

A Submerged Self: Austin Clarke's 'The Frenzy of Suibhne'¹

Hiroko Ikeda

Austin Clarke's 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' (1925) is among his early poems that

1 This paper is a developed version of the section about Austin Clarke in my Japanese article, 池田寛子「引き裂かれた心の行方——現代アイルランド文学におけるスウィーニー伝説の再生と変容」『英文学評論』(Hiroko Ikeda, 'Beyond the Divided Mind: The Rebirth and Transformation of *Buile Suibhne* in Modern Irish Literature', *Review of English Literature*) 90 (2018), 23–55. The outline of the Suibhne legend given there in Japanese shall be repeated here in English. Metamorphosis and exile are the key features of the Suibhne legend. Behind them lies the conflict between Christianity and an older religion to which Suibhne belongs. Enraged by Suibhne's blasphemous behaviour, St. Ronan curses Suibhne. Ill-fated Suibhne is struck by madness during the battle. Targeted by soldiers, he flees to the woods, believing himself to be a bird. He wanders all over Ireland, living among trees. And yet, his human nature is not completely gone. Twice he visits his former wife, Eorann, but does not stay long there. Once he is rescued and brought back to his kingdom, but a mill-hag tempts him to show her a leap, so he goes out of the castle, resuming the life of a bird. In Scotland he comes across another mad man, and makes friends with him. After Suibhne meets St. Moling, the process of reconciliation with Christianity begins. Unfortunately, while drinking milk, Suibhne is killed by a swineherd who is enraged by a false rumor that his wife is having a love affair with Suibhne for whom she

take inspiration from early Irish literature. It is included in his fourth collection *The Cattle-drive in Connaught*. Clarke was probably the first Irish writer who produced a work centering on the ancient Irish king, Suibhne. However, he was not the first to notice the value of the Suibhne story, as he notes that 'George Moore regarded it as one of the great stories of the world'². Clarke considers that the story 'has escaped attention' even after the publication of J. G. O'Keeffe's bilingual edition *Buile Suibhne* in 1913³.

At the early stage of his career, Clarke was heavily under the influence of the Celtic Revival⁴. Besides Suibhne we can find in Clarke's early work most celebrated legendary characters in Irish myth and legend such as Fionn ('The Vengeance of Fionn', 1917), Mannanaun Mac Lir ('The Son of Lir', 1925), Curoi Mac Dara who belongs to the divine race, Tuatha de Danaan ('Lad Made King', 1925), not to mention Cuchulain⁵. Clarke produced two poems based on anecdotes about Cuchulain, those being, 'The Death of Cuchullin' in *The Sword of the West* (1921) and 'The Circuit of Cuchullin' in *The Cattle-drive in Connaught and Other Poems* (1925)⁶. We are concerned here with Suibhne's position in Clarke's

\provides milk every day, at the request of St. Moling. The saint buries Suibhne as a Christian.

2 Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2009), 543. Hereafter the title is abbreviated as CP followed by page numbers.

3 J. G. O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne: (The Frenzy of Suibhne) Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt: A Middle Irish Romance* (London: The Irish Texts Society, 1913).

4 The title poem in the collection 'The Cattle-drive in Connaught' is based on 'The Pillow Talk at Cruachan' from *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, a most representative legendary tale written in Old Irish.

5 While Clarke uses the spellings 'Cuchullin' and 'Sweeny' in his poems, 'Cuchulain' and 'Sweeney' are more general Anglicized spellings to be found to date.

6 Austin Clarke, *The Sword of the West* (Dublin: Maunsell & Roberts, 1921), Austin Clarke, *The Cattle-drive in Connaught and Other Poems* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925).

active involvement in the Irish-language tradition.

It was around the beginning of Clarke's career as a poet that the 1916 Easter Rising took place, and this was followed by the most violent stage of Ireland's national movement for independence (1919–1923). It was also the time of Clarke's personal crisis due to his tragic love affair. Part II of 'The Death of Cuchullin' is a poem about the end of love⁷, behind which could lie Clarke's own emotional turmoil, but he removed that part from the final version of the poem⁸. Around that time Cuchulain was firmly established as a national icon symbolic of the heroic sacrifice of the Rising. Understandably, this warrior hero was not particularly suitable to convey Clarke's inner struggle, but Suibhne could share Clarke's inexplicable suffering from the loss of mind. By delving into the mindscape presented in 'The Frenzy of Suibhne', the following analysis intends to reveal echoes of Clarke's preoccupation with that which seems to be lost to him but remains deep inside him in the light of his biographical and historical background.

I

The calamity of a man losing his mind and memory is at the heart of the poem. The story of the loss of 'self' which unfolded in this poem is also that of its possible recovery, and by extension, of the potential awakening of a hidden,

7 Clarke, *The Sword of the West*, 53–9.

8 Clarke, *CP*, 80–108. The final version of 'The Death of Cuchullin' is given a new title 'The Music-Healers', and the deleted Part II forms a different poem entitled 'O Love, There Is No Beauty', most likely because it can stand on its own independent of the story about Cuchulain's death. The two poems can be found in Clarke's *Collected Poems*.

submerged, or repressed 'self'. The speaker's double identity is epitomized in two names, 'Suibhne' and 'Sweeny'. Despite the title of the poem 'The Frenzy of Suibhne', 'Suibhne' cannot be found in its main text. 'Sweeny', one of Anglicized spellings for 'Suibhne', appears instead, even though the speaker announces the death of 'Sweeny'⁹. As he claims in the last stanza, 'how can they find my name', it seems that he has been trying to conceal his name, or he has already forgotten his name. Since he is convinced that no one will find it out, it is never clear whether he is 'Suibhne', 'Sweeny', both or neither.

In the original story the reader occasionally finds the king completely bereft of the memory of his existence as a human being, while Suibhne's self-consciousness as a king surfaces again and again in intriguing and agonizing ways. In a state of self-division, Suibhne can objectively describe himself in the state of a bird as if he were referring to the state of somebody else, as is clearly shown in the lines addressed to soldiers, "O men of Dal Araidhe, / you will find in the tree in which he is / the man whom you seek"¹⁰. It is when Suibhne comes to himself and fully realizes his present state as a bird, that an inexplicable impulse drives him to compose exquisite poems of lamentation or exultation¹¹. The high quality

9 The title of the poem 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' is identical with a parenthesized part of the title of Clarke's source book O'Keeffe's *Buile Suibhne: (The Frenzy of Suibhne) Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt: A Middle Irish Romance*. O'Keeffe uses the Irish name of the king, 'Suibhne', throughout his book even in the part of English translation.

10 O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne*, 17.

11 Sections 68 and 69 capture the moment when Suibhne starts composing a poem:
68 On a certain occasion Suibhne happened to be in Luachair Deaghaidh on his wild career of folly: he went thence in his course of madness until he reached Fiodh Gaibhle of clear streams and beautiful branches. In that place he remained a year and during that year his food consisted of blood-red, saffron holly-berries and dark-brown

of lyrics attributed to Suibhne contributes to the emotional impact of the legend which has survived across the centuries¹².

In Clarke's 'The Frenzy of Suibhne', the speaker's feelings rarely find direct expressions, and his self-division is projected onto his surroundings. At the outset of the poem, the speaker is telling someone to run:

Run, run to the sailmaker —
 While I pluck the torn white hedges
 Of sea to crown my head —
 And tell him to bind hard the canvas
 For the waves are unhorsed to-night;
 I cracked a thought between my nails
 That they will light a candle
 When I swim from the loud grass
 To the holy house of Kieran.

Storm is masted in the oakwood
 Now and the fire of the hags
 Blown out by the tide; (Clarke, *CP*, 124)

\ acorns, and a drink of water from the Gabhal, that is, the river from which the wood is named. At the end of that time deep grief and heavy sorrow took hold of Suibhne there because of the wretchedness of his life; whereupon he uttered this little poem: 69 'I am Suibhne, alas! / my wretched body is utterly dead, / evermore without music, without sleep, / save the sougning of the rude gale [...] (O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne*, 131)

12 Verses attributed to Suibhne occupy the largest part of *Buile Suibhne*, and some of them have been highly regarded and repeatedly translated as independent poems. A rich variety of English versions attest to the attraction and value of verse sections.

Since no one seems to be around, he is most likely to be talking to himself. What is also notable here is that the speaker sees a seascape in the landscape or vice versa, as he is going to swim in the 'grass', taking 'oakwood' as a sort of mast and seeing the fire blown out by the tide. The double vision on one level reflects his sense of being torn, which is also a state of being in two spaces at the same time.

His swimming through the grass can be a metaphor of his spiritual journey toward his new 'self' or away from his former 'self', since what he sees as external reality seems to correspond to what is happening in his mind as well. Looking through the heavy rain, the speaker closely follows the movement of 'a tall man', who is later referred to as 'Red Swineherd', chasing 'black swine', and the relationship between them could be a mirror image of that between the speaker and his 'self':

[...] black swine
 Ran under the fences
 Of rain for a tall man
 Followed, his one eye
 Redder than grey turf
 When it is stirred: (Clarke, *CP*, 125)

Rain creates 'fences' which not only serve to block the view but also to connect the sky and the land, blurring the border between them. They invite parallels with subtle conditions in which the speaker and his 'self' are divided as well as united.

Like the legendary Suibhne who half-believes himself to be a bird and behaves like a bird, the speaker in the poem looks like half a bird, nesting 'in the drenching ivy', having 'talons' and 'feathers' and running '[o]n the oak-wood' (Clarke, *CP*, 126). He sees 'The wild-eyed man of the water', probably his own reflection

on the water, as if it were somebody else:

Garlic was good there and the pignut;
 Upon the clean tops of the wells
 A tender crop was rooted
 But the wild-eyed man of the water
 Was feathered like a hawk to the foot. (Clarke, *CP*, 124-25)

Considering that the speaker is torn between the state of a bird and that of a man, the cry of a bird that he hears 'down a dark hollow [o]f sloe-trees' may also be his own voice echoing in the depth of his mind.

There is a shocking moment when it seems that the speaker has completely lost his 'self' or mind. It is in stanza nine of thirteen stanzas that he announces for the first time, 'Sweeny is dead'. If the speaker is 'Sweeny', this is a declaration of his own death, which is a response to a juggler revealing the king's wife's second marriage by crying, 'O she has been wedded / To-night, the true wife of Sweeny, / Of Sweeny the King!' (Clarke, *CP*, 126). This leads the speaker 'I' to envision 'a pale woman', who must be 'the true wife of Sweeny', going to 'the new bed', '[h]alf clad' (Clarke, *CP*, 126). Her marriage is likely to have been prompted by the general belief in the death of the missing king, her husband, considering that a hundred men are 'hauling a slab / Upon the great dolmen / Of Sweeny the King' (Clarke, *CP*, 127).

Now nobody seems to think that the king is still alive except the 'heads' with the knowledge that 'I', the speaker, is 'Sweeny', who has lost his mind:

I heard the heads talking
 As they dripped on the stake:

Who runs with the grey moon
When ravens are asleep?
It is Sweeny, Little Sweeny
Looking for his mind. (Clarke, *CP*, 126)

Instead of admitting that he himself is 'Sweeny', 'I' declares again:

But Robbers, dark Robbers, I tell ye
 That Sweeny is dead! (Clarke, *CP*, 126)

Towards the end of the poem, we may catch a glimpse of the possibility that he might recover his mind:

But how can mind hurry
 As reeds without feet,
 And why is there pain in
 A mind that is dead? (Clarke, *CP*, 127)

This is the first and last time the speaker mentions 'pain', while it may be that he has been tormented by unspeakable pain all the time. A remarkable contradiction that he seems to be aware of is that he feels 'pain' in a mind that is supposed to be dead. Once he accepts the pain as his own, he might be able to regain his mind.

As a notable difference from the original story, Harmon has pointed out that the 'sexual betrayal' of the king's wife looms large in this poem as 'the single, most powerful cause of his madness'¹³. The stress that Clarke has placed on his

13 Maurice Harmon, *Austin Clarke, 1896–1974: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin:

queen's change of mind can be in part associated with the unfortunate consequence of Clarke's love affair in 1920¹⁴. His fiancée, Geraldine Cummins was known as poet, playwright, psychic and feminist, but Clarke's family strongly opposed their relationship. Under strained circumstances, Clarke had nervous breakdown, and was confined in St. Patrick's Hospital for a year. Clarke married Cummins at the Dublin Register Office on New Year's Eve in 1920, but their marriage ended in separation in no time without consummation. The following year he lost his position as university lecturer of English at UCD. The reason for this could be the university's disapproval of his attempt at civil marriage which they may have considered to be a serious affront to the Catholic Church¹⁵. Inevitably, Clarke had another nervous breakdown. Clarke's experience of losing his mind is directly dealt with much later in the poem 'Mnemosyne Lay in Dust' (1966) in which we find 'Maurice', Clarke's alter ego, wondering 'who [h]e was' (Clarke, *CP*, 328), and seeing a 'bearded face', probably of himself, in a mirror, that shows 'sufferings he had forgotten' (Clarke, *CP*, 330). It is likely that fragments of ill-fated events found their way into 'The Frenzy of Suibhne', wherein Clarke could superimpose his own sufferings on the speaker, seeking a way to live with pain.

II

On one level the poem provides a story of lost love that has resulted in the

\ Wolfhound 1989), 47.

14 Harmon, *Austin Clarke*, 10, 48.

15 Robert Anthony Welch, *The Cold of May Day Monday: An Approach to Irish Literary History* (Kindle edn. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 179.

speaker's loss of mind or of 'self'. On another level the theme of a submerged 'self' is concerned with the speaker's lost or hidden 'self' as a Christian. This is in line with the original plot, in which the pagan Suibhne is supposed to have the potential to be or be disposed to becoming a Christian in spite of his initial vehement resistance to St. Ronan and his clerics. The conflict between paganism and Christianity is at the basis of the story, and they are going to be reconciled in the end. During his wanderings in nature, Suibhne gradually feels closer to God and even comes to acquire some knowledge of Christianity, which duly surprises St. Moling during their first conversation¹⁶.

In Clarke's 'Frenzy of Suibhne', it seems that the speaker basically belongs to the pagan world, watching 'Mannanaun', the son of the sea god, 'with a bagful [o]f music', and hearing the music of the magician 'Midna'. On the other hand, his ultimate wish is to reach 'the holy house of Kieran', and his prayer to Christ concludes the poem:

[...] O Christ, if I could sail
 To the Island of the Culdees,
 I would sleep, sleep awhile
 By the blessing of the holy Kieran (Clarke, *CP*, 127)

It is not certain whether his wish to sleep under the protection of the saint will be granted¹⁷, while the original story ends in Suibhne's death and burial as a

16 O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne*, 136–41.

17 According to the poem 'Mnemosyne Lay in Dust', which has a line that 'For six weeks Maurice had not slept' (Clarke, *CP*, 325), Clark suffered from a serious lack of sleep during his mental breakdown.

Christian.

If the distance between 'the Island of the Culdees' and the speaker remains the same, so does the speaker's longing to reach there. Most likely this reflects Clarke's ambiguous position. Robert Welch points to Clarke's 'attachment to Catholicism' in his later poetry¹⁸, but throughout his life, there was a chasm between Clarke and the Catholic Church. His attempt at civil marriage could be seen as one manifestation of his rejection of Catholicism. Clarke was born into a pious Catholic family, but he became disillusioned with the Church's teachings and distanced himself from the Church. He was particularly annoyed by its intervention with sexual and private matters, and he resolutely resisted its denial of intellectual freedom. The establishment of the Irish Free State confirmed the highly authoritative status of the Catholic Church, which was behind the enactment of the 1923 Censorship of Films Act, leading onto the notorious Censorship of Publication Act in 1929, which Clarke vehemently opposed.

Finding solace in mythologies and legends of the pagan past, Clarke could identify with the pagan king Suibhne who clashed with the Christian saint Ronan and was cursed because of that. While Suibhne gets along with Christianity, Clarke's rebellious attitudes could be seen as indicating his loss of faith. But the poem may claim that there is no contradiction in embracing both pagan music and 'the blessing of the holy Kieran' on Clarke's part, and he remained to be a Christian in the depth of his mind¹⁹.

18 Welch, *The Cold of May Day Monday*, 180.

19 In *Pilgrimage*, the collection of poetry following *The Cattle-drive in Connaught*, Clarke turned to the high period of Irish Christianity in the Middle Ages. This marks Clarke's departure from the influence of the Revival characterized by its almost unanimous attention to the pre-Christian centuries of Ireland. Terence Brown, 'The Counter-Revival 1930-65: Poetry', in Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of*

That which synchronizes with the theme of recovering a lost or submerged 'self' is Clarke's exploration of his potential to be a Gaelic poet which is hidden or hiding somewhere inside Clarke, waiting to be retrieved. This corresponds to a possibility of the speaker's being 'Suibhne'. 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' contains traces of Clarke's aspiration to create or recreate his link to the Gaelic past by establishing his own poetic forms based on Gaelic prosody. *The Cattle-drive in Connaught*, in which this poem is included, is generally regarded as marking the beginning of his conscious adoption of Gaelic form²⁰. According to Robert Welch, the poem 'Ceilidhe' in the same volume 'reveals Clarke's unique use of Gaelic metrics to create elaborate and densely worked effects in English'²¹. As Harmon points out, what is most striking about 'The Frenzy of Suibhne' is Clarke's ingenious use of alliteration and assonance, which are notable features of Gaelic verse. To create such sound effects, according to Harmon, Clarke turns a 'mill-hag' which appears in O'Keefe's English translation into 'the hag of the haggard', and he even changes a place name from 'Dun Sobairce' to 'Achill'²².

Clarke's idea that assonance is essential to Gaelic verse is fully demonstrated in his often-quoted comment, '[a]ssonance, more elaborate in Gaelic than in Spanish poetry, takes the clapper from the bell of rhyme'²³. Assonance contributes to the creation of lines which carry layers of nuances in the following eighth

\ *Irish Writing*, iii (Derry: Field Day, 1992), 129–30.

20 Seán Lucy, 'The Poetry of Austin Clarke', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 9/2 (1983), 7–8. Harmon, *Austin Clarke*, 26. Welch, *The Cold of May Day Monday*, 180–81.

21 Welch, *The Cold of May Day Monday*, 179.

22 Harmon, *Austin Clarke*, 47.

23 John Goodby, 'From Irish Mode to Modernization: the Poetry of Austin Clarke', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 25. Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, 83.

paragraph where the speaker is letting horses go in secret. Words in assonance in the fourth, fifth and eighth lines below signal the speaker's close proximity to horses:

I hurried to the paddock
 While stablemen were brawling
 And under the bellies
 Of *horses* I *crawled*:
Dark, dark was the *harness*,
 (The wheelwright said I was mad)
 But I flung back the lock
 And I *loosed* forty *hoofs* to
 The storm in the grass. (Clarke, *CP*, 126) (*Italics mine*)

The speaker's liberation of horses parallels the liberation of his own wild instinct, considering that he is going away from the human world to wander alone in the wilderness. The sounds of broad vowels in '*horses*' and '*crawled*', in '*dark*' and '*harness*', in '*loosed*' and '*hoofs*' may invite readers to sense and imagine not only the speaker's physical actions but also some invisible energy being released from his mind.

Samuel Beckett casts a dubious eye on Clarke's immersion in the imitation of Gaelic prosody, considering 'the need for formal justifications [...] serves to screen the deeper need that must not be avowed'²⁴. It has also been pointed out

24 Samuel Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry' (1934), in Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, iii (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 246. Welch explains Beckett's stance. Welch, *The Cold of May Day Monday*, 183–4.

that Clarke's commitment to Gaelic form sometimes resulted in 'obscure diction'²⁵, probably because musical effects came before clear meanings. On the other hand, Harmon claims that in Clarke's view 'style or technique should be inseparable from the poet's own voice'²⁶. Clarke's experiment of poetic form was not necessarily superficial but probably was deeply rooted in his inner necessity, that is, his desire to awaken his own undiscovered voice. A successful employment of Gaelic rhythm in English poetry would be seen as a proof of Clarke's innate affinity with Gaelic tradition.

Clarke is very vague about to what extent it would be possible to imitate a delicate soundscape of Gaelic verse in English, saying, 'Unfortunately the internal patterns of assonance and consonance in Gaelic stanzas are so intricate that they can only be suggested in another language' (Clarke, *CP*, 544). Besides, he does not fully admit his conscious effort to apply Gaelic sound patterns to 'The Frenzy of Suibhne', as can be seen in his note, '[a]lthough most of these lyrics are based on assonance and feminine, or stopped rhyme, they are not necessarily an attempt to suggest the intricate prosody and sound of Gaelic verse' (Clarke, *CP*, 543). His feeling may be that in order to reproduce Gaelic prosody in English something more than strenuous efforts is needed. If that which appears to be a product of his willful endeavor accompanies an unintentional outcome to a certain extent, this might hint at his natural inclination toward Gaelic mode.

It may be safe to say that the speaker can be 'Suibhne' at least on a subliminal

25 Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syrcause: Syrcause UP, 1997), 83-4.

26 Harmon quotes from Clarke's 'Irish Poetry Today' (1935) in which Clarke says, 'It helps us respect thyme, which has been spoiled by mechanical use. By means of assonance we can gradually approach, lead up to rhyme, bring it out so clearly, so truly as the mood needs, that it becomes indeed the very vox caelistis.' Harmon, *Austin Clarke*, 22.

level. Since it probably took Clarke considerable effort to read the original text in Old Irish along with the literal translation provided by O'Keeffe, he may have been inspired by this contact with the Irish language to some extent²⁷. In this process Clarke sought to yield not a new translation but a creative work which would share something fundamental with the original story as well as with a spirit and music of traditional Gaelic poetry. It would be appropriate for Clarke to imagine himself being 'Suibhne' rather than 'Sweeny' in composing the poem in the voice of the frenzied Gaelic king who is supposed to have lived in Irish-speaking Ireland in the remote past. An obvious example of Clarke's use of a Gaelic name for a speaker is found in the poem 'The Itinerary of Ua Clerigh' (Clarke, *CP*, 114–6), also included in *The Cattle-drive in Connaught*. 'Ua Clerigh' is the Gaelic equivalent of 'Clarke'. According to Clarke, 'itinerary poems' were 'favourite forms' among 'Gaelic poets'²⁸. It is natural that Clarke chose the name 'Ua Cleirigh' to convey his imaginative journey as a Gaelic bard.

Among characters from the Gaelic past, Suibhne stands out as a man who has nearly lost his mind, and this is undoubtedly the crucial part of the story that captured Clarke's imagination. According to the case of Suibhne, while the state of complete oblivion or loss of one's 'self' can mean a relief and escape, the recovery of self-consciousness and the return of memory inevitably involve unbearable pain. And yet, since human sorrows and an intense sense of loss are what make Suibhne a poet, his poems of lamentation could encourage Clarke to embrace his own agonized mind, when he may have wished to cut it off and leave behind.

27 It is pointed out that Clarke 'must have worked closely with the dual-language versions' of Gaelic literature. Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, 83.

28 Clarke, *CP*, 543.

Importantly, while Clarke was struggling to recover from his crisis, he became more and more attracted to Gaelic mode as a means of exploring his hidden potential. Even in writing in English, part of Clarke as a Gaelic poet can be awakened in such a way as Suibhne's submerged 'self', man or bird, surfaces or emerges from the unconscious. This is how Suibhne stimulated Clarke to revitalize his lost self and to cultivate suppressed possibilities.