

AUSTIN CLARKE'S "TIRESIAS" AND THE *AISLING* TRADITION

by Ed Madden

*Burn Ovid with the rest . . .*

—Austin Clarke, "Penal Law" (*Collected Poems* 189)

*Is sexual desire a figuration of politics, or politics a displacement of sexual desire?*

—Adrian Frazier, "Queering the Irish Renaissance" (10)

**I**n the long erotic poem "Tiresias," published in 1971, Austin Clarke attempts a number of simultaneous poetic, historiographic, and sexual projects. The poem is his attempt to rewrite Ovid and to revise T. S. Eliot in an overwrought poetic celebration of the erotic, one of what Thomas Kinsella has called Clarke's "wickedly glittering narratives" (and what the *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* calls Clarke's "exuberantly sexual, even pornographic" last poems).<sup>1</sup> The poem offers a poetic representation of history—or more properly historiography—as a collaborative male project, produced in the collaboration between the blind male prophet, Tiresias, and his scribe, Chelos, a scholar and the former lover of Tiresias when Tiresias was female. The first half of the poem explores female sexuality in the story of Tiresias's life as a woman named Pyrrha<sup>2</sup>; the second half explores a male collaboration towards the construction of a historical vision. That is, the first half of the poem is about Chelos the randy student making love with Tiresias as a woman, the second is about Chelos the scholar and scribe making history with Tiresias as a man. Ostensibly, then, a poem about sexual pleasure, "Tiresias" is also a poem about cultural production. Although apparently a celebration and exploration of heterosexual pleasure, as Clarke suggests in his footnote condemning the misogyny of Eliot,<sup>3</sup> the poem also offers a narration of homosexual panic, and, indeed, it is that panic that effects the shift in the poem from female sexuality to male historiography.<sup>4</sup>

It has become almost a commonplace in recent criticism of Clarke's work to note his celebrations of the erotic, so much so that Gregory Schrimmer, writing of the "conflict between human sexuality and spiritual discipline" in Clarke's early work, would characterize the central vision of Clarke's poetry in general: "Human sexuality is not to be repressed by censure, nor sublimated by the imagination[.]. . . it is, rather, an intrinsic part of human nature, and is to be accepted, and celebrated, as such" (20). Yet, when the homoerotic sometimes appears in Clarke's work, it is clear that his vision is not quite as inclusive as Schrimmer might suggest, since the homoerotic is marked by anxiety, panic, flight, and suppression. Not only is the homosexual implicitly suppressed by the heterosexual imperatives of Clarke's narrative in the poem "Tiresias," but the homoerotic is explicitly sublimated into the work of the imagination, the homosocialized productions of artistic and historiographic endeavors that depend upon but suppress homoeroticism.

In "Tiresias," the movement between the homoerotic and the heterosexual that

Clarke represents must be tied to the transfers of poetic and psychic (and sexual) energies illustrated in the poem, transfers from the erotic to the historiographic, the romantic to the cultural, sex to narration—and these must be further tied to the very narrative incidents of metamorphosis the poem represents, from male to female to male, from vision to blindness, from sexual trauma to psychic insight. In order to address the rhetorical and poetic means by which Clarke effects these various transformations, I want to explore briefly in this essay an aspect of the poem completely ignored by critics, an aspect that links the sexual and the cultural inextricably: I want to examine the poem as a revision of the *aisling* or vision poem, the Irish poetic genre of eroticized nationalism and politicized eroticism, a genre that collapses history and prophecy into the metaphors and hyperboles of erotic vision.<sup>5</sup> If Clarke's poem locates homosexual panic at the heart of homosocial historiographic and poetic cultural productions, how must we rethink the *aisling*? What are the implications for the genre if the *aisling* is not simply a poetic narrative of the vision of Ireland figured as a woman, but also a narrative of sex changes, homosexual panic, and the repeated phantasmatic displacement of sexual desire through male bodies imagined female and female bodies refigured male. What happens if homosexual panic becomes the psychic and figural means by which romantic vision becomes historical vision? In other words, what happens if the *aisling* is queered?

By the word *queer* I mean to suggest both the semiotic strangeness and the sexual deviance that may be registered in Clarke's Tiresian version of the *aisling*, and the inevitable imbrication of the sexual with the rhetorical and cultural, an imbrication inevitable in both a Tiresian poetic and an *aisling* poem.<sup>6</sup> To call the poem *queer* is to echo Michael Warner's definition of the queer as that which resists the broader fields of the socially normative as well as the more specific deviance from the heterosexual.<sup>7</sup> A number of queer writers and theorists have drawn attention to the ways a dominant cultural trope may be inhabited by deviant sexual potential—whether through queer authorial appropriations or queer cultural reading practices.<sup>8</sup> Even if, on the one hand, Tiresias offers a trope of incredible cultural power, so central to Western culture that Tiresias may be connected to almost every major ancient Greco-Roman myth, and a trope so obviously in the service of the heterosexual and patriarchal that some critics have dismissed Ovid's story of Tiresias as a bad and perhaps misogynistic joke, on the other hand the figure of Tiresias has become in twentieth-century culture a kind of cultural shorthand for sexual variance. Similarly, if the *aisling* offers a genre and a cultural formula of nationalist sentiment as romantic yearning, in Clarke's poem the heterosexualized project of cultural nationalism is always already haunted by the homoerotic, and by the poet's complicated anxieties about passivity, penetrability, and femininity. That is not to say that Clarke himself was a repressed homosexual, though homoerotic anxieties are specifically linked to Irish cultural nationalism in Clarke's memoirs.<sup>9</sup> In queering the *aisling* formula, Clarke's "Tiresias" figures—in the sexual ambivalences and anxieties that necessarily inflect the Tiresian voice, body, and tale—the *aisling*'s sexualized production of cultural meaning, and perhaps simultaneously represents the very destabilizing terms of its own sexual-rhetorical construction.

Poets fight for Ireland  
 The whole world over:  
 For Ireland's a woman  
 And God is her lover.

—Anna Wickham, "Ireland" (316)

Clarke wrote three poems explicitly entitled "Aisling," and many other poems utilize the aisling's combination of erotic, political, and poetic desires. In the first "Aisling," published in 1929, the poet speaks to a woman he meets wandering on Mount Brandon, a woman whose hair he describes as all "gleam and glitter," and a woman he compares to women from both Irish and classical mythologies, as is common in the traditional aisling (*CP* 173-5).<sup>10</sup> Although she speaks of strangers leaving and the pleasure of company gathering in her house, she refuses to answer the poet's questions about his own vocation, leaving him in the morning cold and wandering like the young man in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," or the romantically and politically forlorn poet of the aisling tradition. In his 1963 "Aisling" (*CP* 299-300), written after his visit to Mt. Parnassus, Clarke explicitly echoes an aisling by Egan O'Rahilly, and in his own notes to the poem, he cites Daniel Corkery's 1924 book on 18th-century Munster, *The Hidden Ireland*, and specifically his "wonderful chapter" on the aisling or vision poem.<sup>11</sup> Finally, in his 1968 "Aising," Clarke echoes much of the traditional formula, yet he also suggests the more explicitly sexual direction his poetry will soon take. The woman, whom he imagines as one of the muses, Deirdre, and the traditional "sky-woman" of the aisling, stands naked before him, and in the course of the poem she explicitly removes the hand that covers her genitalia, a revelation Clarke equates with the utterance of her name (*CP* 445-6).

In the poem "Tiresias," it is an encounter between Tiresias and the goddess Athena bathing that most clearly suggests that Clarke intends the poem as an echo of the aisling tradition. This strange meeting between the naked goddess and the soon-to-be-blinded prophet is the last in a series of erotic encounters in the poem, sexual encounters repeatedly inflected by historiographic vision, and it is one of the two myths from classical mythology that account for the origin of Tiresias's prophetic power. The most familiar myth of Tiresias's power, of course, is the famous story from Ovid—the story of his sexchanges from male to female and back again, his judgment in the Olympian court between the relative sexual pleasures of the male and the female, the blinding of Tiresias by Hera (for stating that women have greater pleasure than men in sex), and Zeus's granting a gift of prophecy as recompense for the blinding. This myth, in fact, provides the opening frame for Clarke's poem. But late in the poem, Clarke offers the alternative myth of origin for Tiresian power, an alternative he reimagines as an aisling. The description of Tiresias wandering along a mountainside and coming upon a shaded pond echoes the formulaic descriptions in the aisling of the poet wandering along a river or a mountain. In the ancient Greco-Roman version of the incident, Tiresias is hunting when he comes upon Athena bathing. Because of his vision of this taboo sexual information—his viewing of the goddess's naked body—he is blinded, but later granted a gift of prophecy at the request of Tiresias's mother, Chariclo.

In Clarke's version of the myth, he dispenses with the mother character and sexualizes the scene more explicitly, as in the 1968 aisling, localizing the poetic vision at the

genitalia of the goddess. Tiresias gazes at the body of the woman, who is wading shoreward until he can see “below her navel an auburn/ Dazzle,” a sight that leaves him “Faint with desire” (CP 532). This poem continues the celebratory eroticism that characterizes Clarke’s later work, and also offers a figure of the female temptress as “bright temptation” (literalized in the “dazzle” of her wet pubic hair). Such figures suffuse Clarke’s poetic canon, perhaps most famously in the often cited 1938 poem, “The Straying Student,” in which a young clerical scholar is tempted away from his studies by a “vision” of a woman who banishes shame with her laugh (CP 188-9). Such bright or dazzling female figures also repeat the representation of Ireland allegorized as a glittering woman, or as Clarke writes in the poem “Eire,” the “Lady of the bright coils and curlings” (CP 446). That Clarke situates all the “gleam and glitter” of the traditional female vision’s hair specifically at the pudendum illustrates his quite explicit relocation of the traditional nationalist romanticism within a more literally sexual tropology. Yet the female is still a goddess, and she is still the ethereal figure of the *aisling*: Clarke calls her a “sky-woman,” the traditional *aisling* term for the female figure, the *spéirbhean*.

In “Tiresias” Clarke seems to intend a psychoanalytic revision of the genre, since Athena seems to figure a feminine version of the male self. His Tiresias strangely misrecognizes Athena as Pyrrha, the name of Tiresias himself when he lived as a woman. “O why had/ Pyrrha not recognized me?” he asks himself—as if it made sense that the figure of his past self as a woman would recognize his current male self. He steps out of hiding with his erection leading the way: “With open arms, I came out,” writes Clarke, “Pulse sang. . . purple knob impatient. Body/ Wanted its other self” (CP 532). Since Clarke represents Tiresias’s sexual desire as a desire for his other (formerly female) self, he suggests that the figure is a projection, and leaves the poem open to a rather pedantic and pedestrian Jungian interpretation, Athena-Pyrrha as Tiresias’s anima figure, which he must recognize and incorporate as such in order to achieve wholeness and wisdom. In the poem, Athena blinds Tiresias into his visionary insight, and then adds, “Yet because you have shown to a goddess such stout admiration,/ Take the gift of prophecy and this seemlier staff to be your guide” (CP 533). Athena replaces the erection in Tiresias’s hand, his “stout admiration,” with a staff, representative of desire transcended by or incorporated into divine wisdom. Sexual desire may guide Tiresias to this figure of the past, of the feminine, and of the psychic, but it is not the means by which wisdom will be achieved; only in its refiguring can Tiresias achieve the vision of history that follows, a vision encompassing human history from the Trojan War through the atomic bomb. That is, only in the transformation of the feminine, interior and anterior—all collapsed into Tiresias’s memory and projection of his female self—can the exteriorized masculine (that “purple knob”) predict the future.

But that this moment ends not in some kind of psychic wisdom but produces instead historical vision suggests that a Jungian reading would be both inadequate and inaccurate. The poem echoes an earlier poem, “From a Diary of Dreams,” published in 1963 with Clarke’s second “Aisling” (as a diary of dreams, it is also a kind of *aisling* poem). In that erotic poem, the image of “The goddess striding naked” is an image of the unconscious as both sexual and primal religious sensibility, what Clarke calls the “under-mind . . . our semi-private part” (CP 259). Yet that poem also offers a problematic prefiguring of the staff that replaces the erection. The poem opens and closes with personified dreams who wait at corners under gas lamps and leer at the speaker as they expose themselves at urinals. These

prostitutes and pervers are prone to “purloin my blackthorn stick,” Clarke writes; they may take his phallic staff away from him, leaving him, apparently, only with his less seemly and literal penis (*CP* 258, 264).

If we follow this interpretive trajectory further, we might note that in Clarke’s memoir, *Twice Round the Black Church*, published the year before in 1962, the anti-clerical Clarke links prostitutes and “touchers” (his term for old men who expose themselves in public places), in that both are rounded up by the increasingly Catholic state (164). Furthermore, he also links his Irish cultural nationalism, and his interest in the Irish language, to the prosthetic, the illicit, the shameful, and the “queer”—that is, the sexually and semantically strange. He recalls with pleasure the “slightly illegal” nationalist agenda behind language learning at his Jesuit school, remembering the way students volunteered for the classes “shamefacedly” (*Twice Round the Black Church* 167). He also associates the language with deviations and deformities of both physical body and body politic. His first instructor has a wooden leg and possibly a glass eye, a second has an artificial arm hidden by a glove. A third appeared normal, but disappeared from school, fleeing to South America. “By this time,” writes Clarke, “we had all concluded that there was something very queer about the Irish language” (168).

Of course, “queer” does not necessarily denote sexual deviance in this passage. It is a word Clarke uses for the odd and the contextually disconcerting.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Clarke finds Irish odd in its “incantatory power” and the perpetual use of rural and agricultural subject matter in the lessons (168). However, one cannot escape the possible association of semiotic with sexual deviance, since the second teacher also “made strange clucking noises which had nothing to do with Gaelic” and he “at times pinched us behind the blackboard” (168). More significantly, only pages before his discussion of the illicit and shameful pleasures of learning Irish, Clarke relates a tale of illicit sexual pleasure registered in a phrase of schoolbook Irish. He tells of an older student at the school he attended, briefly, in Limerick, who briefly courts him by tucking sweets in his pockets, later inviting him to the school washroom where he offers a sexual proposition.<sup>13</sup> Clarke writes, “There [in the washroom], awkward and ill-at-ease, he muttered a mysterious sentence to me. I have never forgotten it for it might have been a literal translation from our Irish phrase book, *tabhair dham spúnóg*” (164). The phrase literally means “give me a spoon,” suggesting either sentimental spooning as lovers, or a more literal sense of nestling bodies, perhaps even an invitation to anal or intercrural intercourse. “Frightened” by the phrase, Clarke hurries away, relieved that the boy does not follow him. However, spooning is also a particular kind of soft hit in that most British of sports, cricket,<sup>14</sup> and in the perverse and metonymic logic that governs this memoir, Clarke immediately points out that the priests encouraged the boys to play cricket and rugby to work off their potentially disruptive sexual energy. Irish, then, seems to register illicit sexual pleasure; British culture—embodied in sports—the displacement or sublimation of the sexual. Yet such is not the case. Clarke then mentions the minor scandal that rocked the school when the rugby captains were caught in bed together, moving on to the outbreaks of “unnatural vice” in Dublin parks, and the rounding up of the prostitutes and touchers (164), the connected groups that open and close “From a Diary of Dreams.”

Clarke’s collocation of the sexual and cultural finds expression elsewhere in the memoir when he notes that Dublin peasants, associating the history of Parnell’s adultery with the phallic memorial monument had begun to refer to their penises by the name Parnell:

“What did you say she held?” a priest asks. “Me parnell, Father” (127-8). And Clarke describes his sexual intercourse with a Protestant girl as both an echo of the mythical motif of Europa, since he takes her from behind, and as a politico-sexual “Act of Union,” prefiguring Heaney’s sexual rendering of the political in his poem of the same name in *North* (1975).<sup>15</sup> Most critics focus on Clarke’s first confession as the foundational psychosexual moment in his literary biography, the moment from which may be traced his antipathy towards the Catholic church and his celebration of the physical and the sexual.<sup>16</sup> Clarke describes a harrowing first confession at age seven, a confession during which the priest—obsessed with the sixth commandment and “seminal weakness”—forced Clarke to confess to masturbation, an act he had yet to perform (*Twice Round the Block to Church* 131-3). However, if the conjunction of Clarke’s frank eroticism and anti-Catholicism may be traced to a forced confession of masturbation, anxieties about sexual identity and homosexuality seem intimately connected to the study of the Irish language and Irish cultural nationalism.

Reconsidering the encounter of Tiresias and Athena in these contexts, and returning to the revision of the aísling performed by the poem, we must also remember that this encounter is only one of a series of erotic encounters in the poem: it is the last of three explicitly aísling-like encounters with the female figure of Pyrrha, each rendered successively figural rather than literal. The first such encounter is represented in the two sexual episodes between the young history scholar Chelos and the young woman Pyrrha (Tiresias after his first sex change at the onset of adolescence, when he struck the coupling snakes). Chelos first finds Pyrrha asleep in his hut and rapes her; when she returns later painted and jewelled, he asks, in true aísling fashion, “Are you a goddess?” before they proceed to more leisurely lovemaking (*CP* 525). If the revision of sexual violence into an aísling vision is troubling, the second encounter is also deeply problematic, and indeed the Athena tale seems a prophylactic and metaleptic revision of the troubling second encounter.

Years after the youthful sexual episodes—and after Pyrrha has moved away, married, given birth, and been transformed back into a man—Chelos encounters Tiresias in the woods. Thinking him still the female Pyrrha, he attempts, again, sexual relations (or sexual assault) with his vision, only to discover that his former lover is now a man. “Drawing her skirts up quietly,” Chelos says, “I saw her auburn/ Curlets. Modesty could not conceal the male pudenda” (*CP* 530). Those auburn curls are echoed, only two pages later in the description of Athena, suggesting a psychosexual connection between the two projections of femininity, written in the dazzling pubic hair of the genitalized aísling. “Mocked by her metamorphosis,” Chelos experiences sexual confusion and briefly considers anal intercourse, groping her “unchanged haunches” and anus and thinking of Ganymede, the young boy Zeus abducted for his cupbearer and “catamite,” the archaic word Clarke uses for the passive recipient of anal sex. But Chelos cannot perform sex, since the woman he desires is “Within reach, yet unpossessible except by perverted/ Desire.” He cannot perform the act required by his own phantasmatic vision, though he runs his hands across his/her buttocks. To sodomize Tiresias-Pyrrha would be to make him into a woman, the woman he once was and the woman “within reach,” another version of mocking metamorphosis, yet the social injunctions against sodomy as “perverted” disallow the very act he desires.

In this scene, the female body or femininity has been mapped symbolically onto a male body; Tiresias—the voice of most of this long narrative poem—remains strangely silent and passive throughout this episode, subject to the projections (literal and psychic) of

Chelos. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of the policing of the boundaries of the homosexual and homosocial, the erasure of the female body in homosocial bonding precipitates homosexual panic, the creation and policing of a disjuncture between the homosocial and the homoerotic. In Clarke's poem, homosexual panic will precipitate homosocial bonding, but it also precipitates a brief displacement of desire through the heterosexualizing of the homoerotic—rendered phantasmatically through Chelos's focus on the anus rather than the genitals of Tiresias, his sodomitical fantasies figured first through the myth of Ganymede, then imagined as a sexual metamorphosis, the male made female in his/her passivity and penetrability. One might recall Matthew Arnold's characterization of the Irish as an "essentially feminine" race; if this homoerotic encounter is an aisling, the potential feminization of Tiresias resonates with traditional associations of the Irish and the feminine. Tiresias remains strangely silent and passive throughout this episode.

In the scene as described by Clarke, instead of his penis, Chelos takes up his pen, becoming the scribe rather than the lover of Tiresias, suggesting that his sodomitical desire has been sublimated into writing. Tiresias begins to dictate his visions to Chelos, and Chelos replies, "Pen is lifted" (CP 534), a pun that surely echoes, even as it disavows, the erect penis lifted in their encounter, a pun that rewrites eroticism as collaboration, with a castrating space, an absence inscribed into the very presence of the erected penis.<sup>17</sup> Homoeroticism and homosexual panic are thus displaced into homosocial cultural collaboration, and as a result poetic vision, political polemic, and historiographic cultural production are all, at some level, rendered as sexual albeit sublimated acts among men. This scene perhaps also illustrates Sigmund Freud's bizarre analysis of urination, homoeroticism, and sublimation in *Civilization and Its Discontents*—the rather infamous footnote about men pissing on a fire in which Freud suggests that the repression and sublimation of the homoerotic is necessary for the production of civilization and culture.<sup>18</sup> The narrative of Clarke's poem enacts that very repression and sublimation as the grounds for cultural production, the homoerotic transformed by the historiographic.

One might recall Frank O'Connor's notorious comment in a review of Mary Lavin that "The literature of the Irish Literary Renaissance is a peculiarly masculine affair. . . . the work of men of action disguised as men of thought, or of men of thought disguised as men of action," but not, it seems, the work of women (389).<sup>19</sup> Clarke's version is the work of men of erection disguised as men of thought, sex transformed by narration. The aisling tradition constructs both poetic production and nationalist sentiment as *romantic* impulses for the nation embodied as a woman; as Declan Kiberd has pointed out, the woman is not an autonomous person in this tradition, she functions as a "site of contest" (362). Similarly, in Clarke's poem the feminine is a projective and figural function, exchanged and displaced among men. Clarke renders in psychosexual terms the en-gendering of the tradition: the female is only a symbol, a rhetorical figure, a feminized projection exchanged among men in order to facilitate a nationalism rendered in heterosexual romantic terms.

That the first two stories Tiresias tells Chelos—after he drops his penis and takes up instead his pen—are the tales of his sexual transformation back into manhood and his blinding encounter with Athena surely render suspicious the Athena aisling, especially given the episode's apparent psychosexual revision of the homoerotic encounter. a revision marked in the chromatic and genitalized echo of auburn pubic hair, the site of sexual sameness and difference—the absence of the penis reinstalled in Chelos's in-scripting of the

Tiresian narration where its presence had “mocked” Chelos in his own version of sexual encounter. The transcendence of the Tiresian erection by the Athenian staff of prophesy is itself a troubling echo Chelos’s own replacement of the two too visible erections with the lifted pen; the narrative exigencies of homosexual panic require a story of a pen that supplants his penis and the story of a blinded man who would see neither his own nor his companion’s erection. This sexual information—the presence of erection during a homosocial encounter—seems more taboo than the nakedness of the Athenian body in Clarke’s hellenized *aisling*. Both men must be made blind to the penises they have seen erected between them—one by narrating the stories of how he became both blind and male (necessary given his almost transformation, by being penetrated, into female), the other by first reimagining the Tiresian body, then by narrating the story of narration, substituting the practice of telling tales, *aislings*, and visions for the act of sodomy he desires but refuses.<sup>20</sup> If the third Pyrrhic encounter seemed to be an encounter with a phantasmatic figure of Tiresias’s own projected femininity and passivity onto a personification of wisdom, it must be inflected by the scene it echoes down to the color of the pubic hair, a scene of heterosexual projection collapsed into homosexual panic, and homosexual panic writ large as the grounds of cultural production. The *aisling* figuration of Ireland as woman must be indicted as a phantasmatic projection of homosocial—if not actually homoerotic—nationalism.

As if to further solidify the heterosexualization of the culture, Clarke ends the poem with the voice of Areta, Tiresias’s wife, who interrupts his historiographic work with Chelos to offer him a maternal cup of warm milk (*CP* 540). If the *aisling* vision is to disappear, according to the generic formula, the men—nationalists or poets—are not to be left holding their pen(ise)s in their hands, staring at that which “modesty could not conceal.” In the context of Clarke’s poem, which offers itself as an allegory for the production of culture, the heterosexual domestic unit replaces the homosocial bonding of cultural history, further disavowing the anxieties and desires of the homoerotic inscribed at the rhetorical center of cultural production. So Athena as the Pyrrhic body must replace Tiresias as a Pyrrhic sacrifice, subsume him-her and thus allow Tiresias, within the narration he and Chelos construct as an alternative (or an alibi), to refigure his anxieties about passivity, femininity, and penetrability into figures of his own hyperbolic erection and masculinity (the erection that literally leads him into wisdom) or into psychologized versions of his fears of femininity (Athena as *anima* or other self). Fears of passivity and penetrability—collapsed into figures of femininity—are thus projected, refigured, transcended.

The Tiresian *aisling* may represent, then, an anxiety about Irish cultural nationalism that Clarke portrays elsewhere in his work as illicit, prosthetic, homoerotic, both semiotically and sexually queer. The poet-prophet projects his own passivity onto a female figure, who then renders sexual or political impotence as poetic power (just as the Tiresian tale renders sexual variance as a ground for prophetic power). Tiresias thus strangely echoes the status of the poet in the traditional *aisling*, who may desire Ireland allegorized as woman, but is unable to rescue her or sexually or politically achieve her. She awaits a true mate and saviour, whose desire the poet may only mirror; he produces instead the art that renders her desirable, himself desirous. What the poem offers, then, is an *aisling* in which the suppression or transcendence of the homoerotic—or more precisely a blindness to and rhetorical reconstruction of the homoerotic—is necessary for the creation of a cultural

history.

## NOTES

1. See Kinsella (257), Welch (101). Hereafter, all references to Clarke's *Collected Poems* will be abbreviated as *CP*.
2. The name Pyrrha may refer to Pyrrha and Deucalion, the classical equivalents of Noah and his wife, saved from a great flood by Prometheus. But the name more likely suggests Pyrrhus (or Neoptolemus), son of Achilles and murderer of Priam. He was called Pyrrhus, according to Smith, either because of his fair hair, or because his father Achilles, while disguised as a girl, had used the name Pyrrha. Further there is the Pyrrhus from whom we get the term "pyrrhic victory," a victory gained at too great a cost. These multiple associations in the name suggest the naming of Pyrrha is both disguise and sacrifice; the son assumes the father's patronymic femininity (Achilles/Pyrrha/Pyrrhus), the female excluded, or appearing in mimicry. Further, Achilles is known for his homoerotic devotion to Patroclus. So through the name Pyrrha, homosocial bonds (and the repeated invocations of loss and sacrifice which mark those bonds) are re-inscribed in Clarke's maternal narrative through the giving of a name.
3. As a note to his "Tiresias," Clarke insists that T. S. Eliot expressed "his own Puritanism" in his depiction of Tiresias in "The Waste Land." In response to that depiction and "in our new permissive age," Clarke writes, "I have tried to present a cheerful account of the experiences of Tiresias as wife and mother" (see *CP* 557, note to "Tiresias"). In the original publication of the poem in book form (Bridge Press, 1971), Clarke included the note as a prefatory paragraph to the poem, lending his statement additional weight as a guide to reading the poem—a guide stressing the poem's revision of Eliot and its "cheerful" celebration of female sexual pleasure. (That the note is somewhat disingenuous is evident when one considers that the poem offers practically no illustration of Tiresias's experiences as a mother, and his/her experience as a wife is decidedly not pleasurable; it is his/her premarital adolescent sexual experiences with Chelos that Clarke focuses on as pleasurable, and it is in those scenes that he describes in hyperbolic—indeed almost laughable—detail the dynamics of female orgasm.
4. By homosexual panic, I refer to the social structuring by which homosociality helps maintain social order but only in so far as actual homosexual acts are criminalized, forbidden, abjected, or erased. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, "homosexual panic" primarily refers to the threat of blackmail, which she characterizes as a "private, psychologized form" of the social control of the homosocial/homosexual continuum through vulnerability to homophobic blackmail — "a structural residue of terrorist potential, of *blackmailability*, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia" (89, emphasis hers). In the later book *Epistemology of the Closet*, she enlarges the definition to take into account the legal/judicial use of the term, "homosexual panic" being a defense used in court to prevent or lighten the sentencing of those who commit anti-gay bias crimes (gay-bashing, assault, murder), a defense based on the "assumption that hatred of homosexuals is so private and so atypical a phenomenon in this culture as to be classifiable as an accountability-reducing illness." Sedgwick notes that the defense is so widely accepted that it in fact proves just the opposite, that hatred of homosexuals is "even more public, more typical, hence harder to find any leverage against than hatred of other disadvantaged groups" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 19-21). The current controversies in our nation over adding sexual orientation to hate crimes legislation, and the recent murders of gay men in Wyoming and Alabama—supposedly murdered because they propositioned the straight perpetrators, who panicked—suggest the force this social structuring still maintains in our culture.
5. On the ailing, see Wall (31), Welch (9), Kiberd (210, 317-18, 362).
6. By a "Tiresian" poetic I denote the linkage of sexual variance and poetic or performative power, as figured in the Ovidian tale, in which prophetic power replaces sexual trauma and sexual knowledge—and as figured in such texts as T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," in which Tiresias's power as poetic persona is linked to his transsexualism (his having been both male and female) and his hermaphroditism ("old man with wrinkled dug"). The Tiresian may provide a site of both discursive and counterdiscursive significance, a trope through which sexual deviance may be rhetorically elided and contained, or through which sexual variance may itself become a site of discursive power.
7. See Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (especially xxvi-xxvii).
8. For example, one might cite Jonathan Dollimore's examination of the "perverse dynamic," Lee Edelman's collocation of the rhetorical and sexual in "homographesis," or Earl Jackson's analysis of the cultural practice of "double articulation," in which a writer may use a heteronormative cultural code to articulate homosexual

- desires. Although these various readings of doubleness in the imbrication of the sexual and the textual are not exactly compatible, they all suggest primarily that the codes and symbols of heteronormativity—of the heterosexual as the culturally normative—may be underwritten by, dependent upon, problematically driven by, perhaps even appropriable to constructions of the abnormal and deviant.
9. Samuel Beckett implies sexual deviance in his caricature of Clarke as the alcoholic homosexual “Austin Ticklepenny” in *Murphy*, which W. J. McCormack reads as an expression of literary enmity and the modernist violent rejection of preceding cultural movements, figured here in psychological, literary, and explicitly sexual terms. (See McCormack’s “Austin Clarke: The Poet as Scapegoat of Modernism.”)
  10. Unless otherwise noted, poems will be cited from the 1974 *Collected Poems*.
  11. See Clarke’s note in *Later Poems* (91). In the collection of essays *Poetry in Modern Ireland*, Clarke implies that Corkery’s book provided the impulse for his experimentations with the aisling form (43).
  12. In *Twice Round the Black Church*, the “queer little grubs” in a honeycomb augment Clarke’s suspicion, as a city boy, of raw nature (67-8). In *A Penny in the Clouds*, people may have a “queer taste in music” (20), or receive “queer looks” when accosted by the police for suspected political dissent (158). And a drunken fool or *amadann* in the Gaeltacht is only a “queer fellow” (145)—“queer fellow” according to the OED a phrase denoting strangeness, used especially in Ireland.
  13. The city of Limerick is itself figured as the washroom writ large, a city of overflowing public toilets and “cloacal darkness” (158).
  14. According to Michael Rundell in *The Dictionary of Cricket*, to “spoon” is “to hit the ball high in the air without much force, especially as a result of a mistimed stroke” (178). It perhaps also worth pointing out that Irishness itself carries a perverse connotation in cricket slang, since in Australian cricket slang an “Irish swing” denotes the “movement of the ball in the air in a direction opposite to what one would expect” (98).
  15. Interestingly, Irish-American writers Sean Kelly and Rosemary Rogers connect heterosexual anal intercourse with Irishness in the list of common figures of speech they cite in a popular survey of Irish culture. The “Irish way,” denotes heterosexual anal intercourse, they say, because of a 1990 case in which “an Irishman was sentenced to two years in prison for ‘sodomizing’ his wife” (75). Anal intercourse obviously offers a form of nonprocreative sex in a predominantly Catholic country, but the figure of speech suggest that the perversity is linked to the ethnic identity, not simply to a resistance to procreative sexual norms.
  16. See, for example, Schrimmer (8-9).
  17. After the account of sexual panic, what Tiresias dictates to Chelos is “what is/ Left of my wandersome story from your last punctum” (531), “punctum” suggesting both penetration and the act of writing—or more precisely, Chelos’s writing provides a performative replacement for the physical penetration it supplants.
  18. Describing the control of fire as one of the “first acts of civilization” (37), Freud notes: “It is as though primal man had the habit, when he came in contact with fire, of satisfying an infantile desire connected with it, by putting it out with a stream of his urine.” Characterizing the tongues of flame as phallic, he continues, “Putting out fire by micturating . . . was therefore a kind of sexual act with a male, an enjoyment of sexual potency in a homosexual competition. The first person to renounce this desire and spare the fire was able to carry it off with him and subdue it to his own use. By damping down the fire of his own sexual excitation, he had tamed the natural force of fire. This great cultural conquest was thus the reward for his renunciation of instinct” (37 n.1).
  19. Thus O’Connor opens a review of the work of Mary Lavin, one of the strangest reviews in his anthology of short fiction *The Lonely Voice* (1963). Commenting on Lavin’s “The Patriot Son,” the only story of Lavin’s that addresses Irish political conflict explicitly, O’Connor finds in it a subversion of both gender and genre. The point of view is “too exclusively feminine,” which so subverts the narrative that a reader might sympathize with the effeminized and sensitive male rather than the masculinist republican rebel, finding “the mammy’s boy is a far better type than the revolutionary” (389-90).
  20. The phallus as psychosexual cultural signifier only functions when veiled (Lacan, *Ecrits* 322-23).

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