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Marcus Clarke: Confronting Spectacle with Spectacle in *For the Term of His Natural Life*

While Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* is unquestionably a valuable contribution to Australian literature, his journalism career also deserves equal attention, particularly as an influential antecedent to the creation of his seminal text not only on a technical basis as John Conley details in "Marcus Clarke: The Romance of Reality", but also as a social platform. In "Marcus Clarke and the Society of the Spectacle: Reflections on Writing and Commodity Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Melbourne," Andrew McCann demonstrates how the "Peripatetic Philosopher"—one of Clarke's more successful journalistic endeavors—and several other selections reveal Clarke's critique of the colonial Melbourne society and its fascination with the spectacle, which Clarke both caters to and critiques in his novel.

One of McCann's points focuses on how the public interest in criminality correlates with urban boredom—a concept that's mirrored through a relationship between the tedious size of the novel and its escalation of the grotesque from the scandalous prologue to the tragic epilogue. Part of Clarke's journalistic aim, according to McCann, is to highlight the demoralizing effects of this societal interest in the grotesque:

“The public that craves ‘monstrosity in any shape’, as a way of tempering the monotony of quotidian existence in the capitalist metropolis, is apparently incapable of distinguishing other aspects of its cultural and moral life from the world of spectacular amusement. Accordingly, Clark writes, ‘the bricklayer who

goes to see a hanging or buys a “dying speech” to take home as a relish to his pipe, is only displaying another phase of that feeling which got Mahomet worshipped, Caesar crowned, or Tom Thumb patronized. The populace is equally kind to giants and dwarfs; it is only intelligent mediocrity that comes so badly off.”

Throughout the novel, Dawes develops an identity that revolves around his resistance to the system of demoralization within convict discipline, as seen in his choice to help, and later rescue, the group stranded on the island, including the cruel Maurice Frere, rather than take advantage of them or leave them at nature’s mercy.

Clarke’s concern of demoralizing effects and Dawes’s identity come together most effectively in the scene of Kirkland’s fatal flogging. Initially catering to the societal “lust for blood,” Clarke describes Kirkland’s punishment in graphic detail. By the twentieth lash, Dawes has to run his fingers through the cats twice, because they were “beginning to get clogged a little” (Clarke, Book 3 Chapter 15).

Michael Wilding in “Marcus Clarke: *His Natural Life*” points out that Clarke specifically “diverts attention [from Kirkland] to Dawes who has been doing the flogging” and Dawes’s subsequent torture when he refuses to flog Kirkland anymore. Instead, Dawes is flogged until “the agony forced from his labouring breast a hideous cry” (Clarke, Book 3 Chapter 15) after being mute for well past one hundred lashes. He “seem[s] to have abandoned his humanity” as North observes in “[Dawes’s] frightful outpouring of obscenity and blasphemy.” In other words, Dawes’s moral identity has been stripped away through spectacle, something he acknowledges when he’s later recovering in the hospital: “Throughout his long term of degradation he had, as yet, aided by the memory of his sacrifice and his love, preserved something of his self-respect, but he felt that he could not preserve it long” (Clarke, Book 3 Chapter 18).

If flogging is the spectacle that causes Dawes's inhuman outburst, it's worth noting which convict took over the whip—Gabbett, a central figure of spectacle in the novel primarily due to his cannibalism. However, Wilding argues that this depravity “is not innate but imposed upon him, by society, by the penal system” (Wilding), aligning neatly with Clarke's commentary. Just as societal forces “brutalized [Gabbett's] senses” (Wilding), Clarke suggests that the societal cycle of boredom and desire “indicates a kind of consciousness closely related to the degradation of mass cultural forms” (McCann).

Clarke's journalism arguably suggests this demoralization is atavistic in nature through his juxtaposition of barbaric history and contemporary criticism. McCann uses the example of a selection titled ‘Infant Wonders’ as a demonstration of how Clarke combined speculation “on reviving the violent, gladiatorial spectacles of antiquity ... to satisfy the public taste for sensation” (McCann) with contemporary images of entertainment—“the tobacco-smoke and clamour, and rustle of silks, and popping of corks, and shrill unnatural laughter” (McCann).

This technique of using juxtaposition to imply atavism generates a unique approach to the novel, considering the imperialist roots of the transportation system in particular. Again, Clarke uses barbaric history as his critical mirror. Just as colonial Melbourne was fascinated with the spectacle, their European ancestors were also fascinated by the spectacle, and in that day, imperialism was a popular source of sensation, best seen by the fad of imperialist “trophies,” such as monkeys that were stuffed and turned into lamps or rhinos that were turned into chairs. Furthermore, Clarke's intended audience retained European tastes—even Clarke's work has been compared to European styles such as Dickens—suggesting a connection to their ancestral colonizers.

To use this critical framework for Clarke's novel, one must consider Patrick Brantlinger's discussion of imperialism in "Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914." He specifies that one of the central themes of imperial Gothic is "'atavism'—psychological and social regression like Kurtz's 'going native' in [Joseph Conrad's] *Heart of Darkness*" (245). Of particular relevance, Brantlinger describes how "fictional atavisms can be matched by innumerable expressions of anxiety about backsliding by politicians and colonists doing the actual work of the empire" (247).

This perspective can be explored more fully in the novel through viewing the authority figures as colonizers and convicts as the colonized. Reflecting an imperialist attitude, the novel's constant sub-human descriptions of the convicts supports this interpretation, as exemplified by this exchange: "'You speak of them as if they were wild beasts,' [Meekin said.] 'So they are,' said Maurice Frere, calmly" (Clarke, Chapter 9 Book 3).

Maurice Frere in particular exemplifies the atavistic effects of imperialism on the colonizers through his "backsliding" language and his "theft" of the barbaric coracle. Consider how speech patterns reflects the 19th century class system:

"If I thort she was agoin' to throw us over, I'd cut her throat as soon as look at her!" snorts Gabbett savagely.

"Jack ud have a word in that," snuffles the Moocher; "and he's a curious cove to quarrel with."

"Well, stow yer gaff," grumbled Mr. Gabbett, "and let's have no more chaff. If we're for bizness, let's come to bizness."

"What are we to do now?" asked the Moocher. "Jack's on the sick list, and the gal won't stir a'thout him." (Clarke, Book 1 Chapter 7)

The convicts' rough language indicates a lack of education, a common characteristic among the lower class and the poor. These particular convicts later start a mutiny, which places them in the "lowest" class of convicts according to Book 2, Chapter 3:

“Seven classes of criminals were established in 1826, when the new barracks for prisoners at Hobart Town were finished ... the seventh were the refuse of this refuse—the murderers, bandits, and villains, whom neither chain nor lash could tame. They were regarded as socially dead.”

The convicts’ language as an indication of social status is also supported by a comparison to the upper-middle class dialogue of Rev. Meekin:

“Meekin smiled, as a gentlemanly martyr might have smiled. ‘The Lord’s work, dear leddies—the Lord’s work. I am but a poor labourer in the vineyard, toiling through the heat and burden of the day. ... I would rather have remained in England,’ continued Mr. Meekin, ... ‘but I felt it my duty not to refuse the offer made me through the kindness of his lordship. Here is a field, leddies—a field for the Christian pastor. They appeal to me, leddies, these lambs of our Church—these lost and outcast lambs of our Church.’” (Book 3, Chapter 1)

His extravagant description seems to retain the tell-tale “plummy” accent that is often associated with the 19th century upper-middle class and their desire to establish respectability comparable to the aristocrats.

Establishing these boundaries can give readers unique insight into Frere’s dialogue and thus his character. Frere is an established upper-middle class character—indeed, he was nearly an aristocrat if Sir Richard’s will had been altered before his untimely death—yet his speech features convict slang more than once, as seen in Book 3, Chapter 9: “‘If you mean, fake up that paper,’ returned Frere, unconsciously dropping into prison slang, ‘I’ll tell you. He had a Bible, I suppose, while he was writing?’” If the language of other characters is defined by class, Frere’s status becomes questionable. Furthermore, the narrator also suggests that Frere picked up on the slang to better understand his prisoners and use it to his advantage. As the story progresses, Frere is increasingly associated with animalistic descriptions; according to North’s diary, Frere resembles a “murderous animal” (Clarke, Book 4 Chapter 4) with an “animal appetite” (Clarke, Book 4 Chapter 1) By the end of the novel, it is hard to tell the difference between Frere and his “wild beasts.”

In addition, Frere's connection to the coracle highlights the atavism in his character. The text once again indicates ancestral barbarism, this time through the coracle, as Nicholas Burns outlines in "Receptacle or Reversal? Globalization Down Under in Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*":

“[Sylvia] has gotten this term from her *Child's History of England*, from which she reads this passage: ‘The Ancient Britons... were little more than barbarians. They painted their bodies with Woad ... and seated in their light coracles of skin stretched upon slender wooden frames, most have presented a wild and savage appearance.’ Clarke here makes the same reflective point about Roman Britain with which Conrad begins *Heart of Darkness*—that Britain was once barbarian”

Clarke suggests that “the economy of boredom and pleasure that informs culture-consumption thus emerges as a kind of atavism that violently subverts the assumptions of enlightenment progress” (McCann). Not only does the coracle reflect atavistic roots, but also Maurice Frere effectively “steals” the accomplishment from Dawes, reducing him to the same nature as the convicts.

If Maurice Frere is the metaphorical embodiment of Clarke's “colonizer” audience, their fascination with the grotesque is indeed “antithetical to rational discernment” (McCann) and bordering on atavism. In summary, McCann that Clarke strived “to unsettle the complacency of his readership by confronting it with this very fact” (McCann).

Works Cited

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