

“There Are French Novels
And There Are French Novels”:
Charles Reade and the “Other” Sources
of Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life*

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This article elucidates the topicality of Marcus Clarke’s serialized novel *His Natural Life* by establishing Clarke’s debts to Charles Reade.¹ Turning attention to Clarke’s “borrowings” from Reade’s popular romances and stage melodramas counters scholarly preoccupation with historical documents as the “sources” of *His Natural Life*. And in place of a traditional focus on Clarke’s construction of national history, it enables the reconstitution of *His Natural Life* as a work of Victorian modernity, interested as much in contemporary issues of international significance – issues like the “marriage” question and the place of spirituality in modern life – as it is in reconstructing Australia’s convict past.

To facilitate access to this topicality I will analyze two pivotal scenes which feature discussions of French literature. “French literature” was a discursive category familiar to Clarke’s first readers denoting works that were likely to corrupt for their uncompromising social and sexual realism. In the late 1860s and early 1870s such literature was central to debates about what anglophone writers ought to be writing and readers reading. Not surprisingly, the representation of women in modern French literature was a crucial factor in these debates. But the critical response to realism had also dwelt on its social, ethical and theological implications. Hence both discussions of French literature in *His Natural Life* centre on the heroine, Dora Vickers, while her interlocutor on both occasions is a clergyman. And accordingly, analysis of their discussions provides insight into the controversial issues which animate Clarke’s work. Moreover, this analysis illuminates why Clarke turned to Reade’s model of the “matter-of-fact” romance as the genre in which to compose his serial. By writing his own “matter-of-fact” romance Clarke could frame a response to modern French literature and all it asserted about the composition of “natural life”.

A "MOST PURE AND DELIGHTFUL" BOOK

In Book Four of *His Natural Life* Dora Vickers finds herself discussing the merits of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788) with Reverend Meekin. She tells Meekin she has "read it before in English" (362), and it has previously headed the list of favourite books that she relates to Maurice Frere (259). At the climax of Saint-Pierre's tale Virginie's ship is wrecked on the reefs surrounding her island home. A sailor tries to remove her dress so she can swim to Paul and safety but, refusing his aid, she drowns. Let us take up Clarke's scene as Meekin reacts to a declared dislike of Paul:

"No! Why, my dear young lady, it is a lovely story – one of the most pure and delightful books that can be imagined. Not like Paul! I *am* surprised."

"It doesn't strike me as pure, at all," says Dora – "all that nonsense about not carrying the girl over the water because she must show her legs. Girls *have* legs, I suppose?"

"I – I – I suppose so," says Meekin, jerking his chair a little further back, as if the fact had never occurred to him before, and had come upon him now with the force of an alarming and terrible discovery. "Of course they have legs, my dear Miss Vickers. Oh, decidedly!"

"Well," says Dora, "it being necessary to show them, why not show them? There was no need for her to Flourish [sic] them at people, you know – I don't mean that."

Mr Meekin, with an agonized smile, intimated that he never thought that she could have meant anything so improper.

"But to make the fuss that is made here," says Dora, tapping the book, "is silly, I think – more than silly, it's rude. I mean it makes a great mystery out of a very innocent matter. I don't think St. Pierre was an innocent-minded man – do you, Mr Meekin?"

Mr Meekin, driven into a corner by this question, said from his handkerchief, that he had not given "that consideration to the subject which it merited," and prepared to take his leave. This colonial-bred young lady, who didn't see any harm in showing her legs, and thought the author of "Paul and Virginia" a nasty-minded man, was a being quite foreign to his experience. (363–64)

In referring to *Paul et Virginie* as "one of the most pure and delightful books that can be imagined", Meekin ventriloquises dozens of nineteenth-century writers who introduced or commented on Saint-Pierre's work. Many were clergymen who "adapted" the text for "Christian youth" by bowdlerizing erotic or liturgically-suspect passages (Bray). This "received" *Paul et Virginie* was a tale dominated by its portrait of a prepubescent

girl as the epitome of human spirituality. It is this idealized figuration of the feminine that does not tally with Dora's sense of *reality*: for this "colonial-bred young lady" (this "Australian girl") a legless "Virginia" is a proposition without a leg to stand on; "Girls have legs, I suppose?"

Dora's comments anticipate later nineteenth-century impatience with the extreme romanticism and *naïveté* of Saint-Pierre's style. Indeed they are more appropriate to the time of *His Natural Life's* first production than the year in which they are supposedly made, 1838. This anachronism suggests the contemporary relevance of Clarke's scene, and in fact it introduces what *His Natural Life* has to say about literature in general in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The problem for readers today is that while *Paul et Virginie* was one of the more enduring "classics" until the latter part of the nineteenth century, the critical impatience Dora anticipates has caused the work to disappear from the anglophone canon: to pursue *his* literary conversation with the readers of *His Natural Life* "Clarke could rely on a familiarity we no longer have" (Stewart 5).²

Clarke initiates his conversation by means of this scene's narrative context. The installment in which Dora's discussion originally appeared was reviewed in Melbourne's *Touchstone* on 12 November 1870 as a "specimen of Mr. Clarke's lighter vein", but placing its exceptional comedy aside, the conditions under which Dora speaks are actually very serious indeed. The heroine is back in Hobart after enduring the convict mutiny on the *Osprey*, the marooning at Macquarie Harbour, Grimes' madness and murder-suicide, the nightmarish arrival of Dawes, the hostility between Frere and Dawes, the illness and later death of her mother, and the starvation ordeal of the escape in the "coracle". The experiences have proven so traumatic that she has lost her memory. Frere has taken this opportunity to portray himself as the rescuing hero, and so duped, Dora is engaged to marry him. Dora's loss of memory therefore problematizes her frank admission to Meekin that the naked body at a time of crisis is "a very innocent matter". Her time of crisis is the present and, as far as "the Minotaur" (606) is concerned, Dora's naked body is far from "a very innocent matter". For Dora to think as much is a dangerous ignorance. It would be better if she were conscious of her own sexual allure, and the designs it might inspire in others, a consciousness symbolized by the restoration in her memory of the "facts" of her own life.

In one of Clarke's "Noah's Ark" dialogues (*Australasian*, 12 July 1873), the character "Cannabis" complains that womankind is "grossly ignorant":

Her education deliberately ignores physiology, and she is qualified to become a nurse and a mother by being taught that it is highly immodest to know anything of her own body. The frightful ignorance which prevails among women of all classes, but more especially the higher classes, is the cause of more disease, vice, and misery than one dares to contemplate. (Clarke qtd in Hergenhan, *Colonial City* 278)

Dora would also benefit from a better awareness of her self and her body. But would such knowledge help her to fend off Frere, or would it threaten to make her more *like* him? The true respondent to Frere's carnality, after all, is Sarah Purfoy, a woman who *knows* all. Her education "above the common" (184) is presented as a contributing factor to her seeking out a "lover" rather than a husband (185) – to her becoming a "bird of prey" (184) – and it is Purfoy's extraordinary knowledge which causes North to label her a "sexual monster" (563). Dora's amnesiac ignorance is surely to be favoured above this. So while the heroine rejects Saint-Pierre's romance as "grossly ignorant" of "physiology" ("legs"), and ideally Dora too should emerge from puberty with, rather than without, self-awareness, Clarke also warns against going too far in the pursuit of knowledge of the "real". The warning signals a conundrum which energizes *His Natural Life*: how can a positive female character be portrayed with a realistic quotient of physiology but without invoking a corrupting interest in sexuality? How many "facts of life" can a writer include in his account of "natural life" without at once stimulating the reader's carnal desires and risking the reduction of humanity to the beast?

BAD FRENCH NOVELS

"Going too far" is the subject of the *next* conversation about French literature between Dora (now "Mrs Frere") and a clergyman (this time Reverend North):

"And have you bought me the book? I have been looking for it."

"Here it is," said North, producing a volume of 'Monte Cristo'. "I envy you."

She seized the book with avidity, and, after running her eyes over the pages, turned to the fly-leaf.

"It belongs to my predecessor," says [sic] North, as though in answer to her thought. "He seems to have been a great reader of French. I have found many French novels of his."

"I thought clergymen never read French novels," said Dora, with a smile.

"There are French novels and French novels," said North. "Stupid people confound the good with the bad. I remember a worthy friend of mine in Sydney who soundly abused me for reading 'Rabelais', and when I asked him if *he* had read it, he said that he would sooner cut his hand off than open it. Admirable judge of its merits!"

"But is this really good? Papa told me it was rubbish."

"It is a romance, but, in my opinion, a very fine one. The notion of the sailor being taught in prison by the priest, and sent back into the world, an accomplished gentleman, to work his vengeance, is superb."

“Now, now – you are telling me,” laughed she; and then, with feminine perversity, “Go on, what is the story?”

“Only that of an unjustly imprisoned man, who escaping by a marvel, and becoming rich – as Dr Johnson says, ‘beyond the bounds of avarice,’ – devotes his life and fortune to revenge himself.”

“And does he?”

“Read – !”

“No, but you provoking man – tell me.”

“He does, upon all his enemies save one.”

“And he – ?”

“*She* – was the wife of his greatest enemy, and Dantes spared her because he loved her.”

Dora turned her head away with a slight blush.

“It seems common-place enough,” said she, coldly.

“Of course; such matters are too common-place.”

There was a silence for a moment, which each seemed afraid to break. North bit his lips, as though regretting what he had said. Mrs Frere beat her foot on the floor, and at length raising her eyes, and meeting those of the clergyman fixed upon her face, rose hurriedly. (603–04)

The point here is again contextual. From his diary entries the reader knows North desired Dora at first sight. He was transfixed by her appearance one week after her marriage to Frere, “rustling in whitest lawn and stiffest silk, trimly-booted, tight-waisted, and neatest gloved” (474). So there is real moral danger latent in the superficially innocent exchange quoted above. The couple’s flirtatious banter, innocuous at first glance, is captured by all those broken pieces of dialogue, but the onslaught of mutual desire is expressed in bit lips, a beating foot, and eyes that seek each other’s faces. North and Dora are a latter-day Paolo and Francesca, Dante’s famous adulterers who fall in love over a book, modulating mutual admiration into carnal desire.

In *Inferno* Dante’s lovers are punished for a sin of incontinence: lust. Gluttony is another; these are sins involving a failure to control the kind of bodily desires writ large in “Rabelais”. North’s alcoholic binges figure him just such a sinner, and nor is he “contained” in his lust for Dora: he would realize his desire in a full-scale adulterous affair. In accordance with this paradigm of uncontained desire, North’s allusion to “bad” French novels at the moment he literally presents a “good” one introduces a sliding moral scale of literary propriety that immediately proves a slippery one. Although he suggests that only “Stupid people confound the good with the bad” French novel, his problem is not that he will critically “confound” the two, but that he will not *contain* himself to Dumas, a writer who already depicts adulterous desire. North is potentially subject – and might subject Dora – to the enjoyment of more perilous texts. Indeed, how will Dora really know if North were to slip her a “bad” French novel? And could

she resist him if he did? Would she seize *that* “book with avidity”, “running her eyes over the pages”?

REPRESENTING “NATURAL LIFE”

It is pertinent to speculate on what Clarke himself might have considered a “bad” French novel. A hint is supplied in his review of “Balzac and Modern French Literature” (*Australasian*, 3 August 1867). Clarke, like North, distinguishes the “good” from the “bad”, defending Balzac but condemning “the excess of realism, which the prurient and obscene followers of Balzac affected”. These followers “preached a gross materialism”, a materialism associated in the review with “infidelity”, “atheism”, and “licentiousness” (Clarke qtd in Wilding 621–22). Who were these “followers”? Théophile Gautier and George Sand, named in the article’s subheading, are not really likely contenders for the level of moral outrage expressed by Clarke, while the dangers of Dumas fils, Eugène Sue, and Paul de Kock are played down in Clarke’s “Buncle Correspondence” article “Of French novels” (Clarke qtd in Hergenhan, *Colonial City* 286–93). Certainly Flaubert and the Brothers Goncourt are likely candidates: as Kate Flint observes, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) was the “quintessential work of French fiction in the mid-century” (Flint 140). But when Clarke began writing *His Natural Life* he may even have read or heard of Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*. This was published in Paris in 1867 and soon established itself as a very “bad” French novel indeed.³

In the 1868 preface to the second edition of Zola’s novel, published after Clarke’s Balzac review but before the first appearance of *His Natural Life*, Zola referred to his aesthetic as the applying to “two living bodies the analytical method that surgeons apply to corpses” (23). Such a provocative comment was an explicit and extreme endorsement of everything that revolted Clarke about Balzac’s “followers” one year earlier. In *His Natural Life* such a figuration of modern writing as necessarily scientific, sterile, amoral is repudiated in the horror vision of the cannibal Gabbett who, by inviting others to escape with him as walking provisions, has effected “a simple submission to the logic of matter” (Meehan xxvii). As the epitome of a “gross materialist”, Clarke writes that Gabbett “reeks of the shambles” (357). In Clarke’s view, then, the morally-charged image of a slaughterhouse replaces Zola’s autopsy theatre, a blood-soaked chopping block the mortician’s slab. So no matter who Clarke had in mind when he wrote his Balzac review, we can be certain that his targets there, and in *His Natural Life*, were “realists” who went “too far” by purveying a purely materialistic construction of the human psyche. Such writers made beasts of their protagonists, be it through Emma Bovary’s sexual games and putrid death or through Zola’s reference (again in the 1868 preface) to Thérèse and her lover as “human animals”.

North’s allusion to “bad” French novels cannot, of course, invoke this particular form of writing for Dora without being anachronistic, but the *reader’s* idea of a bad French

novel is also invoked by North's conversation, and *that* allusion does indeed incorporate the French realism controversial in Clarke's day. Readers of popular serial fiction of the 1860s and '70s were well aware of critical issues in contemporary literature because the question of what the mass reading public *should* be reading was being discussed by such a wide range of writers and reviewers in media accessible to a large proportion of the literate community; in the newspapers, magazines, tracts, and literary quarterlies popular with the middle-class readership. As Flint writes, the "French Novel was a topos familiar in Victorian reviews and other cultural forms, carrying with it . . . the generic assumptions of its power to corrupt" (138). So even if Clarke's readers had not directly partaken of French literature (perhaps because "Papa" told them "it was rubbish"), they certainly knew what it was all about. If nothing else, they would be familiar with the vociferous critical deploring of "sensation" novels by writers who acknowledged French influence, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, whose infamous *Lady Audley's Secret* appeared in 1862, not to mention Charles Reade, who caused controversies with *Griffith Gaunt; or Jealousy* (1866) and *A Terrible Temptation: A Story of the Day* (1871). Thus while North discusses Dumas openly, the whole "topos" of "the French novel" is implicitly signalled for Clarke's readers in terms of the "obscene followers of Balzac".

Such writers were "obscene" not merely for their frank depiction of feminine desire. Reviewers, writers and many readers were well aware that if a heroine were to be freely depicted involved in what "John Bunclé" calls "a compound fracture of the Seventh Commandment" – the basis, he observes, for many French plots – far more than her individual reputation was at stake (Clarke in Hergenhan, *Colonial City* 288). The woman of popular romance, as epitomized by Virginie, represented the very *motive* of spirituality. If she faltered the place of spirituality itself in modern life was placed in doubt. "Natural life" became a sum of bodily urges restrained only by socio-political concerns. When the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act began providing newspapers with salacious details of "real" adultery scandals, this figuration of "natural life" seemed to be confirmed. And it received full expression, not as doubt but conviction, with the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. So Dora's critique of Saint-Pierre – her point that "Girls have legs, you know" – raises the same vexed question that pervades all of these "modern" works with which Clarke's text is in conversation. What is the place of the *immaterial* – of the spiritual sphere – in a world-view revolutionized by scientific materialism?

THE "OTHER" SOURCES OF *HIS NATURAL LIFE*

Appreciation of *His Natural Life's* international topicality has been generally displaced as the novel's fame exceeded its original literary context. A significant moment in that process is the appearance of the far less resonant title, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, which first appeared in 1884, three years after Clarke's death and fourteen after the

publication of the serial's first installment. The extreme bias of the novel's later reception in favour of local interest is evidenced by its coming to popularly stand for Australian convict "history"; the series of articles from the 1960s examining Clarke's use of historical sources principally set out to counteract this popular trend (see Robson, Poole, Denholm, Boehm, Barry Smith). While this was an apposite challenge to Clarke's historicism, the articles have also served to perpetuate a focus in scholarship on *His Natural Life's* convict element. In turn literary analyses have concentrated far more on Dawes than Dora (Poole's "Maurice Frere's Wife" being an important exception). But awareness of "other" sources, "literary" not "historical", restores the original text's equal interest in the marriages of its protagonists, and on the related topical question of the place of spirituality in modern life. These "other" sources also help us to see why Clarke should include discussions of "pure" and "bad" French novels in his work, because they provide the context wherein Clarke's text could strike a balance between the two, between portraying a heroine as ridiculously "pure and delightful" – an angel in the house – and depicting her as a "human animal"; between reinscribing the redundant idealism of Saint-Pierre and subscribing to the abhorrent materialism of Balzac's "followers".

Appraisal of the full extent of *His Natural Life's* "other" sources would require a more comprehensive account than is possible here.⁴ But Clarke's most significant debt is to Charles Reade, a writer of popular melodramas and romances, famous in Clarke's day for his efforts at self-promotion. His intervention in the Tichborne case is just one example of Reade appointing himself a prominent role in matters of public interest, as are all the letters and articles collected in *Readiana: Comments on Current Events* (1883). The writer always went out of his way to capture public interest in favour of the social cause championed in his latest novel (see Burns, Elton Smith). As a consequence his name was instantly recognizable to Clarke's first readers when it appeared alongside that of Victor Hugo in the "Dedication" prefacing the revised book of *His Natural Life*.

Clarke owes characters, situations, and incidents to the English writer. One Readian "source" is *Foul Play; or the Wreck of the Proserpine*, written in collaboration with Dion Boucicault as a stage melodrama and then as a romance published in 1868. To cite some examples of Clarke's superficial debts, Reade's protagonist, a convict falsely accused, disguises himself to protect "Helen", the object of his impossible love, on a voyage from Sydney to England. Sulky and suspicious, he visits a barber to effect the disguise, suggesting Dawes's trouble with the barber after he abandons Blinzler in London (65–68). The ship is scuttled – the overloading and false-insurance of ships is Reade's cause – and the couple undergo a gruesome ordeal on the lifeboat when a group of rogue sailors threaten to kill Helen with the intention of eating her.

Foul Play was actually re-adapted for the stage by Clarke and performed at Melbourne's Duke of Edinburgh Theatre for a week's run, beginning 7 December 1868 (Elliott 131; Irvin 8–9; Edwards 401–02; Kelly 40). The plot is conveniently outlined in the hero's Act II monologue, to the best of my knowledge published here for the first time:

Surely some fate pursues me. Heaven has tried me much. Imprisoned for an offence I never committed, I am cast into the company of the woman who loves my destroyer, giving up all I had worked for, I took passage on board the ship with her, determined to prevent the marriage . . . Oh that I dared tell her all, – that I dare reveal to her who and what I am, that I Robert Hazel am none other than Robert Seaton, once gardener in her father’s house in Sydney, and that Robert Seaton is Robert Penfold – the man who falsely accused – wrongly imprisoned, drags out a life of contumely, a victim to the treachery of the man she loves. Surely Heaven cannot always be unjust. Whilst I live! live! here, ha! ha! Fool that I am. Shipwrecked on a desert island in the midst of the Pacific! (Clarke, “Foul Play” 21)

The transfer of names and identities sustained by Devine-Dawes-Crosbie is signalled by the passage and, as Veronica Kelly has observed, the embryo of Dawes’s dilemma at Macquarie Harbour is also clearly evident (Kelly 40). There Dawes must decide between making his own escape to freedom and helping the entire marooned party reach safety, between his self-interest and his duty to society. Similarly Hazel favours settling on “Godsend Island” but Helen begs him to concentrate on escape and he concedes:

[W]e did not drift far from our course, and the beacon fire will attract the attention of a passing vessel – she will be saved; and I shall no longer be Robert Hazel the Inventor, the gentleman, the lover, I shall be Robert Seaton the convict, Robert Penfold the transported forger [erased: but duty and honor demand that I should set her free! free to wed her lover!] Here! (Clarke, “Foul Play” 31)

When rescue is imminent, Hazel exclaims to the retreating Helen:

In a few hours you will be clasped in the arms of him you love, and I shall be known for what I am – a convicted felon – yes, the social law is hard, but it is just. I was falsely accused, falsely convicted, but I am none the less degraded. (Clarke, “Foul Play” 31)

Dawes also fears his experiences as a convict have left him unfit for reintegration into society (341–42). But Dora’s faith in “Good Mr Dawes” (344) decides him in favour of maintaining the social ideal, willingly sacrificing his own freedom to the cause. The situation is less self-motivated in “Foul Play”; Helen’s father arrives and exclaims:

This is Robert Seaton – our gardener – a convict [erased: ticket of leave man!] . . . Young man, you must learn to look things in the face, this young lady is not of your station [erased: sphere, to begin], in the next

place she is engaged . . . Helen take my advice – shut your eyes to his folly, as I shall; think only of his good deeds . . . I cannot be harsh with you, you have saved my daughter's life, but you must forget her! Come Helen! come! (Clarke, "Foul Play" 33–34)

This has none of the finesse of Dawes's "reality check" when Dora declares he might be pardoned only to become her father's servant (331), but the moment is anticipated all the same. Once Seaton reveals he is the falsely-accused Reverend Penfold, Helen falls in his arms declaring him "my hero and my martyr" (Clarke, "Foul Play" 38). She determines to return to England and restore Penfold's good name. In the process she discovers her fiancé, Arthur Wardlaw, committed the crime for which Penfold was punished, shades of North and Dawes in the revised book of *His Natural Life*. Wardlaw goes insane once cornered, as does Clarke's Rex, but Helen manages to marry the man she has grown to love, a fate denied the erring Dora.

In his "Dedication" Clarke notes Reade had already "drawn the interior of a house of correction in England" (Clarke in Wilding iii). This refers to Reade's *It's Never Too Late To Mend* (1865), one of the author's most popular works. *It's Never Too Late* forced together a prose adaptation of Reade's stage melodrama *Gold!*, a topical hit in 1853, and the tale of a likeable offender, Robinson, who endures the "silent system" of a model prison before being transported to Australia. This aspect of the work was a thinly disguised attack on abuses of power at Birmingham gaol recently exposed by a government report.

Reade's critique is focused through a battle of wills between the prison's heroic chaplain, Reverend Eden, and the abusive commandant Hawes, suggesting Reverend North's objections to Frere's rule on Norfolk Island. In Reade's work, Josephs, a fifteen-year-old, is tortured at Hawes' command for a petty misdemeanour. The boy is doused with water, deprived of food, light, heat, and a bed, and subsequently suicides, exposing the prison to an inquiry. At the first performance of Reade's stage adaptation of *It's Never Too Late to Mend*, the depiction of Josephs' suicide caused "some of the most extraordinary theatrical rioting of Victorian times" (Elton Smith 36). Michael Hammet writes:

Louisa Moore, who played the boy, confessed that perhaps she "entered too thoroughly into the spirit of the part" when she allowed herself to fall upon the stage with an apparently alarming bang. Vining altered the scene on the second night. (14)

Reade's graphic on-stage depiction of Josephs' torture and death models Clarke's portrayal of "thin, fair, and delicate" Kirkland and his troubles at Port Arthur, one of the more notorious episodes in *His Natural Life* (449). Kirkland is put on the chain gang by Captain Burgess for blocking his ears to the commandant's blasphemies. That night he is gang raped in the convict "yard", leading him to attempt escape/suicide the

next morning (450–54). This earns him a sentence of one hundred lashes. When he faints during the punishment he is doused in water but soon discovered to be dead (466).

Other episodes in *It's Never Too Late to Mend* also find counterparts in *His Natural Life*. In both books the shocking incidents described above prompt sham inspections by corrupt officials. In Reade's work Hawes later singles out Robinson for special punishment to break Eden's influence in the gaol, anticipating Frere's tormenting of Dawes partly to incense North. And Reade's strait-jacketed prisoners are pinned to a wall, suggesting the torture of Dawes on Frere's "stretcher". Generally, however, Clarke's Reverend North is a flawed and far more human version of Reade's Eden. The latter is a hyperbolic embodiment of muscular Christianity whose example engenders Robinson's reform, not least through an emotional intervention during which Eden calls the prisoner "brother". Whatever the "influence" on North seeking Dawes' forgiveness and calling *him* "brother" (469), Clarke aims for a more detailed and "darker" account of the psychology of such characters.

THE "MATTER-OF-FACT" ROMANCE

While these "borrowings" suggest something of the general practice of writers of Victorian popular fiction, they are more significant for the alignment they suggest between Clarke's writing and Reade's style. This relates specifically to Clarke's use of historical "facts" in *His Natural Life*, emphasized by the references in the appendix to the revised book, and by the footnotes in the original serial, the latter labelling certain incidents "A Fact" (623). Reade was famous for his use of "facts" in his romances. His inspiration was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853 to support her representation of the treatment of slaves. The move suggested that "facts" provided novels with maximum potential to spark public reform. While no one could match the well of public feeling which Stowe tapped with *Uncle Tom*, Reade used his "facts" to expose abuses in the various institutions to which he turned his attention. In a less generous view they also acted as a justification for the inclusion of salacious details in his novels, details which drove up Reade's sales.

Reade actually collected facts by scouring newspaper sources and gathering his findings in copious notebooks and catalogued cards, creating a "system" with which he could manufacture fictions (Elton Smith, Burns). Ann-Mari Jordens characterizes Clarke's library as a collection of "source material for future novels based on research into contemporary records" (400), highlighting the correspondence between Clarke's and Reade's technique and consequent habits. Clarke's "facts" did impress Reade when sent a copy of *His Natural Life*. The British author replied that Clarke could "rely on my reading it – all the more that on glancing into it I see that several chapters are based on evidence". A postscript to the letter exposes the rapaciousness of Reade's own collecting: "Any

Australian journals reporting *Facts* adaptive to Fiction Dramatic or narrative will be gratefully received” (qtd in Edwards 401–02). In his “Dedication” to the revised book Clarke also plays up the reform potential of his fact-based work. Most critics have found his allusion to the continued transportation of French prisoners to New Caledonia belated or somewhat spurious. Again, a more pressing motive for Clarke’s use of “evidence” is to justify his work’s most sensational details. Clarke’s particular “facts” were always going to be controversial and most contemporary reviews of the revised book of *His Natural Life* mention its ability to shock (Hergenhan, “Contemporary” 52–53). *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* assured readers the novel’s “moral tone” was “pure” but acknowledged “scenes of the most terrible vice and crime” (11 April 1876). Such scenes made reviewers recommend caution as far as women readers were concerned. London’s *Saturday Review*, citing two male spaces in the Victorian home, declared *His Natural Life* “more fit for the table of the smoking-room or study than the drawing room”, the latter frequented by women (20 November 1875). Similarly London’s *Examiner* complained that the work’s innocuous format, “in three volumes and in an elegant cover”, belied horrid contents sure to “startle” unsuspecting “boarding school young ladies”. The paper declared the work reading fit for “men only” (11 December 1875).

Such comments sit awkwardly with the original publication of *His Natural Life* in the *Australian Journal*, subtitled “A Family Newspaper of Literature and Science”. The disjunction points, I believe, to Clarke’s determination to associate romance with the masculine charge of French realism, literature which for anglophone readers was emphatically for “men only” even if women did read it, and read it all the more enthusiastically for its reputation of impropriety (Flint 140). For my purposes, then, the actual identity of Clarke’s readership is less relevant than the identity his text allowed some of them to inhabit. This was of a modern man who endorsed challenges to the ellipses and hypocrisies of contemporary literature and society as long as they did not also bring down the hegemonic pillar of Christian faith or seriously undermine the social hierarchy. It is an identity readily apparent among Clarke’s fellow members of the Yorick Club or later in the “Cave of Adullam” (Elliott 90–106; 210–14). By writing “as if” for such readers, by writing “as if” for the club, “the smoking-room or study”, even when *His Natural Life* was found most often in “the drawing room”, the author demonstrated how romance could be “modern” and “masculine”, without sinking to the brutal and atheistic depths of the “followers of Balzac”.

That Clarke’s model in this pursuit was Reade explains why he might characterize the British writer in his “Café Lutetia” as “the only living *male* novelist” (Clarke in Hergenhan, *Colonial City* 338–39). As regards Reade’s “modernity”, an extravagant paean to “THIS GIGANTIC AGE” – the nineteenth century in comparison with over-lauded classical times – appears in Chapter 61 of *It’s Never Too Late To Mend*. There Reade claims his pen cannot encompass the titanic historical significance of such events as the Australian goldrush, a passage which surely appealed to Clarke (Reade, *Never*

338–39). It is appropriate, then, that Reade's system of fact-based romance should be characterized by Wayne Burns as a "steam engine for truth" (187). The steam engine invokes the sense of modernity associated with Reade's method, which was, after all, a modern British response to the French realist *avant-garde*. But it is a sense lost with the same years that have eroded Reade's reputation.

Similarly Clarke's use of "facts" might well seem an antiquated and idiosyncratic machine to the modern eye, but for his original readers it was a more than acceptable "steam engine for truth". Laurie Hergenhan writes that "of all the reviewers, including disapproving ones, only the writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (21 May 1874) questioned the realism of [Clarke's] novel" ("Contemporary" 56). Even if the *Sydney Morning Herald* review does question the overall realism of *His Natural Life*, it also noted that "[s]cattered throughout the work are pictures drawn with a bold vigour and reality, reminding one of passages in the pages of the best French novelists". As this review suggests, Clarke combined aspects of realism and romance. But the privileging of the realism-modernism trajectory in literary history has generally led Reade's and Clarke's combinatory technique to be positioned in an embarrassing backwater in the history of *realist* representation. For example, Elton Smith positions Reade "at the parting of the waves between realism and romanticism" while finding him a place in the literary hierarchy only in that he "was unquestionably . . . a forerunner of Emile Zola" (156; 105). This de-legitimizes what Reade was attempting to do for *romance*. For Clarke, in turn, the technique of integrating in his romance the realism found "in the pages of the best French novelists" represented a genuine, intellectual, and aesthetic programme, a kind of conservative manifesto for the perpetuation through modification of romance.

Significantly for *His Natural Life*, then, Reade's *It's Never Too Late To Mend* was subtitled "a matter-of-fact romance", epitomizing his method.⁵ But through the allusions to French novels in *His Natural Life*, it is Clarke, not Reade, who substantiates the technique as a tempered response to modern French literature. In these terms, the purpose of Clarke's generic choice was as much to contextualize facts within *the* romance of transcendent Christian meaning as it was to make his romance "factual", provable, self-justifying. This is evident in the most dramatic Providential action in the novel. Stephen Murray-Smith refers to "The Hurricane" chapter as "lengthy" and "heavily padded" (14), but it also showcases the way empirical observations are incorporated in the moral tale. To cite only one example, the "red light" which is "a forewarning of a cyclone" (676) becomes the "dull red glow" (680), the diabolical backdrop foreboding the climax of the intertwined relationships of Dawes, North, Frere, and Dora. A scientific (amoral) "fact" is consciously imbued with romantic (moral) meaning.

The significance of this aesthetic decision can hardly be underestimated. Clarke asserts that the "facts" of the material world are still legitimately to be contextualized by the romance of God's plan for humanity. Like Dawes, then, Clarke will not allow Dora to become a mere beast, but will determinedly preserve her spiritual life, the neglected, topical story of *His Natural Life*. For the colonial Australian author radical French real-

ism went “too far” in reducing “natural life” to the carnal; but old French romanticism made a mockery of the spiritual sphere. Reade’s “matter-of-fact” romances were preferred as a modified response to modern scientific materialism. Defendable facts housed in romances of the spirit offered what was to Clarke the only morally viable option for up-to-date and “masculine” writing for the mass market.

Endnotes

1. *His Natural Life* first appeared as a monthly serial in the *Australian Journal*, from March 1870 to June 1872, before it was radically reduced and revised by Clarke for publication in book form in 1874 (McLaren). Clarke also altered the first name of his heroine from ‘Dora’ in the serial to ‘Sylvia’ in the book. I am dealing here principally with the serial version, with all page references to Marcus Clarke, *His Natural Life*, ed. Stephen Murray-Smith (London: Penguin, 1970). I am also generally indebted to Ken Stewart, in particular to his identification of ‘an intertextual dialogue . . . through which *His Natural Life* establishes its difference, its complex meaning’ (Stewart 2).
2. Dora’s conversation is cut from Clarke’s revised book but the two references to *Paul et Virginie* remain. Clarke simply relies yet more heavily on his reader’s familiarity with the cultural status and meaning of Saint-Pierre’s work.
3. Admittedly no work by Zola appears in the catalogue of Clarke’s library, auctioned in 1874, and the British controversy over Zola was not sparked until 1884 when Vizetelly published *Nana* in translation, with other translations (including *Thérèse Raquin*) appearing in the following year (McLaren 342–60; Frierson).
4. Although I will discuss Clarke’s debt to Reade in some detail this is not to suggest he is the only writer of popular circulating-library fare from whom Clarke may have borrowed incidents. To cite one example, Edmund Yates’s *Black Sheep*, serialized in Dickens’ *All the Year Round* from August 1866 and readily available to Clarke, opens with a scapegrace son returning home to fight with his stepfather and to lean on his mother for money. She hands over diamonds which he liquidates in Amsterdam.
5. Reade’s *Hard Cash* (1863), *The Wandering Heir* (1872), and *Singleheart and Doubleface* (1882) also featured this subtitle.

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