

## **‘Everything is Visible’: Considering Laurie Clancy’s *Perfect Love***

**HERMINA BURNS**

Melbourne

By the time Laurie Clancy’s second novel *Perfect Love* was published in 1983, Clancy had established himself as an academic, critic, short story writer and novelist. *Westerly* had published his first short story ‘The Wife Specialist’ in 1971. A debut novel *The Collapsible Man* followed in 1975, to some critical acclaim. It was to share the National Book Council Award of that year. A collection of short stories under the title of his first published short story appeared in 1978. He was already working on his *Reader’s Guide to Australian Fiction*, though it took a decade to complete, being published in 1992.

Reception of his early work emphasized the ‘comic misadventures’ and mordant wit (Grant, 44). Clancy’s work was characterized as funny, jokily or blackly comic, seen as capable of drawing wry laughs and grimaces even from the kind of people, such as the characters in his stories, too smugly self-conscious of their liberal education, too caught in ‘self-absorption’ (a recurrent term in ‘The Wife Specialist’) to laugh out loud. The humour in this early work tilts on a knife-edge between flippancy and despair. Contemporary reviewers of the time, though, emphasized the rollicking comic element, as if these works were focused on a ‘guy’s world,’ as the America Clancy visited in 1969 when he was Harkness scholar, writing on Nabokov, might have termed it. But for Clancy, the world of his fiction always incorporated the female, and the complexities of the ‘real’ business of living (Clancy, *Perfect Love* 180).

It is true that Clancy’s characters *are* predominantly male—specifically the kind of Australian male negotiating a post-pioneer world, post two world wars, able to access education and sexually emancipated women in a way of which most of their fathers could only dream. In this climate of social change, they do not, however, have access, to the clear patriarchal privileges of their fathers, the kind we see Joe Lloyd, husband of the central character Nora of *Perfect Love*, assume. He can’t ‘get it out of his head’ that women are ‘essentially decorative appendages to the real business of living, which is what men did’ (180), even while the consultations carried on about family business between his wife and eldest daughter demonstrate a ‘manifestly visible refutation of his assumptions’ (180). Clancy’s younger male characters do not have access to the heroic territory their fathers and grandfathers traversed—the historical context of pioneering or war, a context that authorised and legitimised a version of masculinity and the patriarchal conditions from which their fathers gained direct benefit.

Clancy delineates the representatives of this new generation of males as having more choice, and supposedly greater awareness, yet somehow living lives that are self-absorbed, attenuated, even disillusioned. Faced with more possibilities—‘too many possibilities’ (222)—in their lives, they might be represented by James, the narrator of *Perfect Love* who sardonically concludes at one point: ‘Everything is risible’ (255). In his later novel *Night Parking*, Clancy’s protagonist Neil is bleakly aware of his dilemma as a male in relation to possessing the female: ‘I can still possess if I wanted to...yet never possess in reality’ (49).

For the generation of no longer quite young men that frequent much of Clancy’s fiction, life has neither heroics nor conviction. Uneasy in their masculinity, partly because they are knowing and educated, any development of artistic capacity uncertain and dissipated because it confers

on a male only ambiguous status, Clancy's males feel they are bystanders, historical and moral voyeurs – in some kind of perpetual tension. They feel inadequate in relation to the expectations of the male past, and the new expectations of the women, wives and lovers, struggling to know how to be in the universe.

Clancy initially renders the narrator of *Perfect Love*, James, as if he is this kind of young man, uneasy, ironic, and impersonal. Tonally, the voice that opens the novel as if with a mental shrug, is detached, seemingly impartial, concerned with documentation, clinical observations:

Where to begin? Documents...tangible evidence remaining of fifty years of existence. Meagre materials from which to reconstruct or invent a life. A birth certificate...A death certificate. Nora Mary Lloyd. Died 4 April 1951, of natural causes. What was natural about wearing out when one was barely fifty? (1)

Only in the final pages of the novel does this narrator reveal himself to be Nora's youngest son, James. Highly disruptive to the opening's seemingly detached scientific distance, this revelation forces the reader into re-examination of the trajectory of the novel, interrogating the opening to discern now an undertone of bewilderment in the opening question. With the narrator made visible, the latter question carries undercurrents of anguish, pain, even outrage. The relationship has shifted from clinical observation to complicity in Nora's life.

The detachment of the narrator has been a ruse, a pose that not only conceals the narrator's 'intensity...his impatient desperation' (233), that is later revealed, but also teases the reader, confounding our expectations of a simple linear narrative that might offer a neatly packaged historical saga of the life of an ordinary girl who becomes merely a wife and mother in the early twentieth century, and where we might expect the comfort of triumph in romance and lives well-lived, where adversity has been overcome in a story where everything will be resolved and complete.

But resolution and romance are withheld, both for Nora and also for the writer-narrator self, her son James. For while *Perfect Love* ostensibly focuses on Nora Lloyd's 'story,' the author's focus, however, is as much on his evasive, enigmatic narrator as it is on the narrator's object, Nora. This is a remarkable novel for Clancy's consciously even-handed, contrapuntal exploration not just of the baffled life of the male narrator, but also of his protagonist, Nora. Both, the novel suggests, are in the uncertain, complex and absurd 'real business of living.'

It is the technically brilliant device of the evasive narrator that allows for this investigation; cumulatively the inner lives are revealed both of Nora and the narrator James. For the first third of the novel, the narrator James shows himself, overtly, only rarely as Nora's early life and her marriage is reconstructed: to introduce himself as the apparently objective chronicler of Nora's life; to apologetically jump the narrative over a blank three year period in order to 'quicken' the plot (97), to slyly assert that his act of reconstruction is not appropriating or voyeuristic, by adducing knowing literary asides and allusions, emphasising the fictionality; and conversely, returning to the documents of Nora's walnut box as a strategy to assert to readers the veracity of his tale.

The narrator is, of course, being tricky, especially with the proposal that his task is reconstruction. That claim is destabilized from the opening page of the novel with the subversive qualification 'or *invent a life*' (1; my italics), which tilts the enterprise from the

opening page into the territory of imagination and creation. This novel is as much about the development of a life—the narrator/ author's -towards artistic maturity as it is about Nora's life.

James, as the young artist, plays with words as in much the same way as he does with meccano or chess: 'trying to write a story that would sum up everything he knew about life, would answer all the questions to which he could find no answer. But the problem was the same as with chess, there were too many possibilities, too many words...' (222). Having turned to poetry in defeat, James works obsessively at 'paring and cutting away...to write a poem which would say everything possible about human existence in the shortest and fewest possible number of words...which said everything by compressing itself out of existence' (231).

Clancy's watchful narrator, James, speaks of himself in the third person even in the final pages of the novel. He observes his own attempts to construct for himself a 'universe of order,' existing alongside the 'slovenly warmth' (of the Lloyd family's life, with his father Joe's globs of spittle on the newspaper spittoon, the agony of Nora's ulcerated legs, his sisters' presences with Anne's unmarried pregnancy, Theresa's passive femininity, and his brother Albert's predatory, promiscuous sexual adventuring). What James yearns for is a world of 'beautifully symmetrical patterns' (222)—for a kind of perfected humanity. He shows us himself when young, absorbed by his meccano set locking 'squares, triangles and circles together, complete and indissoluble ...simple, spare, skeletal, with a pristine beauty of design that left him aching with envy' (206).

If the novel has any kind of triumph in it, it lies in the construction of the novel itself, demonstrating some kind of fulfilment in the development of the narrator as artist as he shapes and controls the narrative design. What he creates has symmetry, parallels and patterns, wrests understanding and creates meaning.

There is symmetry in the history of the family: Nora's sister Doll has an illegitimate child; in the next generation, Nora's daughter Anne has an illegitimate child. The parallel allows for a comparison of the fate of Cliffy, the first child, and Peter, Anne's son. On seeing the former, in spite of the public shame a child out of wedlock brings to the family, Nora feels an 'unfamiliar wave of love invade her body like a spring' (16). She conceives of a wild 'perfect solution' (18) and so makes a mad gamble with her sceptical mother to find get a 'decent offer of marriage in four weeks from a man who is also prepared to take Cliffy in' (20). The narrator crafts the quest with humour but also tenderness. Joe is met; courtship and marriage follow, not quite within the four-week deadline. A decent man, Joe acquiesces to Nora's plea to 'take both of us' (34). But within three months, the pressure of religious precept and parochial disapproval from the country town and the priest—where they have begun married life—forces the abandonment of Cliffy. Tonally, the narrator takes us through a madcap scheme to tragedy. The burden of 'metaphysical guilt' (164) that Nora experiences—though she does not have the term to name it—alters the universe.

The fate of Peter, Anne's son, on the other hand, is a much more positive one. The narrator shapes our experience of this to show that it is not just that times have changed. Nora is revealed as having a consciousness that 'the pattern was being repeated' (215) and out of her lived experience of Cliffy's abandonment, she resists entrapment in archetype and custom. The narrator James patterns the development in Nora of a self that will not continue to be 'turned away from inquiry' (250).

The details of her life in early marriage on the failing Gippsland farm that the narrator selects, or rather, invents, all gather about this development of self. The narrator relates the newly married couple's late afternoon arrival at the farm through a kind of vision Nora experiences:

The fiery red sun had almost disappeared...the sky was a pale azure colour, streaked with splashes of red in two or three different shades. In the east a huge full moon had risen and hung low over the trees, astonishingly distinct and close to them. Nora gazed at the apparition almost in fright. Against its uncannily white fullness and symmetry she could see tiny rivulets and tessellations and she tried to imagine how far it was away and whether people like themselves lived there. Another kookaburra was cackling sporadically in the trees by the side of the dusty track but otherwise the silence was complete and unearthly. It impressed her, not as the absence of noise but as a positive entity, and she shivered and hugged the sleeping baby against her. (48)

The prose, like Nora, is pared back, lacking lyricism or poetry, restrained but powerful. It is a vision of the Australian landscape that the reader recognizes with a kind of jolt—familiar and disorienting, simultaneously. While her thwarted education limits her ability to speak of the metaphysical, her apprehension of the farm in the universe is offered as a transcendental experience of the unbearable anguish of life, an existential terror, though she is unable to name it. Her literal shiver holds within it a premonition of the horror of Cliffy's removal, the silences that follow.

At a less heightened level, in dailiness on the same farm, the narrator congregates a pattern of Nora's experiences of the pleasures of being 'her own mistress' (58). She finds she thrives on the 'independence and solitude' (58). She comes slowly in the farm years to realise the value of aspects of her own thinking: her comprehension of the constancy and desperation of economic realities; the doubt she develops towards the inhumanity demonstrated in the 'accumulated weight of ecclesiastical authority' (67) when she is forced to give up Cliffy; her awareness of the 'compulsive shutting out of women from any of the enclaves of power' by the town (140), her recognition of Joe's all-masculine world being precarious, and her relinquishing of deference towards it.

Nora's continuing struggle 'to wrest some order and meaning out of the experience of her own life' (202) shapes an identity, a self that has a developed understanding of the possibility of integrity, of individual choice. It is this identity—which has an understanding close to wisdom—that in the face of custom and social shame is able to assert Anne's right to keep her child. That integrity, humanity and wisdom are demonstrated in laconic decisiveness and practical action is characteristic of the older Nora. So her daughter Anne gladly abides by Nora's determination, and the child Peter will be kept in the family and loved.

There is inter-locking symmetry, too, in the deaths of Nora and P.J. Slattery, Anne's older lover and father to Peter. Slattery is a public and imposing figure, a highly respectable partner in his own law firm. Yet the narrator slyly gives twenty-one documents to take the measure of Nora's life, and only twenty lines of obituary to sum up the life of the lawyer. The narrator James refuses to subordinate the status of Nora's life to Slattery's conventionally more successful one. Moreover, Slattery is revealed in the narrative to be found wanting in a way that Nora is not. His love and his letters all convey equivocation, the literary allusions and quotations from poetry imparting a sense of life lived at a remove, second-hand, his love conditional, beset by allegiance to entirely conventional morality rather than integrity. The notion the narrator insinuates that Slattery's death is by suicide suggests the life as both cowardly and heroic:

unable to declare his love and propose marriage, having a mindset that sees the potential of becoming the clichéd comic figure of the old man with younger woman as too great, he can, only by death, will to Peter and his mother that which he could not give by living. But it is a sad and pyrrhic victory, felt by the reader to be stalked by moral failure.

The novel is consciously meta-fictional, referencing the romances of Walter Scott that Nora reads, heroines of the novels of Jane Austen, Mary-Ann Evans great novel of provincial life, *Middlemarch*, the bildungsroman of *David Copperfield*, Bronte's *Shirley*, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* from which the narrator collects the quotation, 'Be no longer a Chaos, but a World, or even a Worldkin' (245). None of these references is authorial showing-off, though some are sly, playful and mercurial in allusive effect. All are eloquent in signalling the author's awareness that he is writing within and to a tradition, conscious of the heritage and his debt, never assuming that his creation is of the same worth or value, always conscious of the cost and imperfection of creation.

There are allusions to iconic pieces of Australian literature: Lawson's *Drover's Wife*; Baynton's *The Vessel*; perhaps most pervasively to Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* and Stan Parker, who sees the gob of spittle spat by a man, and asserts bleakly 'That is God' (White, 495). The narrator of *Perfect Love* constructs a parallel moment: "‘Maybe God is in that glob of spittle,’ suggested James. Who had read a book’ and who has lived with Joe's newspaper spittoon. Joe's refutation, though, is immediate: 'Pigs he is!...That's years of getting dust in your lungs on the bloody railway gangs and in the mines. And spat again' (265). His contempt for James's attempt to turn the globule of phlegm frothing in the living room fire into metaphysical speculation, into an avoidance of the 'miasma of pain' (169) of the kind Nora endures with her festering ulcers, is ferocious.

In the creation of the narrator of *Perfect Love*, as James searches for the possibility of self and meaning, Clancy has shifted narrative perspective from the impulse towards nihilism that is felt in his early fiction, and can be felt still in James's bitterly sardonic note, 'Everything is risible.' Instead, the weight of the novel leans to Anne's misreading of James note. Perhaps, she thinks, 'he had really written, "Everything is visible"' (255). And of course, he had written it, for as narrator, James writes Anne and everything in the novel. Such a declaration, 'Everything is visible,' is not for the faint-hearted. Clancy's narrator chooses not to watch but to experience, to inter-lock. The shift is real, as is the cost, for it means renunciation of the narrator's desire for a universe of abstract and pristine order, a superior position, in fact.

The narrator's developing power as an artist is used to engage actively and create a narrative of his vision of 'the real business of living' (180), with the female character of Nora firmly at the centre of the creation. It is Nora, when her description of the failing farm is wielded into a romance of the land by the estate agent who makes an observation about language that comes to characterize James's use of it. 'Language, Nora thought...had mysterious powers of transformation' (120). In writing his way into a nuanced understanding of the nature of his mother, and precise female experiences of the world, and in the creation of the novel, James begins to understand new possibilities for both male and female, for himself. In Clancy's subtle and attentive exploration of female life, of Nora living her very particular life, we come to see her life as a measure of history, not an addendum to it.

Clancy's narrator ends the novel in tentative affirmation, 'certain of only a few things. That living was better than dying, which was the only alternative. 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). So the novel chooses not to recoil in revulsion from Nora's suppurating wounds, from Joe's 'endless secretions of phlegm' (167) from all the blood of women in menstruation and birthing, from all the slovenly warmth of family in its messiness. The narrator renders the 'odour of mortality' (129) that Joe, and all the characters of the novel, carries; the narrator begins to apprehend it as the odour of humanity.

While the title *Perfect Love* is ironic and remains ironic, an act of love drives the writing of the novel. However relative, mortal or imperfect that love is, both the narrator and the reader feel it, glimpse that 'something pure might be possible' (266). However many times we feel the temptations of dazzling humour and literary cleverness career the novel towards comical evasion or nihilistic dismissal that it's 'just molecules, kid,' the narrative pulls equally towards love and meaning, a vision that is finally tragic in nature.

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