

# “Oh, You’re Cutting My Bowels Out!”: Sexual Unspeakability in Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life*

DAMIEN BARLOW  
La Trobe University

For one month during the summer of 1877, the “Vagabond”—the alias of journalist John Stanley James—became an “embryo civil servant” dispensing medicine at Melbourne’s Pentridge Prison Hospital (James 84). The purpose of James’s subterfuge lay in his desire to expose whom or what was incarcerated in the state of Victoria’s modern, and supposedly enlightened, carceral archipelago. The criminal milieu that James found housed within Pentridge was heavily marked by an almost unspeakable, and only just forgettable, history of transportation. Despite an initial willingness to strip back the bluestone walls for the eager consumption of the middle-class *Argus* readers, James becomes coy and protective when confronted with the existence of same-sex desires. As part of a paradoxical strategy to speak the unspeakable, James employs the authorial signature of “Mr Marcus Clarke” and the sexual notoriety of Clarke’s novel, *His Natural Life* (1870-72/1874), as euphemisms for sodomy and other non-normative sexual acts and desires between incarcerated men:

For mixing freely as the patients do there, the incipient criminal gets depraved by contact and conversation with the hardened sinners who have graduated at Norfolk Island. Nor is that the worst; at Pentridge there still remains a vestige of those offences which, in these columns, I scarcely dare hint at, but which Mr Marcus Clarke boldly alludes to in *His Natural Life*. The discovery of this, and of a horrible “ring”, was most revolting to me, and I can never sufficiently express my detestation of the damnable system which allows comparatively innocent youths to be mixed up with wretches perpetually sinning against God and man. (91)

“The Vagabond” was not alone in mobilising Clarke and his novel as sexual euphemisms. Popular tabloids, most notably the Sydney-based *Truth*, continued this discursive practice with increased vigour in their own accounts of the contemporary colonial prison system. An 1891 article—descriptively titled “Our Gaol System. Sodom and Gomorrah’s Sins. Revolting Enormities.

Unnatural and Unspeakable Crimes”—claimed that male prisoners were being “subjected to an existence such as that to which Marcus Clarke describes young Kirkland as being subjected to” (3). In 1896, the *Truth* reduced the sexual euphemism simply to an authorial signature: “there is no reason to be prudish over a matter at which Marcus Clarke plainly hints” (“Gaol Horrors” 3).

This perverse sexual reputation of *His Natural Life* rests primarily on the infamy of Clarke’s portrayal of the gang rape and subsequent fatal flogging of the young convict Kirkland. The notoriety of Clarke’s somewhat brief, but memorably visceral representation of Kirkland’s dismal fate, has haunted the text and unnerved readers ever since its first publication. For example, London’s *Saturday Review* in 1875 protested:

The incidents of convict life which are described grow more and more repulsive as the book goes on, until all bounds are overstepped in the description of the flogging of a prisoner, in which every detail is insisted upon with a horrible fidelity. No kind of excuse can be found for the brutality of this passage. Yet worse in another way, however, is that part of the book just before this which indicates Kirkland’s experiences when thrown among his fellow convicts [. . .] If [Clarke] thought that the former existence of the abominations which he describes or hints at called for some record as a matter of warning, he should have embodied their history in anything rather than the pages of a novel. (qtd. in Hergenhan “Contemporary” 53)

However, Clarke’s sexualised representations of convict life were generally greeted with silence, rendered unspeakable. Laurie Hergenhan notes the *Saturday Review* was the only contemporary response to make any reference to the sexual “abominations” of the convict barracks (“Contemporary” 53). Similarly, Elizabeth Webby’s critical discussion of various adaptations of *His Natural Life* reveals an unsurprising history of sanitising or simply removing Kirkland’s gang rape (20).

Since the 1960s, historians and literary critics of the novel have been more willing to acknowledge and discuss the sexual violence inflicted on Kirkland and have (quite rightly) accused Matthew Gabbett of being the chief rapist (Argyle, Robson, Wilding). However, there has also been a general tendency to limit critical discussion of Clarke’s textual exploration of the “sexual horrors” of transportation to Kirkland’s sexually violent encounter with Gabbett (notable exceptions include Argyle and Henderson). Whether intentional or not, such containment has served to avoid the ways in which *His Natural Life* thematically presents more complex and potentially more subversive representations of non-normative sexual desires than the image of Kirkland’s

“slovenly unhandsome body” (287). For the purposes of my close reading, Clarke’s novel can be more fruitfully understood as mobilising what William A. Cohen terms “the logic of sexual unspeakability”. Cohen elaborates:

Thanks to the Victorian novel’s renowned loquaciousness, the subjects it cannot utter generate particularly nagging silences. How can we make these silences speak? Precisely through attention to the rhetoric of unspeakability: such tropes as, periphrasis, euphemism, and indirection give rise to a series of signifying practices that fill in these enforced silences. (32)

For Cohen, “sexual unspeakability” operates as a “productive constraint” on Victorian writers, “it affords them abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse—richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent—that we now recognise and designate by the very term *literary*” (3). By strategically repositioning Kirkland and his sexual horrors back into the dynamics of *His Natural Life*, I seek to show how unspeakable sexual practices and desires rivet and buttress the narrative framework of Clarke’s canonical text. More specifically, I offer a queer close reading of *His Natural Life* that addresses the “nagging silences” arising from the general critical assumption that Clarke’s all suffering gentleman-convict hero, Richard Devine/Rufus Dawes, remains immune to same-sex desires and practices during his debasing tour of the Australian penal colonies.

A useful starting point is to place Clarke’s text within a tradition of speaking the unspeakable about Australian convict sexualities. *His Natural Life* may license other journalistic accounts of prison sexualities in the 1870s, 1890s, and beyond, but the novel itself is also authorised by the vitriolic polemics of the preceding anti-transportation movement. Clarke’s additions to the 1874 version of *His Natural Life*—a dedication, footnotes and a bibliography of historical source—encourages the reader to think back to the convict archive, especially to the anti-transportation debates which ardently raged in the Britain and the Australian colonies during the 1830s and 1840s. Central to these debates was the trope of the “unnatural” or “abominable” convict: a trope anxiously imbued with same-sex and/or bestial desires. For example, a major historical source for Clarke’s novel was the influential final report of the “Molesworth” British Parliamentary Select Committee on Transportation (1837), which was instrumental in ending the antipodean penal experiment in favour of the Benthamite prison. However, one of the ways the Committee achieved this aim was the risky political strategy of speaking the unspeakable about convict sex. In effect, the “Molesworth” Committee created the first large scale public discourse on antipodean convict sexual perversity and provides a potent example of Michel Foucault’s notion that sex was not simply repressed

in the nineteenth century, but rather there was immense verbosity about sex, an “incitement to discourse” (34). At the inquiry conducted in London numerous colonial witnesses testified to the prevalence of “unnatural crimes” in the Australian penal colonies. A former chief justice of New South Wales, Sir Francis Forbes, admitted that the colony “had been called a Sodom” in the colonial press (30). Another witness testified that unnatural crimes, especially bestiality, were “much more common than in any other country inhabited by the English” (40). Other evidence detailed the common occurrence among the male convict population of same-sex marriages, the adoption of female names, orgies, consensual buggery and rape, discussed more fully in Robert Aldrich’s *Colonialism and Homosexuality*.

A much quoted passage from *His Natural Life*—perhaps because it adopts the Gothic tones of the anti-transportationists—centres on the carceral depths of “that huge sea-monster, in whose capacious belly so many human creatures lived and suffered” (62-3), the ill-fated prison ship the *Malabar*.

As the eye became accustomed to the foetid duskiess of the prison, a strange picture presented itself. Groups of men, in all imaginable attitudes, were lying, standing, sitting, or pacing up and down. It was the scene on the poop deck over again; only, here being in no fear of restraining keepers, the wild beasts were a little more free in their movements. It is impossible to convey, in words, any idea of the hideous phantasmagoria of shifting limbs and faces which moved through the evil-smelling twilight of this terrible prison-house. Callot might have drawn it, Dante might have suggested it, but a minute attempt to describe its horrors would but disgust. There are depths of humanity which one cannot explore, as there are mephitic caverns into which one dare not penetrate. (56-7)

Clarke’s account of the *Malabar* luridly suggests unnatural sexual “horrors” while concurrently arguing that such “horrors” are unrepresentable, as “impossible to convey”, as “depths of humanity which one cannot explore”. On a closer reading, the unnaturalness of the *Malabar*—with its “hideous phantasmagoria” of moving male bodies—is evoked by a cluster of images grouped together by odours: “foetid duskiess”, “evil-smelling twilight”, “mephitic caverns”, and later “reeking den of infamy” (57). Clarke’s references to foul-smelling carceral spaces “that one dare not penetrate”, suggests the unspeakable interiors of anality. Clarke offers the reader a representation which metaphorically, and in an olfactory sense, anxiously poses the threat of anal penetration or rape. The unspeakable depths of the *Malabar*—with its threatening odours of sodomy—not only prefigures Kirkland’s gang rape in the convict dormitory at Port Arthur, but signals the development of the novel’s thematics of sexual unspeakability.

Clarke’s hyperbolic and paradoxical language shares much with one of his chief archival sources for the novel, the anti-transportation diatribes of the Catholic priest William Ullathorne. For example, Ullathorne claims: “There is another class of crimes, too frightful even for the imagination of other lands [...] crimes that, dare I describe them, would make your blood freeze, and your hair to rise in erect horror upon the pale flesh. Let them be enfolded in eternal darkness” (*Catholic Mission* 31). Despite his overt moral intention to educate and reform, Ullathorne’s exposé of unspeakable convict sexualities guides the reader—even by the strategic omission of specific details—to produce an array of somatic responses to imagined scenarios of sexual depravity in the Australian penal colonies. Clarke’s novel invokes this anti-transportationist technique of speaking the unspeakable, reviving it for a late-Victorian audience with an appetite for sensational writing.

Poor Kirkland. His innocence and middle-class affectations, his Methodist pieties and sense of stubborn righteousness, are of little worth at the sacrilegious Port Arthur: their only value seems to be one of potential defilement. Aged twenty-two and described as “thin, fair, and delicate” (269), Kirkland’s posting as a convict-butler to Commandant Burgess initially guarantees him protection from the sexual violence of the convict barracks. However, after showing disapproval of the Commandant’s ungodly language, Kirkland is dismissed and sent to join the other convicts. Within two days he is violently gang raped and flogged to death.

After his first day with the other prisoners Kirkland begs not to be locked up in the barracks, “drawing back in dismay from the cloud of foul faces, which lowered upon him” (270). At the sound of Kirkland’s pleading, the narrative perspective strategically cuts to Dawes contemplating Kirkland’s fate in the convict dormitory. “Rufus Dawes, among whose sinister memories this yard was numbered, sighed. So fierce was the glamour of the place, however, that, when locked into his cell, he felt ashamed of that sigh, and strove to erase the memory of it. ‘What is he more than anybody else?’ said the wretched man to himself, as he hugged his misery close” (270).

Dawes’s pity for Kirkland’s inevitable fate, his humane “sigh”, is enabled by his own “sinister memories” of the convict barracks. Clarke’s narrative does not provide any details as to the nature of these “sinister memories”, but in the context of Kirkland’s gang rape the memories are stained by sexual violence. Avis MacDonald argues that Dawes’s experiences during the Port Arthur section of the novel are characterised by “temporal discontinuities” and “are treated elliptically” by Clarke (351). Such temporal ambiguity surrounding Dawes’s incarceration opens up questions about the novel’s

romantic hero: was Dawes raped? a rapist? or did he witness such events? The only clue is the rather unusual line, “so fierce was the glamour of the place”. Clarke’s use of “glamour” strikes me as odd, it jars. Editors of the novel have felt a need to elaborate the term, for instance, Graham Tulloch’s explanatory note defines “glamour” as “a spell, enchantment” (474). Moreover, “glamour” is qualified by the adjective “fierce”, which though commonly meaning violently hostile and aggressive, also more ambiguously implies a lack of restraint and control, or an extreme intensity. What both these terms highlight is a perverse interpellation into the sexually violent ethos of the convict barracks, epitomised by Gabbett’s sexual-sadistic rule and Dawes’s harsh line about Kirkland, “What is he more than anybody else?” Secondly, they offer an alibi or excuse for unnatural sexual acts, a situational disavowing of one’s actions, responsibilities and desires when seduced by the “fierce glamour” of the dormitories at night. The strategic displacement of Kirkland’s rape scene to an interior focus on Dawes’s “sinister memories” of the barracks, provides the queer reader with an ambiguous hint of Dawes’s possible non-normative sexual experiences at Port Arthur, and is thematically linked to his initiation into such a sexually violent ethos within the fetid belly of Gabbett’s *Malabar*.

It is a disturbed and sleepless Reverend North—in the “habit of prowling about the prison at unofficial hours” (270)—who first hears Kirkland’s yells for help and finds the terrified convict “ghastly pale, bleeding, with his woollen shirt torn, and his blue eyes wide open with terror [...] clinging to the bars” (270). Unable to convince Hailes the watchman to let Kirkland out, North pursues the matter with Commandant Burgess. North protests: “you know the character of the men in that ward. You can guess what the unhappy boy has suffered” (271). Burgess uncompromisingly replies: “Do him good, curse him!” (271). The reader becomes privy to Kirkland’s shame and horror, and the wider complicity of the System in such sexual violence, through North’s empathetic yet materially helpless narrative viewpoint. But Kirkland’s gang rape is not represented graphically, rather the “hints” and “bold allusions” Clarke offers can just as easily be read as a severe bashing. What codes Kirkland’s experiences as sexual is the often disavowed knowledge of the prevalence of same-sex sexual violence in prison. Reverend North’s “you know” and “you can guess” speech addresses the reader as much as Commandant Burgess and typifies the way in which Clarke’s oblique representations of “sexual horrors” rely on the dynamics of the “open secret” in order to obtain their sexualised meanings. The paradoxical nature of the “open secret”, as D. A. Miller explains, rests in its strategic flexibility to remain widely known but vigorously denied: “anxiously enough, the fact

that the secret is always known—and, in some obscure sense, known to be known—never interferes with the incessant activity of keeping it” (206).

The day after, we are reintroduced to an emotionally and physically shattered Kirkland through the perspective of Dawes: “His face was of a greenish tint, and wore an expression of bewildered horror” (271). Kirkland is again placed in the chain gang, re-coupled with his chief rapist, Gabbett. Initially, they are put together by the solidier Troke “by way of an experiment in human nature” (269). Troke’s “experiment” more sinisterly suggests a degree of premeditated official collusion with Gabbett in the sexual violence inflicted on Kirkland. This forced coupling carries with it a public recognition of Gabbett’s sexual ownership, connotating a perverse marriage bond that becomes more apparent when Gabbett and the other prisoners begin to call Kirkland “Miss Nancy”. In the final report of the “Molesworth” Committee, the name “Miss Nancy” was submitted as evidence of a convict slang term for a male “wife” (30). Kirkland’s response to this new nuptial role is one of unspeakable disgust, fear and humiliation which results in two unsuccessful attempts at suicide. Kirkland’s nightmarish encounter with the sexual “monster” (222) of Port Arthur, is framed, punctuated, and narrated from the viewpoints of Dawes and North, and proves pivotal in laying the perverse foundations of their intense homosociality.

As a climax to Clarke’s vignette of Kirkland, the reader is presented with the visceral flagellation chapter, “One Hundred Lashes”. Clarke’s graphic description of floggings at Port Arthur is not exactly a new representation, but rather mobilises a common tradition of representing violent whipping scenes within nineteenth-century anti-transportation and humanitarian reform discourses. What Clarke’s flogging episode does differently is to thematically draw attention to the often unacknowledged gendered and sexualised dynamics of flagellation.

The spectacle of the male body being flogged has long associations with emasculation. John Barnes, the surgeon of the notorious Macquarie Harbour penal station during the 1820s, testified at the “Molesworth” Committee that flogging was not only a frequent, but “a most unmanly kind of punishment” (38). More recently, critics have begun to explore the erotically charged dynamics of flogging. In her study of humanitarian campaigns against corporal punishment, Myra Glenn argues: “by associating whipping with uncontrollable emotion and bestiality, reformers tacitly explored the connection between corporal punishment and illicit sexuality” (46). Karen Halttunen has explored how “reform literature did eroticise pain, constructing it as sexual in nature” (324). Halttunen elaborates:

More commonly, the humanitarian eroticization of pain took indirect form in references to the illicit excitement generated by the infliction of pain: the “emotions of a doubtful character” awakened in the flogger; the similarly doubtful sense of pleasure reported by some flogging victims; and the “ferocious taste”, “atrocious passion”, or “craving” aroused in spectators to the scenario of suffering. (325)

Robert Hughes has influentially compared the practice of convict floggings to the experience of “homosexual” rape. Hughes’s verbose, and at times anachronistic language, is still worth quoting at length:

Next to homosexual rape, flogging was the most humiliating invasion of the body that could befall a prisoner. Nothing in an ordinary man’s experience compared to the rituals of the cat: to be stripped and tied to a triangle, like an owl skin nailed to a barn door; to hear, through battering pain, the quartermaster-sergeant slowly calling out the strokes; this was to be drowned in powerlessness. (429)

While the experience of male-male rape and flogging may share some similarities—such as themes of powerlessness, emasculation and violence against the male body through an illicit penetration of the flesh—a key difference, at least in their textual representation, is the generally private and unspeakable nature of rape when compared to the very public spectacle of flogging. That said, Clarke’s novel does create overt and implicit links between the obliqueness of Kirkland’s gang rape and the brazenness of his fatal flogging.

Having brutally learnt the lessons of the dormitories, Kirkland morbidly echoes Dawes’s probing question during his rape—“What is he more than anybody else?”—when he coldly encourages him to take up the lash: “Go on Dawes [. . .] You are no more than another man” (281). Kirkland’s pristine back, its luminous whiteness, is progressively disfigured by Dawes’s flogging. Clarke creates a cluster of sexualised descriptions of Kirkland’s transforming virgin flesh that eroticise Dawes’s actions by symbolically recreating the sexual violence of the barracks. At the sound of Troke’s first count, “[t]he white back was instantly striped with six crimson bars. Kirkland stifled a cry. It seemed to him he had been cut in half. [. . .] The third blow sounded as though it had been struck upon a piece of raw beef, and the crimson turned purple” (282). By the tenth lash “[t]he lad’s back, swollen into a hump, now presented the appearance of a ripe peach which a willful child has scored with a pin” (282). Finally, “his back was like a bloody sponge, while, in the interval between the lashes, the swollen flesh twitched like that of a new-killed bullock” (283). The simile of a “bullock”—which builds on the earlier description of “raw beef”—brings into play not only Clarke’s beast

imagery but also an overt reference to castration that figures scourging as an emasculating experience. More sexually suggestive is the “ripe peach” metaphor, which creates a perverse image of “willful” anal penetration. This nexus between Kirkland’s flogging and anal rape is made more crudely in the serialised version of the novel, where accompanying Kirkland’s screams for mercy he cries, “Oh, you’re cutting my bowels out!” (Murray-Smith 465).

When Rufus Dawes refuses to continue to flog a dying Kirkland, he is tied up in his place, receiving Kirkland’s remaining fifty plus an extra fifty for insubordination to be administered by the sadistically willing Gabbett. Without uttering a sound for a hundred lashes, Dawes stoically receives twenty more until he finally succumbs with “a hideous cry”, releasing a barrage of unspeakable abuse to all asunder: “He seemed to have abandoned his humanity” (284). While in the prison hospital recovering from Gabbett’s “handiwork” Dawes reflects on the flogging, and the reader, as Avis MacDonald argues, “is admitted to his thoughts which acknowledge that he has shamefully fallen to the level of the convicts and the enforcers of the convict System” (352). On a closer examination, this rare psychological access into Dawes’s disturbed mind also reveals an ambivalent notion of “fierce joy”: “But he had miscalculated his own capacity for evil. As he flogged, he blushed; and when he had flung down the cat and stripped his own back for punishment, he felt a fierce joy in the thought that his baseness would be atoned for in his own blood.” (295)

Dawes’s eager anticipation of a cathartic flogging, not only mobilises a redemptive Christian concept of “atonement”, but more ambiguously eroticises pain. Rufus Dawes’s masochistic desire to “atone” for his “baseness” is presented as a deeper, unspeakable need, that is briefly figured for the reader in the illicit pleasures implied by his intense feelings of “fierce joy” and somatically displayed as an unnatural “blush”. Dawes’s eroticisation of his flogging creates further psychological and semantic links between his notion of “fierce joy” and the “sinister memories” and “fierce glamour” of the convict barracks at night.

The flogging scenes develop the novel’s unspeakable themes of sexual violence and illicit penetration by creating a triangle of desire and eroticised pain that re-enacts, colludes with, and amplifies the earlier oblique representation of Kirkland’s gang rape. Despite the perverse sexual doubling of Kirkland and Dawes, a key difference between their floggings is the way Kirkland’s punishment occurs and is told on the body: the reader is presented with a visceral spectacle marked by a violent erotic exteriority. In contrast, Dawes’s

flogging focuses more on the mind, figured as a disturbing interiority which sees his soul “confess itself conquered” (296).

Kirkland’s fatal flogging also provides an unnatural beginning for the development of the strange, emotionally distraught and erotically charged relationship between Dawes and the “gentleman, scholar, Christian priest [and] confirmed drunkard” (281), Reverend James North. Unlike Commandant Burgess who is “jeering” and “laughing his hardest” and Gabbett “grinning” with a barely repressed sexual sadism, North’s response to the floggings is equivocal. North arrives at Kirkland’s fiftieth lash and watches six more bloody blows, “biting his nails and grinding his teeth” (283). As Dawes is taking off his shirt in preparation for the “fierce joy” of Gabbett’s lash, he significantly turns “with a glance at North” (283). During the ordeal of witnessing the debasing flogging, North’s reactions become riddled with a dubious voyeurism: “North with his hands to his ears, crouched against the corner of the wall, palsied with horror. It seemed to him that the passions of hell raged around him. He would fain have fled, but a horrible fascination held him back” (284). North’s “horrible fascination” at watching Dawes physically and spiritually broken by the lash, reveals a gaze coded by a sadistic voyeurism that forms an ambivalent homoerotic coupling with Dawes’s “fierce joy”, his masochistic exhibitionism.

After watching the horrific spectacle of Kirkland’s and Dawes’s floggings, North is overwhelmed by guilt and turns to Dawes desperately seeking absolution. This inverted request quickly becomes a brotherly communion of shared shame:

Rufus Dawes, too astonished to speak, bent his black eyes upon the man who crouched at his feet, and a ray of divine pity penetrated his gloomy soul. He seemed to catch a glimpse of a misery more profound than his own, and his stubborn heart felt a human sympathy with this erring brother. “Then in this hell there is yet,” said he; and a hand-grasp passed between these two unhappy beings. North arose, and, with averted face, passed quickly from the cell. Rufus Dawes looked bewilderedly at the hand which his strange visitor had taken, and something glittered there. It was a tear. He broke down at the sight of it, and when the guard came to fetch the tameless convict, they found him on his knees in a corner sobbing like a child. (286)

The powerful effect that North’s desire for absolution has on Dawes cannot be underestimated. Dawes’s narrative viewpoint, his flashbacks of memory, keep returning to North’s “profound” actions in his cell after Kirkland’s fatal flogging. Building on Laurie Hergenhan’s seminal reading of the redemption theme of *His Natural Life*, I interpret the cluster of recurring redemptive

tropes that mark this new stage of their relationship—hearts, hands, tears, and Christian brotherly love—as symptomatic of an avid homosocial/erotic bond. Dawes’s intense feelings of “wondrous sympathy” (296) for the priest are created out of an intimate sharing of typically “unmanly” traits of “weakness” and “shame”, potently symbolised by their excessive weeping. The qualification of their tears as not “unmanly” (296) indicates an anxiety within the hero, a need to distinguish such “tenderness” and outpourings of emotion from more overt and morally dubious displays of same-sex desire. Through the mobilisation of Christian imagery, Dawes beatifies his “yearning love” (300) for North as something special and unique, a “secret virtue” (300). Their intense relationship blurs the permeable boundaries between the social and the sexual by enabling an ambiguous erotic sharing of intimate moments, unguarded honesties, private torments, and raw displays of unmanly emotion.

The last section of the 1874 version of *His Natural Life* temporally shifts the narrative from 1838 to 1846, and spatially from Port Arthur to the *ne plus ultra* of the Australian penal colonies, Norfolk Island. To the horror of the Catholic priest and vocal anti-transportationist, William Ullathorne, the island-prison was a “proverb” for unnatural desires and practices: “we find the foulest crimes always staining the fairest lands. Those five criminal cities, on whom the Lord rained down his fire and his fury, were placed in a very beautiful country, and Norfolk Island is the modern representative of those guilty cities” (39-40). The strange homosociality that develops between North and Dawes in the confines of Port Arthur, reaches a symbolic and erotic climax among the unnatural surrounds of this new-world Sodom.

When Dawes first meets North again on the island-prison, we find him suffering both a mental and physical transformation. North is presented as increasingly akin to his convict subjects: “He had had a fever, it seemed, and they had shaved his beard and cropped his hair. Dawes could see that the haggard, wasted man had passed through some agony almost as great as his own” (402). From Dawes’s narrative perspective, the priest’s actions and appearance are further described as a confusing interplay of opposites, “ardent and gloomy, so stern and so tender” (403), that nevertheless re-establishes their “erring brotherhood” from Port Arthur as a “sympathetic bond” (403).

On a more intimate level than Dawes’s post-flogging hospitalisation, the reader is given access to Reverend North’s disturbed mind through extracts from his diary: personified by North as “my confessor” (357) and in more

ambiguously erotic terms as a “beloved and detested companion” (360). The introduction of this tortured first-person narrative, which opens the fourth and final volume of the novel, reveals a perverse mix of “repressed desires” (404) that explore a painful attempt at cultivating the self, a “setting down in black and white these agonies and secret cravings of which I dare not speak” (357). North’s transformation into a convict sees the priest identify with the experiences of transportation in unusual ways. For example, in North’s diary entry for the 14 May 1846, he writes emphatically of his visit to the Norfolk Island convict barracks:

The lights are taken away, and save for a few minutes at eight o’clock, when the good-conduct men are let in, the ruffians are left to their own devices until morning. Knowing what I know of the customs of the convicts, my heart sickens when I in imagination put myself in the place of a newly-transported man, plunged from six at night until daybreak into that foetid den of worse than wild beasts. (379-80)

North’s attempt to identify with the plight of the newly-arrived convict perversely imagines a sexually violent fate that echoes the gang rape of Kirkland at Port Arthur. Furthermore, North’s description of the convict barracks as “foetid” recalls the reeking bowels of the *Malabar*.

The Norfolk Island section of *His Natural Life* provides a pivotal scene in which the intense homosocial bond between Dawes and North, their “wayward hearts” (403), becomes eroticised through the imagery of flowers:

One day this bond was drawn so close as to tug at both their heartstrings. The chaplain had a flower in his coat. Dawes eyed it with hungry looks, and, as the clergyman was about to quit the room, said “Mr North, will you give me that rose-bud?” North paused irresolutely, and finally, as if after a struggle with himself, took it carefully from his button-hole, and placed it in the prisoner’s brown, scarred hand. In another instant, Dawes, believing himself alone, pressed the gift to his lips. North returned abruptly, and the eyes of the pair met. Dawes flushed crimson, but North turned white as death. Neither spoke, but each seemed to feel drawn closer to the other, since each had kissed the rosebud plucked by Sylvia’s fingers. (403-4)

What are we to make of the symbolism of the rosebud? Annette Stewart reads flowers as a “minor symbol” in the novel that serve to highlight “Dawes’s essential goodness” and signal a “re-adoption” of Dawes’s role as Sylvia’s saviour (400). Avis Macdonald interprets the rosebud scene as demonstrating that Dawes has “preserve[d] something of the sensitive inner self” (354), while for Joan Poole it is a “gesture [that] presages North’s final abandonment of his plan to elope with Sylvia” (139). In the context of Clarke’s thematic

of sexual unspeakability, the image of the rosebud being exchanged between the lips of North and Dawes can be read as corporealising their unspeakable homoerotic desires for each other in an oblique same-sex kiss. However, their erotically charged homosociality is partially defused by the heterosexualising circuits of an erotic triangle. Sylvia is strategically positioned as a third object of desire, crucially performing the function of mediating the homoerotic desires of the two men through her symbolic presence as a rosebud, just as in the homosocial triangles formulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her *Between Men*.

The homosocial contest for Sylvia reaches a climax when North’s unspeakable desires resurface with vengeance: “The notion of thus destroying his own fame in the eyes of the man whom he had taught to love him, was pleasant to his diseased imagination” (436-7). The departing North shocks Dawes with his confession of their entwined and strangely doubled history: beginning with North’s nefarious dealings with Lord Bellasis and ending with their shared sin of coveting another man’s wife. After the confession a confused and emotionally broken North leaves Dawes’s cell unlocked and without his black cape, enabling Dawes to literally appropriate North’s identity and escape. North’s subsequent suicide and the heterosexual union between Dawes and Sylvia may be read unambiguously as a conventional form of narrative closure, but it is importantly enabled by this redemptive homosocial/erotic osmosis between Dawes and North. The ending of the 1874 novel has Richard Devine reclaiming the “dream-child” (236) Sylvia as his; a relationship that has been labeled as having pedophilic overtones by some critics (Argyle, Wilding). Seemingly, this heterosexual outcome is far from normative as their love—“a purer affection than the love of man for woman” (236)—is positioned against the heterosexual couple and only allowed in death. Dawes and Sylvia’s forbidden love is reduced, much like Maggie and Tom Tulliver’s sibling love, to the gruesome figure of “two corpses” (459).

The “sympathetic bond” established between Dawes and North has an afterlife in the serialised version of *His Natural Life*. In the chapter titled “A Soul’s Tragedy”, we find Rufus Dawes—now living as the socially reformed and financially transformed squatter Tom Crosbie—about to have his secret convict past exposed. Heightening the emotional distress and immediacy of the scene, the novel dramatically switches from an omnipotent narrator to the first-person narration of Dawes/Crosbie as he cries out for the long-dead North: “Is there no other way? No other way my friend my brother? Thou who did’st deign to clasp my bloodstained hand in thine - thou who did’st weep and pray with me - thou who did’st draw my soul alive out of the pit.

North! North! my prison-Christ, who died that I might live for her, hear me and help me!" (874-5)

The redemptive memories of North return vividly for Dawes. Their erring brotherhood, signified by the ambivalently eroticised Christian images of tears, brothers, hands, and the interesting possessive use of "my prison-Christ", lives on. However, Dawes's impassioned plea for North is qualified by a re-establishment of the erotic triangle of Norfolk Island, especially when Dawes is visited, or haunted, by the "spirits of friends love-linked to us ... the Woman and the Priest—those twin sweet influences that, balm-like, fell into his bruised and passion-wasted heart" (875). In a (con)fusion of doubles these characters form a queer template for the unfurling of an inevitable, but by no means smooth, complete, or successfully forged, heterosexual romance narrative.

Clarke's *magnum opus* ambivalently revisits Australia's unnatural convict beginnings and offers the reader an interrelated group of failed, erring, violent, or simply strange erotic relationships which cannot avoid being perversely branded by the carceral nature of life in the Antipodes. The strategic stalling of the novel's central heterosexual plot between Dawes and Sylvia, alters the dynamics of desire within Clarke's text by creating a space within the romantic affections of Rufus Dawes for the entry of Reverend North. The intense "sympathetic bond" between Dawes and North first develops within the context of Kirkland's sexually violent experiences at Port Arthur. On Norfolk Island, their relationship blooms into an erotic triangle with the return of Sylvia as a heterosexualising third figure. At key moments in the narrative, however, queer slippages occur that contest normative sexual readings of Clarke's romantic hero: "sinister memories", a "fierce joy", a rose containing two kisses, a tear exchanged, a bloodstained hand clasped, a brother named, a "passion-wasted heart" soothed. The thematics of sexual unspeakability in *His Natural Life*—the novel's heterodox representations of violent and/or erotic desires and practices—disfigures, or at the very least scars, the heterosexual conventions of the Victorian romance novel.

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