

The sheer power of limelight

Clive James's undimmed poetry and the television years

by Peter Craven

Clive James has been at the business of writing now for so long that his literary activities have almost outlived the fame that used to get in the way of their apprehension. Twenty or so years ago, it was possible to think that the man who clowned around in those 'Postcards' travelogues on television, and who seemed to reach some apogee of self-satisfaction and self-definition chatting to celebrities on the box, was just slumming it when it came to literature; that he had bigger fish to fry than this diminished thing, even, if he was forever reminding us of the grandness of the refusal he had made.

After all, the poems that had entered (highbrow) public consciousness were essentially jokes on the whole enterprise, weren't they? 'Last Night the Sea Dreamed It Was Greta Scacchi' – 'it did *not*' was the Martin Amis rejoinder – or 'Bring Me the Sweat of Gabriela Sabatini' seemed to fall, like his mate Robert Hughes's 'Sohoiad', into the category of brilliant interventions from a world elsewhere, a greater world that could handle the merely literary with its left hand. It was all too easy to imagine that James, for all his manifest brilliance, had fallen, like Lucifer, never to rise again.

It is not hard to understand the trajectory or the mechanism of misapprehension when it comes to James and his Australian compatriots. The supposed quartet of famous Australian expatriates – Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes, Barry Humphries, along with James – seem to leapfrog the things that cultivate their high and mighty talents as surely as the motor car prevented the land of their birth from having world-class public transport. Is Germaine Greer a great intellectual and woman of letters? Is Barry Humphries a great actor? Hughes comes closest to realising a traditional ambition, though the magnetism of the criticism is not separable from the way he projected it on television. Besides, he then goes sideways and writes his masterpiece, *The Fatal Shore* (1986), not as an art critic, but as a self-made historian.

In each case, the fame, the sheer power of the limelight, changes the perception of the thing lit. At least in national eyes, they are media stars before they are anything else. The Australian expatriates are adored and reviled in Australia for being themselves alone rather than for the things they do. This is least true of Humphries,

who is almost refined out of existence and paring his fingernails in the traditional manner of the Flaubertian or Joycean artist, because he has been usurped by his creation, Dame Edna. Of course, Humphries is the most straightforward artist (and entertainer) of the bunch, because he is simply a great comedian and satirist. Still, when Edna vamps her way through the vulgarities she began life parodying, we're dealing with a phenomenon more complex and more media-inflected than the mere artistic eminence of a Sidney Nolan or Patrick White.

The latter are two poets of the first rank. It did give people pause, even when he was so firmly in the television saddle, that what looked like James's occasional poems were quite as good as they were, though Australians did their best to keep them at bay because they were so obviously 'lairy' poems. A lair, as older Australians know, is an ostentatious, loud, preening show-off.

The book of my enemy has been remaindered
And I am pleased.
In vast quantities it has been remaindered.
Like a van-load of counterfeit that has been seized
And sits in piles in a police warehouse,
My enemy's much-praised effort sits in piles
In the kind of bookshop where remaindering occurs ...

That is the poem of a lair as surely as the poetry of my friend, the late John Forbes, was the work of a lair. It is also the poem of Clive James that insinuated itself into the public consciousness, not only as funny but as unforgettably so.

James records the moment himself in the introduction to *Opal Sunset: Selected Poems 1958–2008*. 'When I moved full-time into television I went on sending out any poem that I thought had a right to independent life. Finally I sent out a poem called "The Book of My Enemy Has Been Remaindered", and even my most determined critics began to admit that I might have a voice. In the long run, that's the only moment of validation that matters.'

It is a wonderful poem and deserves the immortality it will surely get, not least because of the homage it pays to the paranoia and preciousness of the literary, the specifically poetic, sensibility. When it first appeared,

the funniness almost obscured the art.

It was possible, back in the earlier days of James's reign as a television host, to suggest that the medium itself was a pale shadow of the criticism that had preceded it. Certainly, it is true that James's descriptions of what the Brits got on the box (the least bad television in the world, as Phillip Adams called it in its glory days) had an extraordinary bite and savour and charm. I can still remember, decades later, the hilarious variations he played on the phrase 'fairytale wedding' in his account of Diana and Charles getting hitched. No, the television criticism of Clive James is about as good as Tynan at the height of his powers on postwar British theatre, and grand in its comic riffs and scathing putdowns, for the same reason: because it is so engrossed.

It is worth saying, too, as memories recede, how good the best of James's television shows were. Here, I am thinking of classic interviews with Roman Polanski and Katharine Hepburn. But think of what James tried to achieve with that intellectual talk show that pitted George Steiner against Christopher Ricks, almost like figures from Bob Dylan's 'Desolation Row' fighting over the corpses and legacies of Pound and Eliot; or the one on journalism in which not only did that posh lefty Alexander Cockburn sit down with Carl Bernstein but Barbara Amiel, Lady Black herself, was heard to say, with drawling North American self-delectation, 'Clive, the real problem with journalism is not censorship but self-censorship.' He came right back at her. 'Have you been censoring yourself lately?'

At his best, James could always come right back at them. It happened like a body blow with the memoirs. It had been easy enough to think that at least a fraction of his fiction was a product of his talent rather than his genius and that, as Günter Grass would say, he had sent his fame out to earn some money, or bring in some other form of good or service. But no one in his right mind could say that about *Unreliable Memoirs*, the first volume of the set of which the new volume, *The Blaze of Obscurity*, looks like being the second last. *Unreliable Memoirs* is quite simply one of the greatest accounts that has ever been written of an Australian childhood in any form, fictional or non-fictional, even allowing for the fact that we're inclined to think that nothing half as vivid as childhood ever happens to anyone in Australia. The nostalgia in the book pours like honey. It is a lovely book, hilarious and credible, while living up to the grave and poignant epigraph from the *Iliad* with which he honours his mother. Behind every joke, every nudge, nudge and wink, wink in the antipodean intellectual wise-guys repertoire there is the *pietà* of the Australian wife who lost her husband to the war and lavished her love on her son.

It stands behind the stark, superb poem 'My Father Before Me'. The ageing James addresses his father, buried in the Sai Wan War cemetery in Hong Kong. The poem concludes with these words:

Back at the gate, I turned to face the hill,
Your headstone lost again among the rest.
I have no time to waste, much less to kill.
My life is yours, my curse to be so blessed.

It chimes, inevitably, with 'Occupation: Housewife', a reanimation of everything so easily dismissed about the old white picket fence Australia, not least the image of the wife and mother. The lament at the end touches the heart, a note of *lacrimae rerum* and loss that is magnificently rendered and counts every cost, not least the way in which the speaker-hero became a mummy's boy because his father was dead.

She can't forget I lost my good penknife.
Those memories of waste do not grow dim
When you, for Occupation, write: Housewife.
Out of this world, God grant them both the life
She gave me and I had instead of him.

I was unprepared for these poems, even though I admired them, when I read them again in *Opal Sunset*. Is it a matter of growing older, with the inevitable losses that come in its wake (a mother being, as they say, no parenthesis)? I don't think so, not largely.

These poems and themes, which together with the theme of the true Penelope, the wife loved beyond all the distracting girls, dominate this book, have a truth for which James has found the form. He has always been good at strict forms, always metrically dextrous to the point of looking smart, but the whirligig of time brings in not only its revenges but its resolutions and retrievals, its truths. The brilliant quipster, the 'Look, Mum, no hands' verse man, has written, with an absolutely moving simplicity, the great poems in this country's literature about being a son and having a mother. It is as if London and glitter, television and trekking, lunching with lions and leering at Diana, has had one purpose: to preserve in amber and then transfigure as art the grief and consolation of childhood.

It is there as a form of joy and madcap comedy in *Unreliable Memoirs*, and it's there in all its gravity and sadness in these remarkable poems.

It is, in fact, like the ascending tricolon of ancient rhetoric, the progression between these three books which is (no surprises here) a reversal of their commercial potential. The new memoir is good and wins you over. *The Revolt of the Pendulum: Essays 2005–2008* is even better. And the Selected Poems, which may well have you reading aloud with your voice breaking, humbles the reader with the power of its art. The shadow of the entertainer, the transfigured hack who is nothing if not critical, the touch of the poet.

The Blaze of Obscurity presents James in his smiling public man phase, when that grin beneath the beady eyes was familiar to millions and its owner was liable to be delighting himself as he leapt into

a Playmates' spa at Hugh Hefner's mansion or acted dumb in the vicinity of the cultural exoticisms of Tokyo or wherever, fooling nobody.

The book is about television and about a literary and more than literary sensibility in the area of television and (at least residually) the power that goes along with it. James has plenty to say about how his television shows were made, the organisational genius of Richard Drewett, his producer and subsequent partner, his passion for a particular bookshop in Argentina, his love affair with the tango, his friendship with Diana, the whole shebang.

The Blaze of Obscurity is a compelling roller coaster of a book, full of sharp observations about everything from too-smart-for-their-own-good young directors who want to show off their technique, to the brilliance and blindness of the grandees of British television. It's a magnanimous performance, especially apropos the hard men of power. Here he is on Alan Yentob, who played a role in his ceasing to be on the BBC: 'But Alan Yentob, even if he wanted me back, was in no position to pay the tab for my whole organization ... for me Yentob was the executive who had had the boldness to buy in the magnificent German series *Heimat* and screen the whole thing on BBC2. If a man as clever as that made a decision that was not in my interest, I could have no quarrel.'

Discernibly though not insistently, it is an elegiac book. James tells the story of Barry Humphries, on a skiing holiday with the Jameses in Aspen, Colorado, suddenly appearing in full tackle even though he had barely skied ten yards: 'But for once he looked bereft. He said, "Peter Cook died." I didn't know what to say. Barry, by a heroic act of will, had saved himself from the menace that nailed his friend. But Peter would never have gone on drinking unless he wanted to get it over.' Indeed, the last part of the book is, almost perfunctorily, a commentary on Yeats's words, 'And say my glory was I had such friends'.

James has a horror of the kind of celebrity which he doesn't think is attached to real talent, and often this seems continuous with people who refused to be cooperative on the television show: Jason Donovan causes a fuss about needing to wear his 'lucky pants', and Peter Allen is a special pain in the neck. 'He writhed, snarled, and finally said "Jesus Christ, what am I doing here?" Then he was gone. A long time later, I realised that he was really asking himself what he was doing in Australia, the land he still called home. The answer was that he was robbing the bank.'

There is some kind of pattern in this. Clive James is rather less impressed by the fame of non-literary people who are younger than himself, and who happen to be male and his countrymen. He has plenty of time for Elle and Kylie. Indeed, his appreciation of womankind can get a bit old-fashioned in its enthusiasms, but James is damned if he's going to tug his non-existent forelock to the Elton Johns of this world, let alone the ocker song

and dance men. That's fair enough and pretty clearly inheres in individual judgements. James is not a man who's afraid to parade his prejudices.

James palpably adores walking with the gods of his childhood, and he likes their amour propre. Despite the steel of Ol' Blue Eyes, he is grateful for a snatched five-minute interview with Frank Sinatra. 'It was a daunting prospect, but I asked him the right opening question. "The words of the songs have always mattered so much to you. Is that why you don't sing many of the songs being written now?" He said, "Good question," and he was off.'

'Movie' is the word Clive James uses, a bit grandiosely, to describe those 'Postcards' shows, which, from his descriptions, were composed with the care of full-scale documentary films, but which don't stay in the mind as indelible sets of images in the manner of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* or Max Ophüls's *Lola Montez*, both of which come in for a bit of stick in the essays.

Peter Porter said once that the confidence which is engendered by Oxford or Cambridge is nothing compared to the legacy of Sydney University. This was certainly true of John Forbes, and it's true with bells on of Clive James. It's not a perspective he has on himself, but no doubt you have to allow for what Paul de Man called the blindness of insight. James says at one point, 'Perhaps I had ... missed the moment when the land of my birth had graduated to a state of self-consciousness even more nervous than my own.'

But there's nothing nervous about the Clive James who is here to say that *Lawrence of Arabia*, for instance, is no great shakes. Hardly a significant judgement or one you would think James would bother to make. It scarcely matters that David Lean's film is one of the more literate and intelligent epics made by Hollywood. Everyone is liable to be unfair to the popular art of the generation immediately after his own. The compensation is that it leads James to a description of Peter O'Toole on his television program. In his dressing room, O'Toole talked about Jack Yeats's paintings and about the diaries of Schuschnigg. 'Dear boy, you really haven't read them? Really?' Clive James comments: 'The sprawling drawl was like being beaten up with a silk handkerchief.' He adds that O'Toole had a vast repertoire of poems that he knew by heart and that, 'Years later, he quoted one of my own poems to me and it was one of the great moments of my life'. As well it might be.

The O'Toole story is fascinating, too, for the way it leads James to reflect that the man who opened the National Theatre for Olivier – as Hamlet – and whom Peter Hall described as a genius when, in his twenties, he played Shylock – to Peggy Ashcroft's Portia – only made 'his interesting movies' because he had been 'rendered colossal by an uninteresting movie'. Well, *Lawrence of Arabia* is an uninteresting movie the way *Gone with the Wind* is an uninteresting movie, but the way in which O'Toole or Vivien Leigh were rendered 'colossal' was

part of the dream factory that created Tom Cruise and Elton and the rest of them as well. But what renders O'Toole 'colossal' even to the not-that-easily-impressed James has something to do with his greatness as an actor or his magnetism and charm as a man. Success is not a moral or aesthetic monumentality. A moment later, he says that Dirk Bogarde was his 'idea of an artist' and that he liked him all the more for the 'frailty' that would allow him to indulge in the 'higher gossip'.

Yes, it all has an obvious application to James, but who can complain? It's the television fame that makes *The Blaze of Obscurity* command the attention of a broader than literary audience, and who could deny that the higher gossip is a significant part of the charm for the most discerning reader of the best of James's memoirs and essays, though not his poems?

At one point in the glittering television career, Tony Curtis has a moment of total breakdown and melancholy and panic. He won't go on. James goes to the dressing room where the star is sitting, desolated, in total darkness. James says to the actor that he was integral to the success of several of the greatest films ever made: *Some Like It Hot* and *Sweet Smell of Success* and *The Boston Strangler* – and *Insignificance* (which most people don't know). After a pause, Curtis emerges. 'You forgot *Spartacus*,' he says. Then he goes on and gives a perfectly professional and straightforward interview. Who wouldn't rather be in a position to tell this story than have taken Damascus?

There is a lovely anecdote about how James's daughter, as a nervous young girl, went backstage with her father to see her hero Pavarotti and 'knocked over a glass of red wine into his lap'. And how did the tenor react? 'He smiled like a happy grand piano and said that in the town where he was born, having wine spilled on you brought good luck. Then he kissed her hand. In what prayers I have left to me, I always make room for him.' James recalls Katherine Hepburn telling him, 'Tracy found life difficult', and has sane, balanced things to say about Polanski. These have a new topicality, given Polanski's current predicament.

There is plenty of detail about how enchanted James was with Diana and how grief-stricken he was by her death, but there is no recapitulation of the empurpled accounts he gave of their friendship (when she made him sit with her in the window seats of restaurants and he feared the bullets that might come for them) which he published soon after her death.

This is a rich and absorbing book by and about a man who has walked in high places and has a perfect right to revel in or revile the various famous names that by necessity pepper his text. It is also an obsessive and consistently interesting account of how an exceptionally intelligent man devoted his wits to television without actually selling his soul.

That he had a soul to sell is not in doubt. It's true that, when Ian McEwan says to him, after James pub-

lishes his magisterial and magnificent rebuttal of Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, 'This is what you should be doing', the reader is inclined to agree – but then, so is Clive James. It is fascinating to learn that it was Tina Brown, so often attacked for having pulled the *New Yorker* down to a *Vanity Fair* level, who pushed and pushed for the Goldhagen essay – which is one of the two or three finest things James has written, the equal of anything by Gore Vidal – to be made longer, to be developed and rounded out. James makes his obligatory joke that the fact checkers at the *New Yorker* are the sort of people who ring up the professor of political science at Heidelberg University to ask if Germany is really in Europe, but there is no doubting how lavishly he repaid his editor's efforts and how much her efforts served him. The essay is effortlessly wise, not just supersmart.

There are times when you hunger for more editing in *The Revolt of the Pendulum*, though that is to not to deny the brilliance of these performances, long and short, or the comprehensive humanity and breadth of culture they exhibit. If you are inclined to weary at the unstinting glitter of Clive James, forever, even at seventy, flashing all his marbles at once, have a look at the wise and generous account of the collected criticism of John Bayley, Iris Murdoch's husband and one of the finest literary critics since World War II. 'Sometimes [James says of Bayley] the angle of approach is so unexpected that it spoils the party, like a waiter who overdoes the fancy footwork and delivers the soup into your lap. Evelyn Waugh, we are told, was short on humour ... Evelyn Waugh was short of humour the way that Sir Richard Branson is short on confidence.'

James concludes by describing the collection as 'a fabulous flea market of a book', and as a defence of collecting reviews it is utterly convincing. So, too – and it is a harder saying – is his conclusion to his essay on Karl Kraus, whom he sees, perhaps a bit projectively, as a blogger *avant la lettre*: 'The consensus that the Western democracies are responsible for any threat aimed at them might not have convinced him.'

The essay on Amis *père*, 'Kingsley and the Women', is one of James's best, because it has the Johnsonian virtue of absolute authenticity. James has a difficult subject and in this essay he succeeds in avoiding his twin vices which – I trust we can say this with respect – are a slightly factitious brilliance on the one hand and an easy sentimentality on the other. It includes things like this, which Dr Johnson would have acknowledged:

Far from being detached from the question of sexual morality, his poetry had almost no other subject. His depth on the matter, and his capacity to dramatise an inner conflict and make it vivid through his mastery of phrase and rhythm, would have made him, had his friend Philip Larkin never existed, a good contender for

the title of the most accomplished and least self-satisfied poet of his generation ...

This is Clive James at his best, intent (as he sometimes isn't) on the interplay between the quality of the work he admires and a human being he deeply liked. He revered the way Amis and Larkin achieved a language for talking about writing as part of the bread and butter of life, and he shows the method to superb and sane effect, in defiance of all academicism and in explicit contradiction of Leavis, in this essay, which is the touchstone of how biographical criticism can work.

On the other hand, the essay on Canetti is one in the eye for the absurd grandeurs of a great man James couldn't stand, and it's not a pretty performance. The only redemption comes at the end when he fesses up to the source of the animus:

I was introduced to him in the first summer after I got to London in the early 60s. He didn't even pretend to be polite and I couldn't blame him. After only a few minutes in his company it was clear to me what attracted him about the passing parade: trainee bluestockings, of the stamp nowadays known, in Britain at least, as posh totty ... Suffering from the same proclivities, I was in no position to despise him, and I might say that the same goes for the characteristic that he projected onto local population because he had so much of it himself.

What Canetti projected onto the English, as James emphasises, was his 'arrogance'. James's note at the end of this essay doesn't quite tally with the evinced disdain for Canetti. Nor is there any indication of what he might think of that blackest of German-language negation men, the great Thomas Bernhard, of whom Updike said that he addressed the reader the way Hitler addressed the German nation: that is, the way German husbands address their wives.

There are essays here in the expatriate pedagogue mode (also beloved of Germaine Greer) in which James wants to carry on about dangling participles and their ungainly like, almost as if to prove that he can equal the British in their ability not only to detect bad smells but to protest against them loudly – the quality A.A. Phillips said, in his 'Cultural Cringe' essay, represented the least attractive side of the English genius.

Of course, nothing could be more 'Orstralian', though this kind of butterfly breaking is not his strongest suit. He is, however, utterly compelling and ravishingly readable in every one of these pieces, in a way that will fill with envy any sane person who has ever put her hand to criticism. It is because James is so much more than a critic that he's so good at it. That's also, needless to say, why he can cut corners and sometimes seems to simplify his responses.

Every so often, there is evidence of the haste and cocksureness of a naturally erudite man who thinks

fast. For instance, it's Petya, not Nikolai, Rostov, who dies shockingly in *War and Peace* (this is one of the few names which the common reader is liable to retain). But these things, like the misquotations in Empson's criticism, are the vices that go with a genuinely dazzling gift. And it has to be said that James is characteristically generous minded, as well as judicious, when he's on the money. The two very resonant cheers he gives to his friend Robert Hughes's memoir *Things I Didn't Know: A Memoir* (2006) leave everything else that has been written about the book in the shade:

Robert Hughes was the golden boy ... as if the mischievous gods had parked a love child on us just so they could watch the storm of envy ... Of all the young men I knew, he spent the least time glancing into mirrors ... Nobody since Patrick Leigh-Fermor in his precocious youth has packed quite so much precisely registered and lexically specified visual detail ... What you hardly find anywhere is someone who can do for art what Leonard Bernstein did for music: go on television and become a fisher of men, hauling the general viewers in the direction of a new life ...

He also says that the reason Hughes fails to come to grips with the curse of Australia is that he never grasped how much he had been blessed, and that, in denying what Australia lacks, Hughes is forgetting that it doesn't because it's got him. This is a beautiful exercise in tact and it pleads, as all the best criticism should in the end, on behalf of love, not scorn.

That is true of so much of this trio of books that, notwithstanding the odd groundless curse, it makes you want, every so often, to weep. This is truest of *Opal Sunset*, in which we hear a James shorn almost of smartness and guile, of metropolitanism and suavity, too, though the poetic equivalents to these qualities abound, transfigured and gleaming through with an effect that is consistently moving and, taken as a whole, rather amazing.

Clive James is such a good poet because his gift – that huge, slippery, trickster's gift, intent on rhetoric and every kind of skulduggery, stealing fame and slagging fame and seeing it as the precondition of all that's possible – somehow comes to terms with itself and serves no other end, on a good day, but art and truth. ■

Peter Craven's most recent article in *ABR* was a review of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, published in the September issue and now available online.

Clive James's works mentioned in this article (all published by Picador):

Unreliable Memoirs (1980)

The Blaze of Obscurity (2009)

Opal Sunset: Selected Poems 1958–2008 (2009)

The Revolt of the Pendulum: Essays 2005–2008 (2009)