality, without Religion.”⁸

Clarke defies the Nietzschean notion that to get rid of Christian metaphysics is to get rid of Christian morals. As he protests in his debate with Moorhouse, “The destruction of a set of beliefs does not necessarily mean the destruction of religion, in no way means the withdrawal of moral restraint.” (p. 13). The morality that Clarke, like George Eliot or Dickens, sees as possible still and as necessary is in essence the Christ-like morality of self-sacrifice through love, loving sacrifice for humanity, or—to use Clarke's positivist language that even Matthew Arnold found himself compelled to use—for “the elevation of the race”. (p. 21)

This morality Clarke insists must be separated from pseudo-metaphysical torments, fire and brimstone (p. 13). Clarke's notion of virtue is that it is pure, autotelic, in other words, seeking no rewards and negligent of adversity. As such it is an *absolute*.

Although Clarke's moral absolute is a Christ-like morality of meekness, it is, I must add, not of weakness. Self-sacrifice through love means strength. “The strong-souled man,” says Clarke to Dr Moorhouse, “... lives uprightly, because he feels that selfishness and sin injure the welfare of his fellow man ... does that which is his duty, that which he and all other free souls know to be their duty, without hope of present fee or future reward” (p. 13).

“Free souls,” says Clarke. Eschewing determinism as he does in assuming man's ultimate (though not interim) freedom, Clarke asserts as much metaphysics as morals and suggests greater complexity than his episcopal skirmish actually declares. But that greater complexity is not worked out in any systematic way in 1879, perhaps because it has already been done in novel form in 1874. *His Natural Life* that is, the revised novel version of his earlier serial,⁹ is both metaphysics and morals. It is a complete *Weltanschauung* for modern man, a position Clarke grimly describes when he relates his own state to Cyril Hopkins in 1867: “I am ... as one who wandering through the pleasure gardens of faith and implicit belief, has stumbled upon the sternrocks that border them; the rocks of reason and practicality and materialism, and stunned by the fall is no more able to return to the pleasant paths and rest with heart at ease upon the dewy turf but must cling to the rugged and sharp stones around him lest he fall into the raging sea of despair and utter incredulity that boils and seethes beneath him.”¹⁰

His Natural Life, full of the same images and metaphors as Clarke's letter, shows man in such a world—a “modern” world, where nature can no longer be perceived as Wordsworth perceived it. Or Emerson. Clarke's universe is closer to Arnold's or even Melville's and is all the harder for that. “Fast friends” man and nature can never be, Arnold lamented.¹¹ In the novel, nature is beneficent or brutal or beautiful and is any of these at any one time in ironic relation to man's needs or to any notion of cosmic justice. John Rex, arch villain, is saved from death by the terrain; the innocent Sylvia is destroyed by a cyclone at sea. “Man knows but little,” says Clarke—or Clarke's persona—in one of his Noah's Ark Dialogues, “and yet he should know enough to make him ashamed of his impertinence in assuming that the Creator cares specially for him.”¹²

Within such a world is human society—and it too is full of ironies. Clarke depicts society as a tangle of glaring and proliferating ironies. Within society the free are not necessarily free: civilized kindly Captain

Vickers as much as his innocent daughter, Sylvia, is trapped within a system that renders him a puppet¹³ and her powerless. And in this society, the unfree are not necessarily wicked, nor the free necessarily good: Clarke's hero Dawes, serving three life sentences, is innocent; while Frere and Burgess, the enforcers of justice, are closer in a chain of being to the most debased convict Gabbett, cannibal and murderer, than they are to any other character in the novel. And Meekin, Clarke's representative of organised and orthodox Christianity is a parody of meekness; he is really a man of no feeling who can reiterate platitudes about providence a few yards away from hopeless suffering (*HNL*, p. 229 ff).

Into such a universe, such a world, such a society and such a society's prisons Clarke sets his hero for the term of his *natural* life—and of his *spiritual* life too. And it is his spiritual life which is the innermost subject of the novel. Clarke's hero has no real name and no real home. Illegitimate, he is cast off by his stepfather, and cannot use his given name, Richard Devine. “Devine” is, of course, a homophone of “divine” and is intended to be. Accused on circumstantial evidence of murder, Clarke's hero protects his mother's honour by giving a false name; and he sticks to his false identity when he is condemned to exile and transportation for life. The name he gives himself, Rufus Dawes (daw means crow or even sullen disagreeable person), is a debased rough version of his original name¹⁴ and a name that also does not belong to him as he is not red-headed and Frere, his gaoler and cousin, is. But it is because the new name does not belong to imprisoned, exiled Richard Devine that Clarke gives it to him. And so, cast off, homeless, with nothing his by right and bearing another man's guilt, Rufus Dawes begins the “terrible affliction of living” (*HNL*, p. 236) as Clarke says; Dawes begins a vicarious atonement and exile, a physical descent into the Hells of Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur, and Norfolk Island; and at the same time a spiritual ascent, an “Imitation of Christ”, ending at a point where Clarke gives him back his name “Devine”—or divine.

The physical descent of Dawes from Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur, to Norfolk Island and the cruelties he and others encounter on the way are crucial to Clarke's world-view. Here I feel I must make an aside about the detail of prison and penal settlement. Defensive arguments as to whether Clarke exaggerated his documentary finds¹⁵ in his novel are useless to the interpretation of the novel's meaning, and result from a literal trust in Clarke's stated intention in his preface—that he writes to prevent an evil or the perpetuation of an evil—an evil, unfair to write about, historians lament, for it was already dying out. This is the same lament made over Zola's *Germinal* or Dickens's *Bleak House*. But to believe literally in Clarke's preface is naïve. It serves the same purpose as does Burroughs's preface to the English edition of *The Naked Lunch*. It is a normalizing device, intended to smuggle what Clarke called his “chamber of real horrors”¹⁶ past a certain kind of reader. One can see from the number of critics who think the novel is only an historical novel or a sociological plea, that his tactics worked.

The details of Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur, and Norfolk Island help form what is for Clarke a world-view, as I've said; they are in effect an existential paradigm, worthy of Melville or Conrad and are essential to the novel's fuller meanings. I cannot here do more by way of suggesting these fuller meanings, than to try to show why Dawes becomes divine/Devine once more. When he is ousted from his stepfather's house, he vows to his mother, Lady Devine, that he will “earn a name—a name I need not blush to bear nor you to hear” (*HNL*, p. 4). By the end of the novel, Clarke grants him that.

No discussion of Dawes's moral meaning can be separated from that of Sylvia Vickers, John Rex or the Reverend North. (I have to bypass Frere, who I think is more self-explanatory and of more importance in the serial version.) John Rex is a perversion of Dawes's morality. He is literally a half-brother of Dawes, a forger, confidence man, thief, murderer and usurper of Dawes's inheritance; he is also a leader of men, a man of style, ingenious at survival, and intelligent. He would seem, at first glance, to be viable in society, and indeed, intermittently lives with society's approbation.

But Clarke says his “‘moral sense’ was almost entirely wanting” (*HNL*, p. 210), and Clarke condemns him to die “a mere animal, lacking the intellect he had in his selfish wickedness abused.”¹⁷ Selfish indeed. He is a foil to Dawes; everything he does is for himself. With patent irony, Lady Devine fooled into thinking Rex is really her son and not a fraud, keeps thanking him for “the ‘sacrifice’ ” (*HNL*, p. 376) he has made for her. Clarke puts “sacrifice” into quotation marks to emphasize the irony of her choice of words, for Rex makes no sacrifice whatsoever for anyone. He is a total perversion of Dawes's morality and Clarke's calling him an animal is of no little significance to humanistic ethics.

What is Dawes's morality? It is the “pure morality” he expounds to Dr Moorhouse.¹⁸ It is love, self-sacrifice, courage, honour, fidelity, integrity. Dawes illustrates all these. His first momentous act in the novel is done from self-sacrificing love to save his mother's honour. He was not used to being so noble and had been a troublesome son. When tested, his love, however, for his mother predominates and he sacrifices himself for his mother's honour. This act of sacrifice is *irrevocable*. He carries it through says Clarke, with “defiant manhood”, “stern resolution” (*HNL*, pp. 10, 174). This courageous self-sacrificing love is soon transferred to Sylvia Vickers and for the remainder of the novel.

Sylvia, sketched in Hawthornesque style and none the worse for that, is both spritely and angelic in her pale golden beauty. And she is not witless. She is innocently but intelligently questioning. In fact Clarke makes her ask some sticky questions as a child, such as whether or not a certain convict will “wear his yellow jacket in heaven, or go as a free man” (*HNL*, p. 97). And later she takes to reading—not quite at random—such works as *Paradise Lost*, *Robinson Crusoe*,¹⁹ and *Paul and Virginia*. She is frank and truthful as a child, telling Frere how cruel he is, and she is instinctively just and compassionate—both as a child when she first feels an affinity to Dawes on the Malabar and at the end when she frees him, now the most notorious incorrigible, from the spread-eagle on Norfolk Island.²⁰

Sylvia's role in the novel is to deepen Dawes's meaning and to clarify it, more than either Frere or Rex and as much as North does—North with whom she is a doppelgänger at times and to whom she is a foil, as I hope to show. Sylvia is a greatly altered character from her appearance as Dora in the original serial version, and her *function* in the novel is also greatly altered, placing her somewhere between realism and allegory, which enables her to be closer to the philosophic centre of the novel.

Now just as Dawes always has a curious affinity to her, right from the beginning when he reports the mutiny on the Malabar for her safety, she always has an affinity to Dawes. Even though he is a frightening, half-starved apparition when he stumbles out of the wilderness to her, marooned at Hell's Gates, she defies Frere to feed him and wants to nurse the grisly apparition back to health (*HNL*, pp. 146, 150-1). She openly prefers Dawes to Frere; tells Dawes she will “always” love him; and persists in seeing goodness in Dawes, even singing of his goodness (*HNL*, pp. 167, 170). She actually celebrates his goodness by writing “Good Mr. Dawes” in the sand (*HNL*, p. 178). Dawes reacts to her affirmation—her faith in his goodness—by despising himself as “cowardly”, “base” and “cruel” for wanting to rescue himself and abandon her. It is of considerable importance to note that Dawes makes the *actual* decision to rescue her *not* just after he sees “Good Mr. Dawes” in the sand, but as he *also recalls in his mind* her good act—her offering of the damper when Frere had held him off with a gad. Dawes is so moved by what the gesture *means*—Frere asks if he's seen a ghost²¹—that he makes the irrevocable sacrifice. He decides to return her to the civilization that will return him to gaol. Dawes acts not just for Sylvia, but for what he perceives in his mind is her meaning—absolute goodness. (I'll return to the point of Sylvia's existence in Dawes's mind later.)

Up to this point in the novel, Sylvia's affinity to Dawes is strong and unwavering, and she merits Dawes's sacrifice. But from now on—once returned to society²²—and upon growing up, she buries what she feels for Dawes; she never does help him to a pardon. Although she could once do a momentous good act in giving Dawes the damper, she cannot now *act*. She does not *act* upon what are her spiritual capabilities when she comes to womanhood. May I stress the word *act*? For above all the novel is a series of decisive acts, deeds or failures to do deeds, and Sylvia fails to act. As she herself recognizes, she leads a double life. She betrays her authentic self with its loving and compassionate affinity to Dawes, when she marries his gaoler Frere, who leads her to believe he and not Dawes saved her life. Her hysterical repression—not unlike Yossarian's repression of Snowden's death in *Catch 22*—prevents her from acknowledging that Dawes and Frere should change places; that the forbidden outcast Dawes is her saviour and her love and fidelity should go to him. The reasons for Sylvia's failure are not finally social—that finishing school finished off her conscience. She is *spiritually* powerless, as her role in the novel increasingly shows. Her conscience remains, and it troubles her. She is subject to hysterical episodes, “nerves” and bad dreams. Throughout her marriage to Frere (who has fraudulently won her hand thereby supplanting Dawes and who increasingly torments Dawes), Sylvia is literally *haunted* by Dawes, by his goodness and great sacrifice and her own love for him. But this does not “easter” in her soul (to borrow from Cyril Hopkins's brother), until the very last page of the novel.

To illustrate her powerlessness, Clarke places her in a scene of very strong irony: Dawes has to pull her train to Long Bay, while she and Frere are on a tour of inspection. She feels Dawes looks at her with “bitterest loathing and scorn”, but afterwards turns to no other than Frere with her spiritual troubles and asks “How is it that the sight of that man always makes me sad?” Maurice explains she should not have come on the tour; he says: “You were not strong enough” (*HNL*, p. 313). Which pronouncement Clarke uses to end that section of the chapter. Maurice is inadvertently right. She is not strong enough. Sylvia cannot yet be transfigured by Dawes; and she cannot help him. In fact she increases his suffering. Dawes says that “she would free him if she had the power” (*HNL*, p. 234). But she has not. Unlike Dawes, Sylvia is spiritually powerless to *act*.

But her full function is not clear until we recognize that Sylvia has not just a double life, but a triple one. She has a life within Dawes's mind or spirit that is as important as his troublesome life within hers. She exists to Dawes in various tokens, a piece of cloth or a flower (*HNL*, pp. 237, 264, 392), that are of talismanic, or religious significance to him; and she exists deep in his soul where his desires and hopes begin, or where his humanity begins, one might say. Dawes recounts what Sylvia meant to him while he was at Port Arthur: “In the depth of his degradation, at the height of his despair, he cherished one pure and ennobling thought—the thought of the child whom he had saved, and who loved him” (*HNL*, p. 233). Later, when he is simultaneously sent to the coal-mine and hears she has died, with “his last hope” (p. 235) gone, says Clarke, he still retains a profound devotion to her *meanings*, as it were. In the chapter called “Rufus Dawes's Idyll”, in which he makes his dreaded physical descent down the coal-mine, he makes a joyous ascent. Upon hearing of Sylvia's death, says Clarke, a “new religion” begins for him: “He worshipped the dead. For the living, he had but hatred and evil words; for the dead, he had love and tender thoughts” (*HNL*, p. 235). Philosophically put, the *ideal* Sylvia, or ideal of Sylvia, of love and charity and faith, is indestructible and persists in Dawes's soul, keeping his humanity alive. It is worthy of his religious devotion. Sylvia now supplants Dawes's thoughts of the home from which he was cast out, Clarke tells us. Instead Dawes pictures home with Sylvia, “a life of unassuming usefulness, a life devoted to good deeds, to charity and love” (*HNL*, p. 236)—a domestic paradise and a model of right living close to any Victorian humanist's heart, certainly that of Dickens or George Eliot. If one keeps in mind that Dawes believes the actual Sylvia dead, one can see clearly what Clarke is doing philosophically. Just as it is not the *actual* act of passing the damper to him, but the *principle* of the act which he recognizes that helps determine his rescue of Sylvia from Hell's Gates, so it is not the *actual*, loving, kind, dutiful, Sylvia now, for he thinks she's dead: it is not Sylvia, but Sylvia's *meaning*, Dawes's devotion to an ideal of goodness and charity and faithful love, that keeps his spirit alive with hope.

Significantly Dawes dreams of Sylvia always as a child—before her “double life” as she calls it began. That is because before her double life, she is, in her disposition and her deeds, purity, love, faith, charity personified—all aspects of Dawes's religion of morality. Equally significantly, her image vanishes when Dawes is filled with hatred or when he breaks faith. “She seemed never to grow older,” says Dawes, “she never seemed to wish to leave him. It was only when his misery became too great for him to bear, and he cursed and blasphemed, mingling for a time in the hideous mirth [for the most part Dawes is *in* this prison but not *of* it], that the little figure fled away” (*HNL*, p. 237).

The Sylvia that he carries in his soul is both the authentic, buried Sylvia, and the ideal of charity, purity, love. The *actual* Sylvia is, however, not the Sylvia of his soul. When he learns she is alive, he feels once again she will help him, and once again, she does not. “Strong in his faith in her, and with his love for her brightened by the love he had borne to her dream-image, he felt sure of her power to rescue him now, as he had rescued her before” (*HNL*, p. 237). Instead she causes him a third life sentence.

In an important scene that at first glance seems tedious and disruptive of the narrative, Clarke sets Sylvia down to read about the fate of the mutineers of the Osprey, led by John Rex, who as I have said before, is totally selfish, a perversion of Dawes's morality. Just after Sylvia is thinking favourably of none other than John Rex, of his possible innocence and of his abilities, and just after she experiences a sense of pervasive evil around her, she comes to feel, the ‘terror of loneliness’ (*HNL*, p. 261). At that moment, appears the man of survival abilities like Rex's, who helped her survive, and the man whose self-sacrificing love and devotion could quell her loneliness. With hands outstretched to her, he speaks his name: “I am Rufus Dawes.” Unlike the time when he staggered out of the wilderness to her as a child marooned at Hell's Gate, when once

recovered from fear she gives him food, she now, as the wife of Frere, is simply terrified. “To the excited girl this apparition seemed the embodiment of the unknown evil she had dreaded.” It certainly is the unknown good she had dreaded—a harrowing of heaven, as it were. She calls on Frere, the very person who renders her so lonely. Her weakness really becomes Dawes's gaoler now, as he is punished with a third life sentence.

In his story “Holiday Peak”, Clarke explores what “might have been” in the lives of certain famous people had a certain event been changed in their lives. Had Sylvia *acted* on Dawes's behalf at that moment, his whole life would have been changed. Instead the scene ends with Dawes's loss of faith. He flings away his talisman, feeling: “Then there was no justice, no heaven, no God!” “... He knew only that his dream-child was alive and shuddered at him, that the only thing he loved and trusted had betrayed him, that all hope of justice and mercy had gone from him for ever, that the beauty had gone from earth, the brightness from heaven, and that he was doomed still to live” (*HNL*, pp. 262, 267).

Now begins his deepest testing and the Reverend North enters the story more actively at this point of Dawes's break with Sylvia. Like Sylvia he leads a triple life: his public life as a Christian pastor, his private life as a disbeliever and a drunk, and the one he has in Dawes's spirit. North takes over Sylvia's role in Dawes's mind—he seems what she was, a moral beacon, a creature worthy enough in spite of his sins for Dawes to commit himself to. North is a spurious Sylvia. He is not only ineffectual, powerless to do good, as Sylvia is, but when he does act, his acts are bad.

North seems an awkward character to foist on the novel at this point. Certainly he seems to retard the plot. But by contrast he helps to clarify Dawes's virtues and his redemptive power. In the belief there is no justice, no heaven, no God, Dawes lets himself be forced to flog young Kirkland. Just at that point Reverend North, after a bout with brandy, appears. He is too late to prevent the flogging, but demands a stop to it. The scene has a careful series of little events that can easily be overlooked but which are crucial in leading up to Dawes's commitment to North, which parallels his commitment to Sylvia. Burgess defies North and orders that Kirkland be tied up again. North cries, “No. Not if you are Christians!” (*HNL*, p. 284). Only Dawes acts. He instantly flings down the cat and “with a glance at North,” pulls off his own shirt and stretches himself on the triangle to be flogged by Gabbett. North is astonished at Dawes's martyrdom and is full of admiration. However, it is not North's intervention here that is the moral meaning of the scene. North was too late, owing to drink, to prevent the flogging. This lateness makes quite a material difference to Kirkland after all, for he dies from the flogging. North is “good” only tardily and in intention. It is Dawes's decisive *act* to stop, signalled by North's attempt at mercy, that makes the material difference and for it Dawes must accept flogging himself. Dawes acts on North's behalf, on North's mere intention.

There starts now to transpire between them not North's redemptive power over Dawes, but the opposite. In admiration of Dawes's martyrdom, North comes to Dawes's cell. In a reversal of roles sustained to the very end of the novel, North confesses to Dawes he is a “besotted beast” (p. 287); and ironically, Dawes at one of the lowest points of his own bodily and spiritual suffering, comforts the priest. Significantly, the smallest degree of humanity brings forth a pledge on Dawes's part; or kindles his spirit to love and compassion. He feels, says Clarke, “a ray of divine pity” for North; he sees him as his “erring brother” and actually cries over North, feeling he is worthy. “Then in this hell there is yet a man,” says Dawes, grasping North's hand.

But what kind of man is North? Although Dawes's spiritual life is the innermost meaning of the novel, Clarke does not cast his feelings and thoughts into first person narration. With North, however, Clarke uses the diary technique. North employs first person more than any other character. Clarke also has North look at himself frequently in the mirror. North is a egoist, and his diary is a guilt-ridden, self-regarding, self-centred criticism of contemporary theology and of North. North carries on what Arnold sees as a symptom of modernism “the dialogue of the mind with itself”.²³ Much of what North says and feels is endorsable—his pity for the prisoners, his contempt for Frere, his questioning of justice, some of which Sylvia does as well. But when he wants to flee with Sylvia, he can bend his ideas to rationalize that God is unjust and unmerciful to him.²⁴ North is both a mixed blessing and a mixed-up blessing. He is as divided a soul as Sylvia—his self-regarding diary is his “beloved and detested companion” (p. 365). The record of his inner self is his “malignant monitor”. His diary is a testament to egoism and spiritual weakness. North admits to feeling powerless when he is posted to Norfolk Island: “How can I attempt even to save the less villainous?” (p.

385). And although he does not set out to save Dawes now considered the “worst man on the island” and now the leader of the Ring, he does so not so much for Dawes's soul as for his own: “Oh James North, remember your crime, and pray heaven to let you redeem one soul at least, to plead for your own at the Judgement Seat” (pp. 387, 8). Clarke says “It seemed to be the fancy of the priest ... that this convict ... was given to him for his own salvation.”²⁵ He even loves or thinks he loves Sylvia for his own salvation: “I feel I have met the only woman who has power to touch my heart, to hold me back from ruin” (p. 425).

His egoism and weakness—interconnected so deftly in his diary musings—are revealed progressively by Clarke as North makes a descent spiritually to the position of apostate to be replaced by Sylvia, who re-enters the main action of the narrative to be very important from now on. I cannot here detail all the incidents of North's apostasy, which includes his ignoble plea to Dawes to become Frere's constable, but the scene where Sylvia saves Dawes from the spread-eagle shows Sylvia's potential for good and North's for evil. Sylvia, feeling Dawes's very “name”, says Clarke, to mean “comfort” and “hope” (p. 434) to her, finally *acts*. Defying her husband's orders for Dawes's punishment, she saves him from the spread-eagle with her own hands. “She was on her knees by the side of the infernal machine, plucking at the ropes with her delicate fingers” (p. 435). In contrast North “did not move”.²⁶ When he does, it is not for Dawes, but for Sylvia who nearly falls. When Dawes awakens from his stupor, he is with the two characters in the novel for whom he feels love. Sylvia and North are doppelgänger here—twin possibilities in Dawes's mind of hope and faith and love. But they soon become foils to each other. Sylvia, associated with sunbeams and goodness and North, with darkness and evil. North draws her away from Dawes at the moment when she is struggling to remember. “The convict's arms fell, and an indefinable presentiment of evil chilled him as he beheld the priest ... slowly draw the fair young creature from out of the sunlight into the grim shadow of the heavy archway” (p. 436). It occurs to Dawes—as it has always occurred to the reader privy to North's diaries—“that the strange wild man of God had in that instant become a man of Evil—blighting the brightness and the beauty of the innocence that clung to him” (p. 431).

In order to flee with Sylvia, North betrays Dawes's trust. At this point in the novel, North is the only hope of justice in Dawes's world and Dawes entrusts him with the precious errand of telling Sylvia that Dawes and not Frere was her real rescuer—orsaviour. North does *not* tell Sylvia; and before his flight has the ignoble callousness of going to Dawes to confess his sins—again in a reversal of priest and sinner. Clarke treats North to some irony as North “reasons”: “I am no hypocrite ... If I choose to sin, I will sin boldly; and this poor wretch who looks up to me as an angel, shall know me for my true self” (p. 443). North is attitudinizing better than he is reasoning. And so he comes to confess to Dawes, who is in great physical pain from his torture and who is desperate for a reply from Sylvia, that he, North, has lied and has not told Sylvia about Dawes's rescuing her—a momentous act of self-sacrificing love that after all has condemned him to return to gaol from which all the rest of the novel's action follows. When Dawes, in despair, realizes what North has done, and cries “Oh, Mr. North, what have you done?” North replies—always self-centred—“wrecked my own soul” (p. 447). When Dawes, who has had a presentiment of North's evil in a dream, realizes that North intends to flee with Sylvia, he *acts*. He bars North's retreat, forcing North to listen to what he has to say. Dawes, although he feels Sylvia must love North, a most important point, will not let North corrupt her. What follows is an exegesis of love—North's selfish love and Dawes's self-sacrificing love in patent contrast. North utters his excuse: “But I love her! ... What do you know of love?” Dawes replies at a point of philosophic crisis in the novel with North, the apostate, sinking and Dawes ascendant: “Love!” cried Rufus Dawes, his pale face radiant, “Love! Oh, it is you who do not know it. Love is the sacrifice of self, the death of all desire that is not for another's good. Love is Godlike! *You* love?—no, no, your love is selfishness, and will end in shame!” Dawes's morality—and Clarke's—is self-transcendent, absolute, and Clarke is rightly compelled to use such a phrase as “godlike”. As Arnold has said in *Literature and Dogma*, “it is as an ideal that the divine had its best worth and reality.”²⁷ Dawes is Clarke's apotheosized ideal of self-sacrificing love.

North always weaker than Dawes, sits “enthralled” by Dawes's “overmastering will” (p. 447) and listens to Dawes's life story, just as the reader has been reading Dawes's life story. Dawes tries to use his story as a moral parable, to deter North from sin—in just the same way the whole novel may be used.

In the second last chapter which Clarke re-titled “The Redemption”, Dawes has finished his story and he clinches his plea to North by making the most important single statement in the novel: “A deed once done

lives in its consequences forever" (*HNL*, p. 456). This is Clarke's humanist deterrent. Fire and brimstone are not needed, but the fact that a deed's consequences are forever renders every moment of choice, of overwhelming significance, irrevocable, absolute.

Clarke underscores this by the retroactive stratagem of having North initially the robber of Lord Bellasis and confess to being too cowardly to testify in court, which testimony might originally have saved Dawes. North's role in the novel has been that of a spiritual weakling. When tested, he fails. His failure to *act* on Dawes's behalf set in train Dawes's life of torment, just as much as his mother's illicit love for Lord Bellasis. Clarke makes North fail again: he returns home full of rum and remorse, holds one more dialogue of the mind with himself and his mirror, then kills himself—while Dawes, still in a reversed relation to North, dons his cloak and hat and escapes. Clarke describes Dawes's inner thoughts and motives with great care. Dawes knows he will sooner or later be detected and hanged, and he thinks Sylvia loves North (pp. 460, 447). It is Dawes's ultimate self-sacrifice, his ultimate testing in the novel; and he goes forward to save Sylvia with courage and no doubts.

In the final chapter "Cyclone", the beautiful and innocent Sylvia and the faithful and loving martyred Dawes together at last are slain by nature, always oblivious of man's hopes in Clarke's world, but not before Sylvia cares to recognize what she always could have known and acted upon—the love and pity of a man who always knew and recognized her love and pity. Their *liebestod* is no simple melodramatic wrapping up of a love theme: Dawes rescues her as he rescued her before; and in the tumult of the moment, Sylvia goes back through time from Dawes at Norfolk Island to the episode of the coracle and knows at last how to interpret the fact that Dawes, not North, is there on board the ship, and with her in his arms: "She only considered ... that as he had saved her once from starvation and death, so had he *come again* to save her from sin and despair (*HNL*, p. 465—my italics). In a moment that has been experienced before by the reader, and is now full of deeper meaning, she utters "Good Mr. Dawes!"—an utterance that surely re-unites her with the innocence of her childhood.

Sylvia stretches out her hands to him as he has done so oft to her, she recognizes her saviour, and at that moment Clarke returns Dawes's name to him, Devine—or divine.²⁸ Dawes is divine. He is self-transcendent, self-sacrificing, love, honour, fidelity, courage. He is the "strong-souled man" Clarke describes to Dr Moorhouse²⁹ and is Arnold's apotheosized ideal.

In a moral chain of being Dawes/Devine is the highest point. More faithful, more loving, more self-sacrificing, more courageous than any other character in the novel, he is the saviour of the character closest to him in worth—Sylvia. They die with his arms about her protectively, and as they die their vision becomes "clear"—obscured as it has been in relation to each other and to others at different times in the novel. Unobstructed by the "misused power" of our lives, says Clarke—the power Rex and Frere and North misuse—and sustained by mutual love and faith, they recognize what has always been within each other, "the loveliness of the other" (p. 466) and their two souls are granted transcendent union.

The novel, with its symbolic structuring of event, is a huge, painful concatenation of deeds and consequences, of "misused powers" and their consequences, in a universe that cannot console mankind. To introject deeds of love and faith and hope and charity and courage, to imitate Christ as Devine does, is in Clarke's grim universe, to change it, to redeem it.

In "The Spirit of the Age" Mill said that he would not compliment a man or generation on having got rid of prejudice or error unless he first found out what kind of substitute was espoused instead. Clarke found a substitute; he didn't succumb to the liberal-humanist dilemma; and in his powerful novel, he asserts and celebrates that so-called substitute, a moral heroism that Mill would approve of. Still more Carlyle or George Eliot or Matthew Arnold ...

NOTES

1 A paper given at the conference on "Literature, Religion and Culture: An Australian Perspective" at the University of Sydney, 10 February 1984.

2 "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born," is the precise quotation from "Stanzas from The Grande Chartreuse", II. 85me6 in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. K. Allott (London, 1965), p. 288.

3 J. S. Mill, *Mill's Essays on Literature and Society*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (New York, 1965), p. 34.

4 Quoted in Brian Elliott, "Gerard Hopkins and Marcus Clarke", *Southerly*, VIII (1947), p. 225.

5 Brian Elliott, *Marcus Clarke* (Oxford, 1958), p. 33.

6 Quoted in Brian Elliott, "Gerard Hopkins and Marcus Clarke", *Southerly*, XIII (1947), p. 225. 1867 is an approximate date. Elliott feels the letter was written close to the time Gerard Manley Hopkins became a priest, which was 21 October 1866.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6. Cf. Clarke's remarks in his column, "The Peripatetic Philosopher", on religion and science: "It is a very good thing to have a faith of some kind, believe me, and if you happen to know anyone who has a faith and holds by it, don't add to your burden of unbelief by hanging round your neck another millstone, but let him believe in peace." (*A Colonial City*, Selected Journalism of Marcus Clarke, ed. L. T. Hergenhan (St Lucia, 1972), p. 63.)

8 *What is Religion? A Controversy Between the Late Marcus Clarke and Dr. Moorhouse* (Bishop of Melbourne), (Melbourne, 1895), p. 64. Hereafter referred to as *What is Religion?*, with page references incorporated in the text.

9 I do not here attempt to compare the serial version published by Penguin and titled *His Natural Life*, ed. S. Murray-Smith (Harmondsworth, 1970) and the novel version in *Marcus Clarke* ed. Michael Wilding (St Lucia, 1976) to which edition my references are made as *HNL*. For my purposes here, the later, maturer version is sufficient. The two works have much similarity of theme and intention, but have—finally—different meanings.

10 Brian Elliott, "Gerard Hopkins and Marcus Clarke", *Southerly*, VIII (1947), p. 225.

11 "In Harmony with Nature", in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. K. Allott (London, 1965), p. 54. For instance, instead of making Dawes consoled by nature's beauty, as one might expect or even hope for, Clarke makes him indifferent and inconsolable: "There was no charm for him in the exquisite blue of the sea, the soft shadows of the hills, or the soothing ripple of the waves that crept voluptuously to the white breast of the shining shore. He sat with his head bowed down, and his hands clapped about his knees, disdaining to look." (*HNL*, p. 265). For the young convict boys of Point Puer the terrain is not an arcadian consolation but a "natural penitentiary" (*HNL*, p. 303 ff). Cf. Clarke's remarks in "In Outer Darkness" on nature's relation to man, in *Marcus Clarke*, ed. M. Wilding (St Lucia, 1976), pp. 661-2.

12 *A Colonial City*, Selected Journalism of Marcus Clarke, ed. L. T. Hergenhan (St Lucia, 1972), p. 274.

13 Clarke gives the measure of Vickers' Pontius Pilate-like role in the scene where Vickers tries to quieten North's conscience about Kirkland's death. Vickers says "My position here is to administer the law to the best of my ability, not to question it" (*HNL*, p. 291).

14 During discussion after the reading of this paper, Professor Stephen Prickett suggested that Dawes was a homophone for doors—and Rufus Dawes was Red Doors—or Hell's Gates. Ms Lyndy Abraham suggested that the name was of alchemical significance. The alchemical allegory of the first version is mostly absent in the novel version, but certain aspects of it clearly remain in the naming of Dawes Devine. I am grateful also to Dr E. Webby and Dr A. Mitchell for helpful discussion of the two versions.

15 For instance Decie Denholm tries to defend Port Arthur from Clarke's pen and complains "*For the Term of His Natural Life* is probably the greatest single source of misunderstanding of Port Arthur secondary penal establishment" ("The Sources of *His Natural Life*", *Australian Literary Studies*, IV, No. 2 (October 1969), pp. 175-6). Or as L. L. Robson says "although the author seizes upon his material where it suits his purpose to entertain the reader, historically speaking, we must conclude that the novel cannot help but be [sic] a misleading account of convict colonization" ("The Historical Basis of *For the Term of His Natural Life*", *Australian Literary Studies*, I, No. 2 (December 1963), p. 106.)

16 Brian Elliott, *Marcus Clarke* (Oxford, 1958), p. 163.

17 The notion of abusing one's intellect or abilities in general, is taken up by Clarke right at the end of the novel.

18 *What is Religion?*, p. 13.

19 See Clarke's remarks on *Robinson Crusoe* in "In Outer Darkness", *Marcus Clarke*, ed. M. Wilding (St Lucia 1976), pp. 661-3.

20 She tells Frere she does not like him because he knocked down the prisoner Dawes, when he picked up her ball (p. 96), and she disapproves of the Carthaginians' cruelty in conquest in one of the many careful ironic prefigurations in

the novel, as here her interlocutor is Frere. (This scene has another prefiguration: she slaps Frere for trying to kiss her, and so he catches her and forces his kisses on her triumphantly—pp. 103-14.) I cannot say more here about the novel's prefigurations but they are very carefully done and more attention should be paid to them.

21 *HNL*, p. 178. The offering of damper can be set against Gabbett's offering of human flesh. Both incidents are important to the philosophic intention of the novel.

22 The social issues of the novel I cannot here discuss, but Clarke's views of society are passionately critical, and what becomes of Sylvia is a gauge of society's corrupting power.

23 *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1960-), I, p. 1.

24 After berating God as merciless, North actually reinterprets the crucified Christ's calling to God in a most blasphemous way: "Kind Christ, pity me *Thou* wilt—for Thou wast human! ... Divinity, who, most divine in Thy despair, called on Thy cruel God to save Thee ..." (*HNL*, p. 427).

25 *HNL*, p. 432. Cf. p. 426, where North says: "O Lord, let me save one soul that may plead with Thee for mine!"

26 *HNL*, p. 436. North is also ineffectual in getting an investigation into Kirkland's death. In contrast to Dawes who instantly desists from flogging Kirkland and regardless of the consequences, North helps him only after he has died. Clarke describes North as being pushed "hither and thither, referred here, snubbed there, bowed out in another place" (p. 299). Not the stuff of a redemptive hero.

27 *Dissent and Dogma in Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1961-), VI, p. 145.

28 *HNL*, p. 466. Dr Elizabeth Webby in subsequent discussion has reminded me that in the serial version Dawes's final name is Reichart Devine, an even clearer indication of Clarke's apotheosizing of Dawes as moral absolute. See *His Natural Life*, ed. S. Murray-Smith (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 909.

29 *What is Religion?*, p. 13.

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