‘Mind spewed’: Abjection in Austin Clarke’s *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*

I: abjection

In March 1919, Austin Clarke, aged twenty-two and already a celebrated poet – *The Vengeance of Fionn*, his long poem based on the story of Diarmuid and Grainne, was published, to somewhat hyperbolic acclaim, in 1917 – suffered a mental breakdown and entered St. Patrick’s Hospital in Dublin for treatment. His father’s death the previous November, and a troubled relationship with Lia Cummins contributed to his illness, a severe depression, the symptoms of which included amnesia, hallucination and anorexia.

Clarke published *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*, a long poem based on his experiences in St. Patrick’s, nearly fifty years after his hospitalisation, in 1966. In as far as any poem is ‘autobiographical’, *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust* is such a poem. It uses ‘real’, historically accurate, names of staff and patients, which confirm that the poem is set in 1919; the location, though not named, is easily identifiable as St. Patrick’s by the references to Swift. Maurice Devane, the protagonist, has symptoms and treatment almost identical to Clarke’s. (Maurice Devane, incidentally, was a pseudonym that Clarke used when writing letters to newspapers.) Shortly after his release from St Patrick’s, Clarke wrote a memoir entitled *The House of Terror*, in which he describes his stay in a first-person prose narrative, and it is likely that he used this unpublished piece in the composition of *Mnemosyne*. The important episode in the padded cell (section VI, Clarke 1974 335-336), for instance, is based on the prose source. This section of the poem, with its imagery of entombment and incontinence (both sexual and faecal), is crucial to any account of bodily

boundaries and their transgression in Clarke's poems. Pascale Amiot-Jouenne, in her article on centrality and marginality in *Mnemosyne*, takes the padded-cell episode as paradigmatic of the poem's description of mental illness and asylum life in its inversion, its "inward-outness" (Clarke 335).

At the physical centre (section IX of an 18-section poem) of his eccentric and marginal poem, however, Clarke places not his hero, but a terrifying apparition:

> *Timor Mortis* was beside him.
> In the next bed lolled an old man
> Called Mr. Prunty, smallish, white-haired
> Respectable. If anyone went past,
> He sat up, rigid, with pointed finger
> And shrieked: "Stop Captain, don't pass
> The dead body!" All day, eyes starting,
> Spectral, he shrieked, his finger darting.
> (339)

This is not the first time that a figure like Mr. Prunty appears in Clarke's work. In his novel *The Bright Temptation*, he is transported to seventh-century Co. Kerry and the Glen of the Madmen (Clarke 1932 220-1). Madmen who believe that their souls have died also appear in 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' (Clarke 1974 131-134) and 'Summer Lightning' (190-191).

To explain Clarke's interest in, and central placing of, the moribund emblem constituted by Mr Prunty, it is helpful to consider the psychoanalytic idea of abjection. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection is a borderline state between the harmony and continuity of pre-linguistic experience and the intervention of the symbolic that comes with the acquisition of language. The abject results from attempts preceding the full intervention of the symbolic to reject/expel the mother, and is necessary to ensure full separation from her.

The symbolic is not on its own strong enough to sustain the expulsion; there must be a parallel movement towards the abjection of the mother. After the successful imposition of the symbolic, abjection does not disappear but remains as a prop for the maintenance of the symbolic law. A society might use abjection in a ritualistic way in order to uphold the symbolic law and ensure its survival. These rituals concentrate on the main sites of abjection: the boundaries of the body. Kristeva uses the example of Old Testament dietary and corporeal prohibitions to illustrate the way in which certain bodily margins and the wastes they produce – particularly those associated with the maternal and the feminine – are presented as unclean. The abject, '[f]rom an analytic point of view is above all the ambiguous, the in-between, what defies boundaries, a composite resistance to unity.' (Lechte 161) It is 'what disturbs identity, system, order'. (Kristeva 4)

The abject disturbs identity, because it is, in common with the object – according to Kristeva, this is all it has in common with the object – opposed to the self. But where the object, through the subject's desire for meaning, draws the subject into a relationship of correspondence and analogy, the abject 'is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses' (2). From its excluded position, the abject continues to bother the subject, as something that once – pre-linguistically – might have been familiar, but is now loathsome, 'not-I'. The subject experiences this as a kind of suffering 'not […] repression, not the translations and transformations of desire […]I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other' (2). As we see with Kristeva's example of the 'most archaic form of abjection', food-loathing, this other's desire is crucial to the confusion of identity caused by abjection:

> "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me", who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*. […] it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which I become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. (3)

Unable, and not wishing to emerge into the symbolic, the self is abjected. This is comparable to Maurice's food-loathing:

> Weakening, he lay flat. Appetite
> Had gone. The beef or mutton, potatoes
> And cabbage – he turned from the thick slices
> Of meat, the greasy rings of gravy.
> Knife had been blunted, fork was thick
> And every plate was getting bigger.
> His stomach closed: He eyed the food,
> Disgusted: always beef or mutton,
> Potatoes, cabbage, turnips. Mind spewed,
> Only in dreams was gluttonous.
> (Clarke 333)

Maurice turns from the food that is proffered by authority, and he experiences the symptoms of disgust. The blunting and swelling of the utensils stress Maurice's surrealistic detachment from the food at the same time as they echo those symptoms – pains and spasms in the stomach, the swelling of the gorge before retching. He rejects the food as anterior to self, but recognises that there is also a desire to assimilate that food. Out of this ambivalence a reaction emerges: 'Mind spewed'. Here the reader tends silently to expand the meaning of Clarke's economical phrase to something like 'Maurice imagined spewing'. But read literally, it means the evacuation of the mind, the spitting out of self.

Maurice has spent this section of the poem (IV; 331-3) trying to recapture his identity, trying first to identify with his image in the mirror. When

that fails he listens to the sound of distant machinery, which he associates with an experience from his schooldays. Significantly, this recollection is of sitting beneath the boundary wall of another mental asylum. Pushed up against a physical boundary, Maurice gets 'memory afoot', but memory malfunctions and transforms the remembered scene into a mythic one:

> A sound of oriental greeting:
> Ramàyana, Bhagavad-gita,
> Hymnal of Brahma, Siva, Vishnu.
> 'The temple is gone. Where is the pather?'
> A foolish voice in English said:
> 'He's praying to his little Father.'
> (332)

Maurice looks to the maternal figure of memory for identity, but what memory gives him is this jumble of allusions to patriarchy. It is a scene of abjection because movements towards the exclusion of the mother are taking place (the vision concentrates exclusively on male, phallic deities) but there is a failure of the subject to emerge fully into a symbolic realm where the paternal law of language would make sense. Kristeva describes the abjection of self in terms very similar to these: '[the abject] is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it is none other than abject' (5). The abjected self is dominated by the drive to expel, he rejects all objects, preserving the want which, in abjection, is the precondition and correlative of desire, '[e]ven before things for him *are* – hence before they are signifiable – he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject' (6). Maurice's mind spews its gluttonously collected contents – the memory of the Asylum laundry, the Orientalist decor – because they are not

signifiable, not assimilable into the symbolic order. What remains is the void of want, 'edged' with prophylactic ritual in the form of food-loathing.

Conversely, when Maurice decides to eat again in section XI, he does so in recognition of his desire for his mother who, acting as the agent of a feminised Nature, has given him an object to desire; given him, psychoanalytically speaking, herself. The abject self does not 'recognise its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory' (Kristeva 5). Maurice, in his abjection, laments:

> "My mother" […] "and my sisters
> Have passed away. I am alone now,
> Lost in myself in a mysterious
> Darkness, the victim in a story."
> (335)

This, in Kristeva's terms, is the characteristic 'elaboration' of abjection: 'I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account, "all by himself", and, to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him' (6). Maurice recovers desire and its object with a gesture that reaches outside his 'own territory', outside its borders of abjection: '[p]ut out two fingers toward the wished-for' (343). As NeilCorcoran mentions, the absence of the expected noun conveys Maurice's quasi-erotic play with the fruit (Corcoran 50); but more than that, the line is a grammatical joke in which the absence of the expected grammatical object signifies the restoration of the psychoanalytic object.

Before this recovery can take place, however, there is another episode dealing with food-loathing and refusal, which substantially complicates the psychoanalytic model set up above. This is the scene (section VII) of Maurice's forced feeding.

Four men
Covered him, bore him into the ward.
The Doctor bared his sleeve to the forearm.
What was he trying to do? Arms rounding,
Held down the hunger-striker, falling
To terror, a tube forced halfway down
His throat, his mind beyond recall.
Choking, he saw a sudden rill
Dazzling as baby-seed. It spilled

In air. Annoyed, the Doctor drew
Back, glucosed milk upon his shoulder
And overall. The rubber spewed
As Maurice feebled against his holders
The noise and fear of death, the throttling.
Soon he lost all consciousness
And lay there, all the struggle forgotten,
The torture chamber and the pressure.
He woke in bed. The counterpane
Gentle with noon and rid of pain.
(336-7)

First of all, we are not dealing just with food-loathing in this passage. It uses Maurice's anorexia to gather together other forms of abjection which are illustrated at greater length elsewhere in the poem. In her discussion of Old Testament prohibitions, Kristeva identifies 'three main categories of abomination: 1) food taboos; 2) corporeal alteration and its climax, death; and 3) the feminine body and incest' (93). Clearly, the forced feeding here points to Maurice's decision not to eat in section IV, and also his reaching out of abjection to break his fast in section XI. The depiction of Maurice as a corpse '[c]overed', borne by four men (he later sees another force-fed patient on a 'bier') point to Mr Prunty, and the way that this terminally abject character is linked with Maurice's temporary, reversible abjection. As Mr. Prunty is at the centre of the whole poem, so this force-feeding scene is at the centre of Maurice's fast – his period of abjection (sections IV-XII). Finally, the seminal

consistency of the ‘glucosed milk’ recalls the agonised *coitus interruptus* of Maurice’s relationship with Margaret.

No real female bodies appear in *Mnemosyne*: women are hallucinations, personifications, unearthly screaming voices, at best benign maternal presences. Instead, Clarke displaces all the abjection traditionally associated with feminine bodies to the only tangible symbol of sexuality available in the asylum: semen. We might note in this context that contemporary psychiatric opinion in Ireland, unlike in Britain, regarded ‘insanity associated with masturbation […] as exclusively a male hazard’ (Robins 112). This is to draw away from the Kristevan scheme, since Kristeva divides sources of pollution into two categories: excremental – that which pollutes from without – and menstrual, internal pollution. She relates both of these to the mother’s body. ‘Neither tears nor sperm’ she asserts, ‘though they belong to the borders of the body, have any polluting value’ (71). But in this passage semen is associated with the self-expulsion characteristic of abjection: ‘a sudden rill/ Dazzling as baby-seed. It spilled/ In air’. Maurice spits out his generative faculty: it is difficult to think of a more precise (or more unusual) metaphor for the spitting out of selfhood. In the section immediately preceding the forced feeding scene, semen has been firmly linked to faeces as Maurice wakes to find himself ‘all shent’ after a dream of Margaret (336). Furthermore, Dr Leeper’s annoyance at Maurice spitting out milk onto his shoulder can be compared to the cruder exasperation of the warder who deals with Mr Prunty’s nightly defecation and confirms the outward manifestation of Maurice’s abjection by calling him ‘ “Dogsbody” ’ (339). The nightmarish quality of Dr Leeper’s movement, ‘sprang, incensed’, (337) is

paralleled by the warder's action: '[c]hristened his ankles with the keybunch', which in its inversion of a Christian rite has a diabolic aspect (339).

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the forced feeding episode, however, is the figure that Clarke uses first to link food refusal, bodily waste (including its ultimate manifestation, the corpse) and sexuality, and then to place these in a wider socio-political context: the hunger-striker. The level of irony involved in portraying Devane as a 'hunger-striker' is not at all easy to determine. It is related to his fantasies of Republican activism in which he is a hero in a romanticised adventure story (334), though more obliquely than we might at first assume. The indirect style of the narrative does not allow for a wholly ironic presentation of these episodes as the hyperbole and self-pity of a young man of nationalist sympathies who feels guilt at his non-participation in the Anglo-Irish war. Nor, however, can the figure be read solemnly as an indictment of a hospital regime as intransigent and coercive as the British government with regard to Irish Republican hunger-strikers. In his interrupted sleep, Maurice sees another patient undergo forcible feeding, a 'young Englishman' with whom Maurice at first wholly identifies:

> Dr Leeper sprang, incensed,
> At him with many hands, keeping
> Him down, but it was someone else
> The men were trying to suffocate.
> (337)

The Englishman is then presented in the conventional pose of the hunger-striking 'martyr', 'on a bier,/ Submissive to his fate' (VII*;* 337). Clarke clearly means to complicate any simple analogy between Maurice's treatment and that of Thomas Ashe or Terence MacSwiney. It is worth noting that Maurice Devane's experience of hospitalisation takes place about a year

before MacSwiney's death.[1] McCormack notes that *Mnemosyne* is 'an interiorized repetition both of non-engagement in significant moments of the nation's trauma and of particular strategies employed by those who were engaged, even to death.' (10) But that non-engagement extends to the poem's temporal frame, so that Maurice's hunger-strike might refer to the past – James Connolly's week-long hunger-strike of 1913, Thomas Ashe's death after bungled force-feeding in 1917 – or to the 'future' events surrounding MacSwiney, but not to the 1919 'present' of the poem. This minute temporal deflection reflects unease with the propensity of poetry to incorporate historical events within its own systems of meaning, which we might find unusual in Clarke's late poetry of local complaint. It is not, however, uncommon in his autobiographical writing. McCormack notes an occasion in *A Penny in the Clouds* in which Clarke garbles the Virgilian names of the Furies in order to suggest the alienation between himself and 'Margaret' and the irreconcilable otherness of her experience (McCormack 4-5). A similar motive animates his deflection of the immediate relevance of hunger-striking: a desire to record the political resonance of the term while suggesting ultimate difference between kinds of experience.

Another way, perhaps, to understand Clarke's introduction of the image of the hunger-striker is as representative of Maurice's desire to engage with, indeed to embody, a political and social reality from which his situation in the hospital excludes him entirely. He protests, then, not against rough medical treatment, but against the exclusion from society that incarceration in a mental

[1] Maurice Devane's stay in St. Patrick's extends from March 1919 to the late summer of that year. In June he breaks his fast by eating the strawberries. MacSwiney was arrested on 12th August 1920 and died on 24th October 1920, on the seventy-fourth day of his hunger-strike.

institution entails. The protest, appropriately, symbolises his exclusion by excluding everything, every object, from the empty site of the abjected body. His anorexia is an attempt to resist his incarceration, though it of course becomes merely a further element in it. Some psychoanalysts, especially those influenced by Melanie Klein, suggest that anorexia is a defence against the infantile fantasy of cannibalism, in which the infant swallows the object 'alive' and entombs it within the unconscious. Maud Ellmann, in her study of anorexia and hunger-striking, *The Hunger Artists*, makes a good case for identifying imprisonment (or, as she punningly terms it, 'encryptment') with eating and incorporation:

> [Klein's] Gothic fantasia of mansions, walls, crypts and dungeons, suggest that the very notion of enclosure derives from the dynamics of incorporation. In a case of claustrophobia, she argues that her patient's fears of being locked into a cage symbolize his deeper terror of the vengeful objects imprisoned in his gluttonous unconscious. (Ellman 41)

Maurice finds that his unconscious, as it expresses itself in his dreams, is 'gluttonous'; and, interestingly, some Gothic paraphernalia haunts his self-diagnosis of claustrophobia even as Maurice is at pains to resist it:

> Shriek after shriek
> From the female ward. No terror
> Of clanking chains, poor ghost in sheet,
> Vampire or bloodless corpse, unearthed,
> In Gothic tale but only blankness.
> Storm flashed.
> (337)

Maurice rejects food in a refusal to incorporate the hostile institution and relaxes his regimen only when finds it safe to incorporate an object – his mother, symbolised by the strawberries.

This does not, however, wholly account for the disruption to the model of the abjected self introduced by the politicised image of the hunger-striker.

Hunger-strikers abject themselves in the service of a political cause: as the hunger-strike progresses, the activist becomes more like 'the utmost of abjection' (Kristeva 4), the corpse, and may, if the strike is prolonged, actually become that most abject of wastes, which in itself means nothing, 'no longer matches and no longer signifies anything' (Kristeva 4). But the hunger-striker's possession of intention also offers a challenge to the idea of the abjected self. The act of deliberately starving oneself to death is construed, regardless of support for or opposition to the cause concerned, as the opposite of the abjection of Mr Prunty and his various prototypes. The hunger-striker has a living mind in a body being allowed to die, as opposed to a dying mind in a vital body.

The 'obvious' explanation – that to go on hunger-strike is a conscious act, whereas the food-loathing provoked by the abjection of self is governed by the unconscious – is inadequate. As Kristeva points out, abjection challenges the theory of the unconscious:

> The unconscious contents remain here *excluded* but in a strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive *position* to be established – one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration. As if the fundamental opposition were between I and Other or, in a more archaic fashion, between Inside and Outside. As if such an opposition subsumed the one between Conscious and Unconscious […] (7)

The distinction between I and Other, already pronounced in Maurice's refusal of food, is emphasised by forced feeding, the violent invasion of the borders of abjection he has constructed around the self. This dynamic of attack and resistance subsumes consciousness: 'Soon he lost all consciousness'. 'All' stresses that this is not just a faint, but a figure for the loss of intentionality.

The insentient things around him assume his human existence, his relation to the world: ‘The counterpane/ Gentle with noon and rid of pain’.

Maurice as hunger-striker loses his humanity, just as the madmen of ‘Summer Lightning’ do. The hunger-striker becomes the politicised image of individual abjection. Like the abject, the hunger-striker construes the world in terms of ‘I’ and ‘Other’, embodying reactive, oppositional politics. Hunger-strikers must reorient their relationship to the Other from a model of desire to a model of exclusion. Once the act of starvation is embarked upon, for both the hunger-striker and the abjected self, the purpose of the hunger becomes irrelevant, since intentionality is subsumed under the opposition of ‘I’ and ‘Other’. This is something strikingly realised in a single gesture in Yeats’s play *The King’s Threshold* (1904, revised 1921). After the entreaties of Seanchan’s townspeople and his lover Fedelm have failed to get the poet to break his fast, the King offers him food with his own hand. Seanchan ‘*pushes bread away, with Fedelm’s hand*’ and says, ‘We have refused it’ (Yeats 140). The gesture allows Seanchan to take on equal authority to the king, by the assumption of the royal plural pronoun, but it is also an abject admission that intentionality has been revoked, ascribed to another, just as the institutionalised hunger-striker voids him/herself of responsibility for his/her starvation and ascribes it to the institution.

However, while the abjected self – the anorexic – maintains the void of want in place of the unconscious/conscious ‘I’, for the hunger-striker, a voided ‘I’ is intolerable. The cause, the ‘purpose’ of the hunger-strike expropriates and ‘fills’ that void, making the increasingly wasted body a site of ideology. The body which in threatening to become a corpse threatens the system

around it with its meaninglessness, can thus enter signification. The body, however, continues to resist the imposition of meaning upon it. In the force-feeding scene these dynamics of imposition and resistance become visible. By force-feeding him, the hospital authorities turn Maurice's inchoate, anorexic protest into a hunger-strike. He struggles to maintain the borders of his empty body, his non-identity as 'anonym', while the doctor tries to give him a self, a name, by forcibly inserting food into his abject body. Dr Leeper's violence is a ham-fisted attempt to drag Maurice into the symbolic. In one sense, it figures the violence of the subject's entry into the symbolic, giving a meaning ('the hunger-striker') to Maurice, reinterpreting his suffering as the resonance of that term within Irish political culture. Maurice's final acquiescence in the symbolic project of naming comes when he names or misnames his condition, ' "Claustrophobia" ', and is rewarded with removal to the social space of the dormitory (337). Equally important, however, he is shown struggling against both entry into the symbolic and the use of his body for the purposes of signification.

II: STRUCTURE

Drawing attention to Maurice Devane's abjection elucidates one of the most puzzling features of *Mnemosyne*: the apparent early recovery of its protagonist and the slackening of pace in the final seven sections of the poem, as well as the apparent relapse of section XVI. McCormack suggests that the use of the title 'Mr Devane' draws Maurice back to normal forms of social interaction (254), Harmon that Maurice's lie about his Uncle George suggests a reawakening of interpersonal perceptiveness (218). But these are fairly small advances to set against Maurice's continued Orientalist

hallucinations, his inability to make sense of the words he tries to read, the evocation of Lear and the Fool (349-50). Section XVI challenges our assumption that Maurice has 'recovered' in section XII, and the related misconception that recovery from mental illness comes in the form of an epiphany, instead of as a series of provisional advances and setbacks. Corcoran, clearly baffled by this, comments with regard to the final sections of the poem:

> It is impossible, in these sections, to trace any process or progress of further resolution, any gradual growth towards the light, in Maurice; and eventually, his becoming "Rememorised" in the final part of the poem is bound to seem abrupt and perfunctory, especially as the rhythms of the concluding lines are casual to the point of the headlong, as they slip and tumble and gabble flatly down the page (Corcoran 50).

He argues that these tumbling and gabbling lines enact a return to a quotidian world where the imagery of Gate, Garden and Fountain is recognised for the mentally dangerous myth it is. Corcoran recognises Clarke's unease with myth's mystical, consolatory treatment of violence and suffering, though the quotidian, commercial world of tuns of Guinness, shares and dividends, is not Clarke's only (or even main) resource in the expression of that unease.

This quotidian space is above all a *nameable* one. Section XVIII presents a return to the 'local and contingent' by juxtaposing a number of proper names: 'Maurice Devane', 'Steeven's Lane', 'Guinness's', 'Watling Street', 'Cornmarket', 'Thomas Street' with the imagery of 'Gate', 'Garden' and 'Fountain', which are now revealed to name a particular state of mind which Maurice has apparently transcended (351-2). The reader is prepared for this effect throughout the second half of the poem, but especially in sections XV and XVII, where Maurice's desire to name his surroundings is given a social or

political context. Section XV shows us Maurice's increasing interest in identifying others not just by their appearance or actions (or by a pun, so Dr Leeper always springs or leaps), but by their race or social class, that is, by the standards of the world outside the hospital (346-49). This interest in categorisation moves Maurice away from the timeless space of myth, showing him to be situated in a particular historical period and a particular geographical space in which a mixed-race man is associated with the 'jungle' or the genteel speaking of French 'for practice' is felt to be comically incompatible with homicidal tendencies (347). Maurice begins to do what in section VII was done to him: he names and classifies. Section XVII, in which Maurice, out on day release to the Phoenix Park with the paternal Mr Rhys, names compulsively the things he sees around him, marks further mastery of symbolic codes. A self-reflexive facility is evident in this passage, as Maurice names the flowers he sees: 'marigold,/ *Clarkia* and rose-beds' (350, emphasis added), and as he re-enters the environs of the asylum, the poet names a troubling, mythicising facet of his own imagination: 'Poetic Personification:/ Hope frowned' (351).

However, the need to name, and the successful act of naming, may not be evidence enough of the subject's abandonment of abjection. As in the final lines of section VII, it might rather indicate simple acquiescence in a signifying system over which the abject self exerts no control. It might also indicate fear, the 'terror' of Clarke's early memoir, the 'falling/ To terror' that Maurice experiences as he is named as a 'hunger-striker' (337). Kristeva reads phobia as a form of abjection; phobia is the '[m]etaphor of want' (35), that is, the basic want that constitutes the abject void. The centrepiece of her discussion of phobia is the phobic's linguistic agility, a characteristic noticed by Freud in his

treatment of the phobic child whom he calls Little Hans. Adult phobics too, are verbally dextrous, though their speech differs from their juvenile counterparts' by being

> as if void of meaning, traveling at top speed over an untouched and untouchable abyss […] It happens because language has then become a counterphobic object; it no longer plays the role of miscarried introjection, capable, in the child's phobia, of revealing the anguish of original want. (Kristeva 41)

Maurice Devane is not, except by his dubious self-diagnosis (337), a phobic. But *Mnemosyne* is a poem possessed by fear, which manifests itself not only in frequent descriptions of Maurice's 'terror', but as the linguistic agility of the narrative. The linguistic structures of the poem resemble those of the child phobic more than the adult, but as Kristeva implies, the writer is someone who is always deprived of 'the assurance that mechanical use of speech ordinarily gives us' (38). For the writer, language is not a counterphobic object, quite the reverse:

> the phobic object is a proto-writing, and conversely, any practice of speech, inasmuch as it involves writing is a language of fear. […] Not a language of the desiring exchange of messages or objects that are transmitted in a social contract of communication and desire beyond want, but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges. The one who tries to utter this "not yet a place", this no-grounds, can obviously only do so backwards, starting from an over-mastery of the linguistic and rhetorical code. But in the last analysis he refers to fear (Kristeva 38).

Rhetorical 'over-mastery' in order to delimit and 'edge' a void of pure, abject want: this offers a very different way of understanding the structure of *Mnemosyne*. Hitherto, the poem has always been understood as a quest narrative driven by desire, culminating in recognition of the nature of that desire and progress towards health. But to read it in that way leaves us with Corcoran's problem of the early climax and 'perfunctory' ending, and we might

add, the problems of sections XIV and XVI, in which, though they occur after the 'recovery', Maurice is shown as institutionalised and delusional respectively.

'[T]here are lives not sustained by *desire*,' writes Kristeva, 'since desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*' (6). There are poems like this too, and *Mnemosyne* is one of them. Read as a linear progress narrative, it fails, and fails precisely at the point when objects (strawberries, mother, Nature) appear to challenge Maurice's abjection. Instead, the poem is a group of scenes or sites arranged around a central point, so that the linear 'journey' between them is effaced. This central point is the account of Mr Prunty's belief that he is a corpse, and his nightly defecation. Mr Prunty is archetypally abject, the epitome of abjection. He is the ultimate waste product, the cadaver, his empty body bordered and delimited by institutional ritual. At the same time, the borders of Mr Prunty's 'corpse' exist only to be breached, by his anal incontinence, his screaming, and in section XI by his 'gobbling'. The reason why Mr Prunty, and not Maurice, forms the centre of this poem, is given in the first words of section IX, Mr Prunty's allegorical name: '*Timor Mortis*'. Fear writes the 'no grounds' of Mr Prunty's body, of the hospital itself. Fear produces the neologism, the syntactical and linguistic enigmas which characterise Clarke's poems; fear produces *writing*: 'The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs' (Kristeva 38). In *Mnemosyne*, the signs that prevent Maurice becoming Mr Prunty are arranged in roughly concentric groups. These groups enact the poem's themes of borders and boundaries: they are the structural equivalent of the

asylum walls, the padded cell, the strait-jacket, the body – in section XIII, Maurice's ribcage is 'cage' and 'straight-jacket' [*sic*] (344).

The outer edges of the poem, sections I, XVII, XVIII, deal with approaches to and retreats from the 'no-grounds' of the asylum. These are the sections which beguile the reader into believing that the events which occur between them constitute a progress narrative, because they seem to follow a pattern of departure and return. Before Maurice can leave the hospital, he has to visit the sites that he encountered on his way into it:

> Cabs ranked at Kingsbridge Station, Guinness
> Tugs moored at their wooden quay
> […]
> How could Maurice Devane
> Suspect from weeping-stone, porch, vane
> The classical rustle of the harpies,
> Hopping in filth among the trees,
> The Mansion of Forgetfulness
> Swift gave us for a jest?
> (I; 327-8)

> The Guinness tugs were roped
> Along the quay, cabs ranked
> Outside the Railway Station:
> […]
> He walked into his darkness.
> Classical rustle of Harpies,
> Their ordure at Swift's Gate.
> (XVII; 351)

As he leaves in section XVIII, the rhyme riche 'Devane/ vein' reminds the reader of 'Devane/ vane' in section I. Clearly, changes have been made in Maurice's condition in the intervening sections (we cannot forget that he has been '[r]ememorised') and the echoes of the first section in the last are meant to draw attention to this, but the parallelism of the first and final stanzas is not sufficient evidence alone for reading Maurice's story as a quest narrative which enacts departure, initiation, and return.

That *Mnemosyne* is structured other than to a prescription of desire is made clearer by the second group of episodes, which all deal with the institutional politics of the asylum, and Maurice's struggles to place himself within it. This is by far the largest group, encompassing sections II-V, X, and XIV-XVI. Sections II-V address Maurice's solipsism, his search for Mnemosyne, and the beginnings of the Gate, Garden and Fountain mythology in his dreams. The later episodes develop his mythography, while expanding Maurice's social awareness to include the other patients. So much of this material, again, seems to refer to quest narrative that it is tempting to conclude that is what *Mnemosyne* is. Section III, for example, seems to be preoccupied with the madmen's quest to find their own selves. But the jingling inanity of the rhymes in the last line of each quatrain and the tautology 'As if they had lost something/ They could not find' (330) make a parody of their quest. Maurice himself is not even involved in the parody: 'Looking down from the bars/ With mournful eye', slightly indignant at his exclusion, 'Why/ should they pretend they did not see him', but maintaining the boundary that keeps his abject self from others, who are '[g]esticulating like *foreigners*' (331, emphasis added). Maurice embarks on his own 'quests', but they are marked by the lack of precisely that compulsion which makes the quest narrative itself. In each, apparent desire shades into exclusion: the memory of schooldays offers a possibility for self-identification, but becomes the boundary wall of another asylum (332). Even a happy dream, like that of the 'little Jewish boys' and '[g]arlanded, caressing girls' who point towards a symbolic order which will make Maurice himself a father, 'Love/ Fathered him with their happiness', is beset by images of a 'gate', a 'pale'. (334) In fact, 'fathered' itself is

ambiguous, meaning both ‘conceived’ and ‘made a father’, showing Maurice to be that fearful child who has ‘swallowed up his parents too soon’ (Kristeva 6). Maurice is really no more the systematic quester after Mnemosyne than he is the ‘Daring Republican of hillside farm-yards’ (334); he is a wanderer, a stray:

> The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself) and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. […] Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichean, he divides, excludes […] Instead of sounding himself as to his “being,” he does so concerning his place: “Where am I?” instead of “Who am I?” A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. (Kristeva 8)

Having spent the first sections of the poem trying to recover his identity, asking ‘Who?’, Maurice’s first direct speech is ‘ “Where am I?” ’ (332). Placing, separating, situating: this is Maurice’s interest in the social class and former occupations of his fellow-patients (346-9), it is an interest in order and hierarchy made abstract, divorced from the will to progress through that hierarchy. The fluid, abject ‘confines’ of Maurice’s space – the asylum – determine his wandering.

A final, innermost group of episodes, clustered around the crux of Mr Prunty, deals directly with the abjection of the patients. This may have a theological bent, as in section VIII, or political implications, as in the ‘hunger-striker’ of section VII, or its emphasis may be familial and sexual, as in section VI. The ‘recovery’ sections XI-XIII also belong to this group, since they deal with the partial recuperation of desire. But as we have seen, Maurice brings with him into the symbolic ineradicable traces of abjection. Some of the

clearest articulations of his abjection occur after his decision to eat, in section XIII:

> He lay there hourly, puzzled by voices
> Below in the forbidden Garden
> Beyond the Gate, from his own void.
> But all the summer maze was guarded.
>
> Often he touched the hardened cage
> Around him with its band of steel-hoops.
> […]
> He wondered why he had been straight-laced
> Straight-jacketed.
> But soon his suture would unseam
> His soul be rapt.
>
> (344)

The mythology of Gate, Garden and Fountain is undisturbed here, as it will remain until the end of section XVII. It seems that Maurice has actually enlarged upon the mythography, adding to it a guarded 'maze', which again figures abjection: a maze consists of boundaries constructed to enclose nothing. Maze, Gate, Garden and Fountain are productions, like the 'voices' that he hears, of Maurice's 'void', the emptiness that is where his self should be. In the second stanza, Maurice considers the physical boundaries that he has made for himself and imagines them dissolving. Although this stanza is sometimes read as hopeful in tone (see for example, Harmon 217), Maurice retains the dualism that has sustained his abjection, seeing his body as prison and strait-jacket. He imagines his release as a kind of dissolving, a liminal, boundary-defying, abject movement. The ambiguity of 'rapt' suggests both the release of his enraptured soul and its continued imprisonment ('wrapped') in his abjected body. Although these reflections occur after the 'recovery' of sections XI-XII, their imagery of body-as-site connects them to the innermost grouping of *Mnemosyne*'s concentric arrangement.

These suggested groupings are by no means rigid or exclusive, as even a cursory reading of the poem shows. But a view of the poem as a concentric arrangement of episodes with fear at its crux makes its structure more intelligible, consistent with both its imagery of abjection and its linguistic 'over-mastery', than an attempt to impose the pattern of the progress narrative upon it. *Mnemosyne* is not a journey towards epiphanic recovery; it is, as Harmon comments, 'more concerned with creating the experience of incarceration and institutionalised violence' (Harmon 205). This is also true of the poem's structure, the concentric patterns of which owe more to the abject construction of borders around an empty 'self', than the questing pattern of the object-driven desire narrative. In *Mnemosyne*, Clarke tries to portray the abject itself, rather than drawing on its repressed power to move Maurice away from pollution and towards healing. In doing so, he creates a hypostatised, petrified poem that effaces goal-oriented movement. The Irish space negotiated in *Mnemosyne* is not so much a national one in which the bodies of its citizens move and act, but the space of the Irish body itself. The poem's rejection of a narrative of simple recovery and progress, however, complicates analogies between Maurice's body and the body politic of the emergent Irish Free State. Instead of presenting us with a teleological allegory of national recovery and renewal, *Mnemosyne* invites us to focus on the politicised body as real. In its set-pieces of struggle, we see how it might be possible for the writer (and the nation), frightened to death, to 'come to life again in signs'. (Kristeva 38).

WORKS CITED

Amiot-Jouenne, Pascale, 'Inward-Outness' : Ou le Rapport au Centre dans *Mnemosyne Lay In Dust* d'Austin Clarke', *Etudes Irlandaises*. (Spring 2002) 49-63

Corcoran, Neil, 'The Blessings of Onan: Austin Clarke's *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*', *Irish University Review*, 13:1, (Spring 1983), 43-53

Clarke, Austin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Liam Miller, Dublin: Dolmen, 1974

__. *The Bright Temptation*, (1932), Dublin: Dolmen, 1965

__. *A Penny in the Clouds*, (1968), Dublin: Moytura, 1990

__. *Selected Poems*, ed. W.J. McCormack, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991

Ellmann, Maud,*The Hunger Artists*, London: Virago, 1993

Goodby, John, ' "The Prouder Counsel of Her Throat": Towards a Feminist Reading of Austin Clarke', *Irish University Review* 29:2, (Autumn/Winter 1999), 321-40

__. *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

Harmon, Maurice. *Austin Clarke: A Critical Introduction*. Dublin: Wolfhound, 1989

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1982

Lechte, John, *Julia Kristeva*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990

McHugh, Roger, 'The Plays of Austin Clarke', *Irish University Review* 4:1 (Spring 1974), 52-64

Robins, Joseph, *Fools and Mad: A History of the Insane in Ireland*, Dublin: Institute of Public Adminstration, 1986

Sheehy Skeffington, Hannah 'Reminiscences of an Irish Suffragette', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, ed. Angela Bourke *et al*, vol. 5, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002) 91-99

Yeats, W.B., *The King's Threshold*, *Collected Plays* (1934), Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992, 107-143