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Laurie Clancy as Novelist of the Secular City

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Laurie Clancy is very much a writer of the modern secular city. Although he was brought up in a Catholic household, he had left the Church well before he left school. The world he describes in his fiction is a post-modern world, where there is no God to offer comfort or authority to offer meaning. Clancy approaches this world from a realist perspective, but his realism breaks down as his characters find their efforts to make sense or to find fulfilment break down into fragmentary episodes of frustration or futility. Indeed he published many of these individual scenes as separate short stories. Even in the novels the narratives tend to collapse into series of fragments, rather than follow any kind of progression towards unity. These fragments record the frustrated attempts of his characters to create a unity in their experience, or to bend the outer world to their desires. Their constant failures produce an absurdity that ranges from the farcical to the tragic.

I

The first of Clancy's novels shows a young man who abandons the Catholicism of his childhood as he tries to make a life for himself from the encounters in which the city involves him. The collapse of his endeavours produces broad farce. In the next, Clancy moves back a generation, to the parents who continued to find a place in the Church even after it failed them. In this novel the aspirations of the parents and their eldest daughter are taken seriously, leading to a novel that could be read as social realism with a suggestion of tragedy. In the next, Clancy moves back to the contemporary city, where the life of the intellect is crumbling under the pressures of self-serving managerialism. This is an academic novel, with the usual farce and futility that marks the genre, but it is also a satire of modern life in which the games of academia become a microcosm of a society which has lost its sense of purpose. Finally, he takes us to a city where all values have died and the highest ambition seems to be to escape from living into mere existence. In this bleak setting, humour is as rare as hope.

In *A Collapsible Man* (1975) the city is the background to lives centred on the domestic spaces of homes and lodgings, either in what had become the academic Bohemia of Carlton and Fitzroy or in the working class areas of Hawthorn or Elsternwick. This Melbourne is not so much a place as a series of sites where people gather to drink, eat and fuck. It provides the constant noise of traffic and the network of streets through which the characters drive to engage with each other. The writer's interest is in the social networks that bring them into contact, the constraints they feel or reject, and the fears, hopes and hypocrisies they bring to their activities.

The novel begins with the narrator, Paul O'Donahue, in the Warburton Sanatorium for the Mentally Disturbed, where he contemplates the brilliant future, as novelist and academic, he has been told he has ahead of him. But as he looks back on his career to date, he is more concerned with his failures as lover and lecher than with his precarious success as student. The driving force of his ambitions has been not so much the encouragement of his professor as the background of his family. 'In almost every respect,' he tells us, it followed 'the classic pattern of Irish Catholics in Australia.' Appropriately for this background, the novel takes the form of a confession which becomes farce as O'Donahue tells of his repeated failures to fit smoothly

into his new world. He is shamed, not by sin, but by the social and sexual ineptitude that betrays him as he tries to make himself a place in a world beyond his family's experience:

The whole family—what eventually proved to be eleven children—lived in a broken-down, rambling rat-infested weatherboard house in Elsternwick, vainly struggling to get out of it into something better until one winter diphtheria swept through the house carrying everything off my two eldest sisters and very nearly myself, and the survivors were immediately moved into a new brick house with a dunny that trickled incessantly, courtesy of the Housing Commission of Victoria, in the outer suburbs. (24)

Apart from the number of children, there is nothing to distinguish this family from other working-class families at the time. It is puritanical, and sex is never mentioned. The father's only indulgences are his two week-night bottles of beer and his weekend whisky. He is a labourer, but the narrator gives us no details of his work. The mother is an apparent nonentity who nevertheless organised and controls the household. This explains why Paul believes that women have been the only source of sanity in his life (24), but the wider Catholic culture accounts for confession being the only form of communication he finds proper in his attempt to escape from 'the spectre of intolerable sanity' that he seeks to escape by telling his story (28).

The schools are part of the same cramped world as the home. In primary school, the class of some sixty boys and girls separated automatically at recess and lunch times, the boys to play football and the girls to hop-sotch and soft ball. The room is austere.

Dusty Venetian blinds kept out the sun on one side. Pin boards, with their illustrations of various saints, their free map of Australia supplied by a generous cereal company in return for only half a dollar and nine packet tops. An elegantly bleeding crucifix at the back of the room. A picture of the Sacred Heart, its disembodied organ glowing like a neon sign in the middle of its chest, while a stray sparrow that had wandered in through the skylight hurled itself vainly again and again at the delusory dance of lights. Varnished desks with their suggestive holes for inkwells, down which instead were stuffed chalk, toffee, apple cores, rubbers and a myriad of miscellaneous surrogates. (18)

The pupils assume that life here is much the same as it is in the state school up the road, 'except for the prayer before and after each class ... the holy pictures, and the various benedictions, holy mass and communion, confessions and holy rosary meetings, novenas, retreats and stations of the holy cross' (16). These accompaniments of schooling were sufficient to produce a separate culture within the broader Australian working-class culture of games, aeroplanes, footballers and, later, sex, of male drinking and female drudgery, that O'Donahue shares with his family. This is the venue for the priest's exhortation that leads O'Donahue to pledge himself to a temperance that he later finds burdensome, but that reminds the reader of the continuing puritanical or Jansenist element in Australian Catholic education.

This Jansenism continues at St Dominic's, the college O'Donahue attends in the next step on his road away from the suburbs and towards scholastic, and presumably financial, success. The college, in a run-down but formerly prosperous north-western suburb, is set back from the highway behind rows of English trees. Otherwise, it is as undistinguished architecturally as intellectually. It prides itself for its athletic achievements, and is known among its contemporaries as 'St Jockstrappers.' O'Donahue is one of its academic stars, and finds interest

and even stimulation in the teaching of a couple of the brothers, as well as polishing his intellectual arrogance at the expense of others. He meets only one bully, Brother McCartney, grossly fat football coach and teacher of Christian doctrine. O'Donahue effectively explodes his attempts to argue for the existence of God, only to be bullied into at least external submission. His religious cynicism is however a product of his innate scepticism as much as of any resistance to the school's particular teachings.

Paul is one of the generation who looked to the university as a path of escape from their suburban backgrounds. In this he had the full support of his mother, who wanted her children to 'make their mark upon the world' (29). His problem is that there are no landmarks to guide him through this new world. His father had a Council job, which gave him a secure place in the community. His mother had the surrogate lives of her children to give purpose to her life (28). Most of Paul's schoolfellows would find safe jobs in government. But by launching into the university, particularly into Arts, Paul loses the security of work, and by lapsing from the Church he loses the safety of religion. He has to find his own way, not simply to material success and emotional fulfilment, but to the moral or existential autonomy that society no longer offers him. His stumbles on this pathway turn his life into a comedy of catastrophe.

The university appears to offer social and sexual freedom and the prospects of academic and literary success. His professor warns Paul that if he is to achieve his brilliant career he must learn to curb his aggressive tongue, but such restraint is foreign to him. The career he actually describes could be summed up as a series of misjudgements and indiscretions made irretrievable by his fondness for the offensive remark when tact, or preferably silence, is called for. Only twice does he resort to it. When, at the nadir of his fortunes, a girlfriend rescues him from a cop who accurately observes that she is doing herself no good by going out with a fellow who can't hold his liquor and uses bad language, O'Donahue is saved from further trouble by collapsing into sleep on his closing insult (174). Then, after realising that '[a]ttempting to assault the girl was bad enough but refusing her when she offered herself was somehow infinitely more unforgiveable,' he is unable to think of a single speech to make. He has to be content with 'Cheery Oh' as they part, he for further erotic adventure and breakdown, she for marriage (175).

O'Donahue's journey through erotic misadventures furnishes the plot of the novel. Thematically, his career, through his schooling, his student politics and editing, and his writing, represents his repeated attempts to find for himself the place in society he lost when he moved outside the authority of family, church and class. Characters in the work of a generation of Australian novelists born in the interwar years had found alternative sources of authority in nationalist or radical politics. These sources may have failed them, but the struggles with them shaped their lives. O'Donahue encounters none of this national mythology. Instead, he has the Aquinas Society, 'a kind of giant marriage bureau' (82), the Radical Socialist Club, which offers only a game of factional semantic warfare and incessant circulars, and an endless succession of boozy parties that eventually sicken him for their sameness (90, 92). The university as an institution suggest alternative paths, but they lead nowhere. Law is a dead end. Following an interest first awakened at school, he takes up literary studies, but finds them too easy to take seriously (111). He meets Bernard Sullivan of Politics, who has a personal scholarly authority and offers an education in politics, religion and football, and incidentally on life, but again these possibilities are dissipated on booze, pool and sex (131).

Despite the conviviality, friendships, and even occasional connubial bliss, *A Collapsible Man* has little sense of society. Its people remain outsiders, if not to each other, at least to O'Donahue, its narrator and central character. His self-absorption, by making him oblivious to the lives of

others, denies him the love he seeks. He is collapsible because he is hollow. The places he inhabits are similar hollows filled with people or things that mean little or nothing. Even nature is banished. We are told that at Batman University, where he studies and eventually teaches, 'every spot of ... land has become a personal challenge to the administration. No sooner is a spot of grass spied than, presto! A new building is raced up.' So cream brick rubs shoulders with redbrick and students are reduced to figures scurrying along the tiny alleyways between them (74). The colleges remain amid their gardens as islands of privilege, but the only university life described in any detail takes place in the drab meeting rooms of student societies, the crowded offices of the student newspaper or the Parkville lodgings that house student parties.

We had no trouble finding the party—lights and noise heralded its approach from many yards away ... In the first room I came across a young man and his half-undressed girlfriend rolling around on top of a pile of duffle coats ... The refrigerator was out the back in the kitchen. I parked myself near it ... and began drinking with methodical determination, speaking to no-one and observing everything that went on with a glassily detached gaze ... In the room next to the kitchen the lights were dimmed and about half a dozen people were angrily discussing the merits and demerits of Dr Cairns as an Opposition leader. (93)

Paul, the observer, remains not merely isolated, but separated from passions that have no meaning for him. His pledge of abstinence long forgotten, alcohol has become his refuge and his trap.

The main action of the novel occurs around Paul's ultimately failed love affair with Jan, a fellow student. Told from her perspective, this would be a conventional romance, with the lovers not recognising their feelings for each other, the diversion of a false lover, a series of misunderstandings that interrupt their affair, and the true lovers eventually discovering their love and living in domestic bliss for ever after. Clancy however tells the story from the perspective of Paul for whom the affair is a grand romance thwarted by his ineptitude. It is a secular version of the journey to salvation, where the seeker has a vision of the Virgin only to betray her through his own weakness. His series of increasingly desperate affairs become stations of the cross, purging him of confidence. The book even finishes with an epiphany, when Paul accepts his loss of his love and is reconciled to the world by glow of a sunset, when the world 'stood poised between mellow light and darkness' (199). Freed from hopeless passion, he is able to choose, and the book closes with him sitting outside the sanatorium, 'laughing helplessly' (199-200). O'Donahue may not have found either salvation or a place in the world, but he has found way to live without any gods, to be himself in a world he accepts as absurd.

II

In *Perfect Love*, his second novel (1983), Clancy shows people at home in the city. Instead of realism collapsing into farce, this novel confronts romanticism with a reality that is sometimes farcical but more often grim. The author turns back to the generation his earlier protagonists were revolting against as he tells the story of Nora Lloyd, a woman born at the turn of the nineteenth century and marrying in the twenties. Although she lives through two wars and a depression, she notices them only as they impinge on her domestic concerns. These concerns—for her husband, Joe, and her children—supply her main connection with the city, and help her endure the twelve years when she and Joe try to support themselves in the country, first on a

farm and then as general storekeepers. In both cases Nora is overcome by her social isolation as much as by the drought and consequent poverty.

Nora is the driving force in the novel, but her life in turn is shaped by the repressive influence of the Catholic Church and the code of respectability it fosters. At the beginning of her story, church and family want her unwed sister's child, Dolly, sent for adoption. Nora stands against them. Her whole pent-up force of her love is concentrated on the baby, whom she names Cliffy, and whom she passionately seeks to adopt herself. Her mother insists that she find a husband first, so she marries Joe, another repressed character. Her wedding and its aftermath have the qualities of absurdity that marked Paul O'Donahue's adventures in the earlier novel, but from the woman's viewpoint are pathetic rather than comic. She is totally ignorant of sex, and does not know what is happening to her when the consummation of the marriage is brief and painful.

The newly married couple borrow money to take up a farm, which seems to share most of the oppressive qualities Henry Lawson's selectors had experienced. When they arrive, the countryside is parched with drought, and they spend the next years fighting the weather and the bank. Joe, like the men on Lawson's selections, divides his time between back-breaking labour and the pub. When he is forced to leave home to go droving, Laura is left to add the farm work to her housework. Loneliness adds to her troubles. The description of her life on the farm refers back directly, if in the negative, to Lawson's 'Drover's Wife,' with a reminder of Barbara Baynton.

... none of the things that Nora feared might happen to her actually did. No snakes appeared under the floor of the house to terrify her ... No loyal animal risked its life to rescue her ... No swaggie came by to molest her or to demand food and lodging in return for chopping a pile of wood, and even if one had done so Nora would have felt no impulse towards a rare and inexplicable act of infidelity to her husband. (77)

Clancy implicitly criticises Lawson's reverse romanticism, but the lack of overt threats only emphasises the barrenness of the life Nora is leading. She proves herself a capable countrywoman, but she finds herself at home only when she eventually returns to the city. As Nora's mother remarks, when she visits to help in parturition, the farm is 'a long way from anywhere' (91).

After they have taken up a farm, the local priest insists that Nora abandon Cliffy. He shames her publicly in church, and follows up this attack with private counselling. Her love for Cliffy is the strongest passion of her life. When the priest, with tacit approval from Joe, insists she abandon him, she suffers a traumatic collapse. Although she subsequently becomes a good housewife and mother, she and Joe never find the intimacy that might have supported them both. While she learns to run Joe's life, husband and wife live together in essential ignorance of each other. Nora does the household chores, imposes order on the family, deals with business matters, and attends Mass on Sundays. The two of them form a pair, but not a couple. Their separate roles deny any mutual understanding. Joe's lengthy absence in search of work scarcely affects them, apart from a nasty accident that renders Joe impotent and so saves Nora from further pregnancies. When their attempts at farming, store-keeping and labouring end up in failure, they return to Hawthorn.

Back in the city, they continue in their separate gender roles. Joe has his workmates and the pub, Nora has friends and neighbours to support her at moments of crisis. Her life is intense,

even tragic, but desperately constrained by her upbringing and social expectations. Her priest in the city is understanding of her plight, even when her daughter in her turn has a child out of wedlock. This difference is as much one of time as of place. The daughter has had an education that has given her a strength her mother has found only once, and which did not allow her to stand against the church. Her daughter, without either losing her faith or affirming it, is able to choose her own course in life, and obtain an independence beyond anything possible for her mother.

Unlike earlier writers about Melbourne during the Depression, Clancy emphasises the social rather than the material deprivation, although he does show the effects of poverty. The children often have to fill themselves with bread and dripping, and even so suffer from hunger when there is simply not enough food in the house. The house itself is chilly, with wind whistling through gaps in the weather-boards and not enough fuel for the fire that is their sole source of heat. Yet they are resilient. Joe scavenges waste wood for the fire, even risking his job when he uses his council truck to demolish a dunny on vacant block and bring home the shit-covered debris for firewood. Nora finds work washing and cleaning for some of the wealthier families in the neighbourhood.

In the postwar years the family climbs out of poverty, as wages become better and the girls leave school and find jobs that add to the household income. Black Albert, the older son, is a rebel almost from birth, and quickly throws off the constraints the rest of the family accepts. He gives a whole new meaning to street theatre when, as a teenager, he shags one of his girlfriends in full daylight on a nature strip in Camberwell. The respectable housewives who watch the incident through their Venetian blinds are outraged and immediately call the police. Joe is more admiring than admonitory, but does suggest to his son that nature-strips in daylight are not the best place for intercourse. But, explains Albert, 'Flossie couldn't wait. ... It was a matter of courtesy' (172).

The house remains almost unchanged through their changing fortunes. Joe adds an extension when another child arrives, then lives in mess in a sleepout at the back. Nora divides her time between household duties in the kitchen and sitting with the family listening to the wireless in the living-room, amid clothes-horses heaped with drying clothes. The overgrown backyard is cluttered with refuse, and an open ditch that runs across it from the clothes-line to the street gutters blocks and overflows when it rains. But it is big enough for the children to play in, and has a blackberry bush and a huge peppercorn tree that they can climb. When, late in the novel, Anne brings home the wealthy lawyer who is her employer and lover, she is at first embarrassed by the shabbiness and clutter as his gaunt frame and evident affluence fill the house. Then she puts aside any reservations as she watches him relax with his friendly reception, and contrasts her home with his 'immaculate and imposing mausoleum in East Melbourne' (207). The streets of Hawthorn may lack the excitements of earlier Melbourne, and Joe's pub may not stage the dramas of the collapsible man's Carlton, but the Lloyds' house offers a warmth and a belief in humanity their draughty frames belie.

Nora, born at the beginning of the twentieth century, is the child of her generation, but the constraints society places on her are judged by the standards of the sixties. After the family's return to Melbourne, an accident leaves her with painful but incurable ulcers on her legs. The discharge from these spreads its pain until she is virtually disabled. In her mind, she accepts this as punishment for her betrayal of Cliffy, the only act in her life of which she is ashamed (249). Otherwise, she is unreflective, accepting life as it is given to her. This may be the source of her strength. After her husband, Joe, retreats into a haze of alcohol, desultory work and glib

moral pronouncements, she lives her life through her children. Anne is the most like her, both in inner strength and in appearance. An intellectual, she becomes a successful lawyer, but also proudly brings up her child out of wedlock. Therese is empty-headed but loving. Albert grabs life's material rewards with both hands, and becomes a successful businessman in England. James, the youngest, is by temperament and, later, physical accident, an observer. At the end of the book he decides that 'watching life was not as satisfying a way of being alive as experiencing it, but that it was a great deal less difficult and dangerous' (287).

Nora's story is shown from her perspective, but the anonymous narrator addresses himself to another, revealed in the last paragraphs as the youngest son, James, who towards the end of the novel becomes a paraplegic after a fall. By introducing him as a listener to the narrative and an observer of its incidents, Clancy adds the perspective of a younger generation, the contemporaries of the collapsible man, O'Donahue, and the other men in his stories.

By tracing this family, and its series of mundane but contrasting lives—the active and passive brothers, the atheist sister and the sister who goes off with her new husband to a Catholic commune, the weak but opinionated father and the strong but withdrawn mother—Clancy shows us glimpses of a perfect love that is necessarily intermittent. It is unavailable only to those who, like the ever-so-respectable and decent lawyer who is father to Anne's son, hold themselves back from life. Nora, whose life would seem utterly miserable to the outsider, continues to have the church, and even her husband Joe maintains the outer observances. This gives them, unlike their children, a secure place in the city. Yet, from the point of view of the novel, Nora has approached perfect love not through faith in God, but by accepting her fate and giving herself to others.

At the end of the book, which has been marked by a series of love matches of varying intensity and success, it seems to be James, the nearly silent observer and writer, who has discovered love not in a single person, but in the family, represented at this moment by his nephew Peter, who is selflessly pushing James in his wheelchair.

Sometimes, when he looked at his nephew, James thought he knew what perfect love was. Then he would reproach himself for all the elements of the personal for which he had mistaken it—need, trust, dependence, the need to be needed, the need to need to be needed.

It was not pure yet, not without elements of vanity. But the thought that something pure might be possible, had been glimpsed for a moment. (266)

III

When God departs from the city—Laurie would surely have asked, 'Where to?'—the university also loses its function of pursuing higher truth. It serves society rather than God, and so adopts the same predatory and competitive practices that keep the wider society functioning.

The Wildlife Reserve (1994) is set in Melbourne's suburbs and on the campus of the new Blamey University. It takes us into a different world from anything in *Perfect Love*. The protagonists in the earlier novel are working class, and the narrator tells their story by assembling the fragments of a life already complete. The characters in *The Wildlife Reserve* are middle class intellectuals, and their story takes us back to the kind of academic environment of *Collapsible Man*. Its protagonist, Terry Shaw, is still constructing his life in an environment that is itself fragmentary, and, like the earlier novel, tending to farce.

The novel opens with Terry's return to Melbourne with an English wife. He is putting his life together after his graduate studies, but does not yet have a job in his native Melbourne. The story of his search for a position, and his settling into it, is told from his point of view, although at times he does try to understand the predicament his wife is placed in by his career (53).

The novel starts in Tullamarine airport as Terry and Penelope walk through automatically opening doors and seek a cab. The taxi drive through Melbourne, and the shoddy-built apartment where they arrive, emphasise the provisional state of this present, which is not eased by their attempts to situate themselves by reference to London and Samuel Johnson. The geographic and literary bearings simply emphasise the distance between expectations and reality that form the theme of the rest of the novel. Most of the action takes place at Blamey University, which newcomers find, to their surprise, is named after a soldier, not an artist or intellectual. The university is the focus through which the characters see Melbourne. Just as God is dead in the city, the mind is dead in the university. Its Wildlife Reserve functions as a metaphor for the lives of its staff, segregated from the outer world yet interacting with it. It also precipitates the action that transforms Terry Shaw's professional life, setting him on the road away from intellectual achievement and towards managerial power: perhaps even a Vice-Chancellorship. This transformation shows clearly that, whatever else Clancy may have drawn on, Terry Shaw is not based on his own character.

The novel comprises a series of set pieces through which Terry discovers how the life of the mind is usurped by the demons of drink, sex and power politics. The cricket match between teams representing Melbourne's two eminent literary magazines is less a social function than a display of the egotism of the individual participants, and particularly of the two editor-captains, who will each use any tactics that may defeat the other. Alcohol and incompetence destroy the cricket, but not the desire to win. The seriousness of the players blinds them to their own incompetence. When a loose ball from Terry kills one of Australia's most venerable literary critics, no-one seems to mind (29-40).

The cricket match, with its almost unobserved slaying of the intellectual notable, is one episode in a tale of petty intrigues and social disasters. These are shaded by recurring references to literature that remind us of the distance between the purpose and the practice of the English Department. For example, Terry's rival Proctor treats the appointments committee to a masterly reading of a poem by William Carlos Williams, concluding with the judgement that its 'introversive semiosis, a message which signifies itself, is indissolubly linked with the aesthetic function of the sound system.' The statement quoted is accurate, if relatively meaningless, but its dense jargon sends up the pretentiousness with which literary academics clothe what might otherwise be worthwhile criticism. Clancy's implicit criticism of this practice is given an edge by the fact that Proctor is staging the whole exposition as a means of discomfiting his rival and winning an appointment for himself. He destroys his chances a moment later when he confuses two poems he will be required to teach in the undergraduate course. However, it is not this performance that wins Terry the appointment, but his display of skill at cricket.

Once appointed, Terry meets the gaggle of colleagues who represent a cross-section of an English Department in the 1980s. Several are drunks, one of them perpetually comatose. One is still trying to organise his notes to complete his thesis on Proust, another shields himself from the present with the voluminous stock of fragmentary quotations he can draw on for any occasion. The foundation professor talks of the good old days when they taught only classics like Walter Scott, before the new wave brought in DH Lawrence. The mediaevalist repeats an

arcane joke about a green horse. Departmental politics pits the younger staff in a contest for power against the older god-professors. Conversation in the staffroom among the men is of race-horses and betting and, among the women, of crèches. When Terry is inveigled to give a public lecture, he gives a reasonable if acerbic account of recent trends in Australian literature, interrupted only by his stumbling when his attention is led astray by the legs or breasts of his female student in the front row.

Terry begins his first tutorial in admirable style, with a question that should take the class to the distinctive quality of Jane Austen's fiction.

Jane Austen seems to be both inside the consciousness of her characters, mostly Emma ... and outside, maintaining a coolly ironic distance from them. How does she manage that? (57)

The tone captures exactly the style of an English Department, the question directs the class to the method they will be required to use through their studies. It may also, to the reader, suggest Clancy's own attitude to his protagonist, although the term cool would scarcely be appropriate. Both the tutorial and Austen are taken over by the students' own experience, or lack of it. After a silence, one responds to Terry by demanding to know why Austen's characters don't fuck, and declaring that 'Emma's a sexless bitch anyway.' This breaks the decorum of the classroom and the convention that the study of literature can be dispassionate. One student immediately breaks into tears, decrying such language for such a beautiful novel. Another directs her own charms at Terry, inducing quite unliterary thoughts. He gets through the class and escapes to a colleague's always handy bottle of Scotch.

Chance furthers Terry's advancement. A suburban and an academic dinner party remove some of his rivals for promotion. His participation in a student demonstration assures his popularity. His acceptance of liberal offers of drink from his colleagues, and his sorties into the staffroom, embroil him in departmental politics. A staff party ends in alcoholic disaster and opens the way to his tenure and final advancement.

The book ends with the sight of the Vice-Chancellor's car and his four hefty minders emerging from the driveway, an image of the university as the site of power it has become. Terry Shaw's apparent rise through the ranks has in fact reduced him to just another pawn on the cadmic playing board. The future he had wanted to construct has been taken out of his hands. In literary terms, realism has once more turned reality into farce.

IV

Clancy's final novel, *Night Parking* (1999) also involves a university campus, but its main action takes place in more sinister parts of the city: in pubs, bars, courtroom and brothels. Whereas in the earlier novels, most of the characters are seeking to make a life from the chances the city offers, in this they are trying to escape it. Their Melbourne is a city of dreadful night where they wander without destination. The novel almost completely lacks the element of farce that marked two of the earlier novels, and even recurred through *Perfect Love*. Unlike the earlier novels, its protagonists seem to have given up trying, given up hope of bringing order to life.

The title is ambiguous, but suggests the atmosphere of dark rain-drenched streets and half-lit rooms that the novel evokes. Although there are few descriptions of the setting, and even fewer of rain, these seem to set the mood for the whole novel. The section where the narrator's

marriage to Sarah runs its course and Helen, now Jodie, enters the brothel is preceded by an anticipatory reminiscence: ‘It seems as if it has been raining continuously since the day of the funeral ... or am I only imagining it?’ (40) The strategic placing of this sentence, before the beginning of the most significant parts of the action, serves to shadow the unfolding of Helen’s story. Then again, near the beginning of the final section, the narrator comments that ‘The colour of the army base is grey. Sometimes in Melbourne the skies look as if they have been painted to military specifications’ (119). Again, this comment seems to hover over the following action, much of which moves around a military base. The culmination comes as it rains on a country road, where the protagonists meet beside the sign, ‘No Parking’ (137-39).

The novel starts with a monologue about a professor who seems to be an epitome of academic cultivation:

I often used to observe him as he walked around the university grounds. He was a very good looking man ... conservatively dressed in a sports coat and tie, or sometimes a black jacket. He was tanned and fit-looking ... When he smiled ... the wrinkles on his face opened like cracks. He was the kind of man you imagined never ageing ... He moved through the grounds as if he had lived there all his life.
(3)

But these detached and apparently admiring observations are taken out of the university context and into a courtroom where the narrator sees the professor at a trial. He then muses on his own sometime lover, Helen, his unsatisfactory relations with her, and the hold the professor seems to have over her. The apparent civilised unity of the university grounds is undermined by sexual drives, abuse and frustration.

The anonymous narrator continues to tell the story of Helen’s abandonment of her studies, her career as a prostitute, and her eventual death, until he reveals himself to the professor on the last pages. The interest of her story is partly documentary, in revealing the brothel as nothing more than a simulacrum of life, where men futilely seek love and the women give their bodies in the hope of making a life for themselves elsewhere. Yet as the novel moves beyond the brothel, to university campus or army barracks, it seems to show the city as itself a simulacrum of a community, where the closest approach anyone makes to celebration is in a bar or at McDonalds. The anonymous narrator has abandoned both marriage and his vocation as a musician, and simply makes money. The professor’s career has come to a halt with his first book. His married life appears erotic but without feeling or responsibility. It reinforces his academic role as an observer of life rather than a participant. Helen takes a different name and attempts to disengage totally from life. She both succours and taunts her eventual lover, who finds she eventually denies him the life he had thought he had found in her. Like all the others in the book, he becomes not so much a lost soul as one of the living dead in a dead city.

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In none of these novels does the city offer its people fulfilment. In the two academic novels, the protagonists learn to reduce their expectations to the confines of possibility. Their path to this solution is by way of farce. In *Perfect Love*, Nora finds her peace through her family, not the city. In achieving this, Nora follows the path of stoicism rather than of faith. In *Night Parking*, there is neither escape nor fulfilment, except in death. It would be easy to see in these novels a progression from comedy to tragedy, but this would impose on them an order that contradicts the essential disorder that each of them reveals in the lives it portrays. Any order they establish

is in the response of characters who learn to live within themselves, as Clancy confronts without flinching the emptiness of a city without either God or humanity. In the face of this predicament, Clancy writes in the voice of the true melancholic that underlies even his broadest farce.

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