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Clive James, *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower*

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Clive James is our very own neo-Augustan – his gleaming formal structures go about their discursive business of conveying a clear idea, and setting forth a recognizable place and context in which the idea can take root and flourish. Thought and emotion, object and subject, analogy and resemblance, vision and revision, sound and sense – the constituents of all poetry become a fluent traffic in the well-proportioned architecture of an ideal James poem. His verses do not become clotted, they do not fragment under semantic or syntactic pressure, they place their trust in a stable subject, a shared perception, a tonal subtlety, in the natural life of the perceiving ego. His poems shuttle easily between past and present, and though he knows – he would not attempt – the danger and the folly of writing the poem including history – history, or fragments of it that concern him personally, are readily available. Known to be a polymath – he is certainly well-read – he practises the art of allusion but without drawing attention to it, the allusion is also subdued to his overriding aim – to deliver the idea, the conceit and create the poetic emotion in his reader. The fragments he unearths, and inserts, do not, as in the Modernists or in a neo-Modernist like Geoffrey Hill take on a life of their own, or come to constitute an antagonistic voice, or a dramatic chorus which threatens to deflect or overburden or impact upon the

fluent traffic of the matter in hand. This voice will suffer no impediment, except one conjured and exorcized on its own terms. Language is firmly kept in check – Clive James is a serious student of Auden – and it remains firmly in the service of clarity. He is, to use the jargon, a poet of the referent, eschewing wordplay, ambiguity and a *signifiante* that never quite settles on meaning – in a word he is not a card-carrying post-modern. He is also very funny.

All this, as far as I am concerned, is a cause if not for rejoicing exactly, then certainly for pleasure. Whose primary dictum was it? – *it must give pleasure* – and Clive James assuredly and repeatedly delivers that welcome commodity. Voice is everything – or rather, tone of voice. Thanks to his other life – his life in showbiz, in what he calls ‘the blaze of obscurity’ – we are familiar with that winning flat unfazed Australian drawl, delivering its witty and ironic commentary. One can hear it in the poems – even though in many of these late poems there is an elegiac lilt and swoon – but he is never lost for words or for a phrase, rather in the sense of Walter Pater’s comment to Oscar: ‘Really, Mr Wilde, you have a phrase for everything’. Clive James has made a parallel career of commenting on the fads and follies of the times, and no one does it more wittily – his talent is riotously let loose in the one indisputably and generically comic item in the book: ‘Iliad !’, with the sub-title: ‘from a fragment of an ancient manuscript recently discovered in the ruins of Los Angeles’. The opening ‘paragraph’ sets the tone :

Then well-toned Brad of the head wider in the jowls than in the brow, Brad of the digitally enhanced thigh, addressed his army of computer generated warriors, saying : Computer generated warriors, merely because the city we besiege is suddenly full of water would you fall back? Are you afraid of Kevin ?

There follows a four-page romp (I believe the piece was originally turned in as a review of Hollywood’s preposterous *Troy*) in which the celebrity cast gets treated to a range of Homeric epithets: we have ‘Angelina of the

exaggerated curvature and the extensive self-harm', and a little later, of the 'inconceivably curvaceous rack'; there is 'Mel of the hair extensions and the deficient anger-management' and 'Naomi of the dark elegance and the irrational anger' who lets fly her telephone 'at Russell of the neck wider than his head' ... and so on and so forth. 'Iliad!' is unforgettable, though it is less formally worked than some of the earlier comic classics – one thinks of 'The Book of My Enemy' or 'Bring Me The Sweat of Gabriela Sabatini' or 'A Gesture Towards James Joyce', or of James's inaugural piece of Augustan satire, dating from the 'seventies, 'Peregrine Pryke's Pilgrimage Through Literary London'.

Which brings us to one of the many fascinating paradoxes and difficulties of dealing with a phenomenon as mercurial – or as slippery – as Clive James. 'He's a brilliant bunch of guys' as one wag described him in the *New Yorker*. As a fundamentally serious and thoughtful man, aiming to be taken seriously as a poet – this much is now clear, and openly admitted in the copious notes on his website – he is a victim of his own wit. He risks being remembered as a brilliant talker – I still recall gags from his End of the Year Shows – Nigel Mansell crowned as the 'most boring sporting celebrity' several years running – and as the author of a handful of very funny poems (the ones I have just mentioned). He risks (let us be honest about this) the resentment of his poet-peers viz how can a man who is apparently so successful at everything, a polymath and a TV celebrity, both here and in his homeland Australia, and presumably wealthy to boot, lay claim to the laurel as well? He is already a successful writer of prose autobiography, cultural criticism and song-lyrics. Not that I begrudge Clive James anything – for one thing he has provided abundant pleasure. But here – asked to review *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower* – one is put on the spot. Despite hearing the familiar drawl and wit, I must lay aside my memories of Clive James the clown and take seriously a self-description he has given 'I'm a crying man that everyone calls Laughing Boy'.

There are manly tears aplenty in *Nefertiti*, sub-titled 'Collected Verse

2008–2011'. The sub-title of course is a cunning strategy – one that is present throughout the volume – that of self-deprecation. But the length and formal ambition of the verses that follow will fool no one – for James, poetry is a competitive sport, and he can do the formal, regular, rhyming stuff better and more cleanly than most. Without raising the hare of 'verse or poetry?', I have no hesitation in awarding the title 'poem' to many pieces in this book. James is a self-advertised polymath, but in that rare breed there is a familiar and touching vulnerability: confront them with a true scholar or specialist of any particular period or subject, and the beast will back down, and show signs of deference if not even obeisance. One person to whom James shows an almost boyish deference is his wife of many years, the Dante scholar Prue Shaw. This is explicitly the case in 'Book Review', his touching *hommage* to her 'brilliant scholar's soul'. The book under review is Shaw's edition of Dante's *Monarchia*, done for the ultimate Dante 'authority', the Società Dantesca Italiana. For James, the publication after twenty years in preparation of this book, presents a rare opportunity (he is famously reticent about his family life in his memoirs) to express both admiration and love. He does it with grace :

Today, so far from our first years, I bless
My judgement, which in any other case
Is something we both know I don't possess,
But one thing I did know. I knew my place.
I knew yours was the true gift that would bring
Our house the honours that mean everything ...

Note though, even here, the weight laid on honour, achievement – and on competition. Nothing if not competitive, on numerous occasions Clive James pitted his wits and broke lances against another famous Australian expat London-based poet, also a brilliant and copious talker, his friend Peter Porter. (There are audio cassettes available of the two men 'in dialogue'). Porter, who died in 2010, is the subject of two elegies

here, most movingly in the poem 'Silent Sky'. There are moments when James strikes the unmistakable Auden note :

There's all our usual stuff of which to speak;
Pictures and poems, things that never die,
And then there's history, which in the end
No one survives, not even your best friend.

Unable to bring himself to utter what he knows will in all likelihood be a final farewell, the poet changes tack – 'Better to wear my mask/Of good cheer ...' The mask of good cheer is the mask of Democritus, that Robert Burton clamps over his features in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Many of the poems in *Nefertiti* are composed *sub signo doloris*, in the sign of Saturn. The elegiac note is not difficult to strike – *do you remember when – and how and where ?* – though it is especially well done in 'Silent Sky', and in the upbeat opening poem (another piece addressed to his spouse) 'Signing Ceremony'. A more interesting angle is taken in 'Grief Has Its Time', one of the finest achievements in the book, in which James's many qualities come to bear. The poem is in part a homage to Samuel Johnson – one of the great Augustan heroes, the writer who almost defines good sense, the great debunker of poppycock. The poem enfolds within it an anecdote that happened to James himself. Taking her place at the end of the signing queue, after one of his public readings, 'An ancient lady touched my wrist and said/ I'd made her smile the way he used to do/ When hearts were won by how a young man read ...'. The young man in question went to war and did not return, which makes one wonder if the ancient lady is in fact not the ghost of James's own mother; he has recounted elsewhere, in poetry and prose, the central 'traumatic fact' of his own life – the death of his father in an accidental air crash, on his way home to Australia, having survived the horrors of Changi POW camp. The guilt James has borne, of being lucky, and how he feels enjoined to live life intensely and productively, as if to make up for what his parents never had, has begun to enter his

prose memoirs and his poems. Other writers of his generation have expressed regret, sometimes bitterly, at coming 'too late' to participate in the fight, and share the experience of their fathers and their elder brothers. The ancient lady shakes James's conviction that he is 'blessed with the light touch,/ A blithesome ease ...' He finds that his words have cut deeper than he supposes – and here the voice of Johnson rejoins the poem

'Be certain, sir, we take a deeper tone
Than we believe. Enough now for tonight.'

The most memorable poems here are those that have the whiff of the *vécu* – they are often the shorter ones, less the set-pieces – when Clive James the seventy year old smiling celeb is shaken in his self-belief, and his life, caught off-guard, 'turns to face itself'. 'Special Needs', about an encounter with a severely disabled child accompanied by his father is such a poem.

But James is rarely fazed for long, and even in these poems there is a suspicion that, yes, he suffers self-doubt a moment, or guilt, or shame – but he rights himself quickly. He is incorrigibly buoyant, and he has the gift of – to employ the demotic as he does on occasion – covering his arse. He has the kind of ironical intelligence that allows him to compose poems in the round, and to distance himself at the right moments, if an emotion is coming through too raw or an analogy is taking him too far. He is a self-conscious poet (for Eliot, a mark of the 'civilized mind'), and in 'Fashion Statement', a remarkably clear-sighted vision of his youth and apprentice years in Australia, he delivers a poetics of style, both poetic and sartorial. He casts his young self as a dandy, in art and dress:

For nothing rules like easy eloquence
Tied to the facts yet taking off at will
Into the heady realms of common sense
Condensed and energised by verbal skill :

It has no need to check before a glass
The swerve of a frock coat around its arse.

This kind of self-consciousness can itself become a device, a tic, used to disarm the reader (but it also can disarm the poem, damagingly) – in ‘Book Review’, mentioned above, the self-deprecation can seem a tad overdone – methinks the gentleman doth protest too much. An astonishing poem in this regard, written (one is given to imagine) from his hospital bed in Addenbrookes, is ‘Vertical Envelopment’. This long piece in irregular blank verse, is a kind of fantasy-cum-diary in which the poet recounts his illness as an overwhelming assault, and the running parallel he creates is with the experience of young men in wartime:

Taking the piss out of my catheter,
The near-full plastic bag bulks on my calf
As I drag my I.V. tower through Addenbrooke’s
Like an airborne soldier heading for D-Day
Down the longest corridor in England.

The gritty demotic macho tone is sustained – even though he is also ‘taking the piss’ out of his own pretensions at such analogy throughout. Improbably, despite or perhaps because of the rough edges, he pulls it off, though crucially, near the end, by taking distance in the familiar way:

Another night alive
To lie awake and rue the blasphemy
By which I take their deaths as mine, the young
Soldiers of long ago, in the first years
Of my own full span, who went down through the dark
With no lives to look back on. Their poor mothers.

Along the way, we can hear the familiar drawl and the easy wit – surviving even in these dire circumstances – and for that, frankly, one can only say *chapeau!*

Bruises from Clexane like Kandinsky abstracts
Blotch me with blue and yellow and bright pink,
A waistline from the Lenbach Haus in Munich.

It is a piece of bravura, but it is genuinely brave. If writing from the terminal, or nearly-terminal ward – or from the ‘departure lounge’ as James has dubbed it – is becoming almost a genre *de nos jours*, then this is a very honourable instance of it.

Clive James’s poetic *œuvre* contains poems that are about poetics, and set-piece poems addressed to poets he admires – ‘What Happened To Auden’ is a celebrated one – and in this latest volume there is a long, stately account of ‘The Later Yeats’ and a shorter piece entitled ‘A Bracelet for Geoffrey Hill’. It can be a risky procedure, this business of paying homage to one’s literary heroes. The Yeats poem is written out in a series of eight sonnets of unusual and subtly varied rhyme scheme – and James is tough-minded enough to drive for the full chime every time. It is a homage to Yeats written in the tones of Auden:

Where he sought symbols, we, for him, must seek
A metaphor, lest mere praise should fall short ...

has that unmistakable, confident, hypotactic cadence, the first plural person used with such persuasive authority. Unfortunately, the metaphor chosen – I would prefer the word analogy – which is that Yeats’s work is comparable to a boat, or to a series of boats that grow bigger and more adventurous – sinks under the strain it is asked to bear, and takes in water, falling into banality:

These would have been enough to make him great :
The caravels that reached Byzantium
Alone proved him unmatched. Then, at the heart
Of this flotilla, as if light were haze,
Something appeared to strike the viewer dumb :
A huge three-decker fighting ship of state.

James, true to his usual technique, attempts to recoup the poem by distancing himself from his own analogy, which sinks it further, and offers advice on how to read Yeats –

Worse than absurd, then – witless, in the end –
To trace him through his visionary schemes
And systems...

and he risks the lapidary but becomes sententious:

Few things are true
About the life except the work.

Whatever that means. The danger here of course is that, prompted by the poem, one then takes down Yeats from the shelf – and re-reads, say, the magnificent summation called ‘Dove or Swan’ that concludes *A Vision*, and one notes, among other things, that it may not actually be ‘witless’ to read it with attention. It may actually contain insight and wisdom. Then one turns to the late poems James rightly picks out for singular praise – ‘Among School Children’ or ‘All Souls Night’. Every line of these poems has a specific gravity, grace and stateliness his disciple can never match, and Clive James’s opinions, whether in praise or blame (the part of blame I suspect prompted by the passage in Auden’s own elegy for Yeats that begins ‘You were silly like us’) come to seem nugatory, or like received opinion. The poem for Geoffrey Hill is interesting chiefly because in it James seems – consciously or unconsciously – to be feeling towards an understanding of what it is, precisely, that is missing from his own fluent verse. Two phrases in fact finger it – ‘the densely wrought’ and ‘Coherent multiplicity’. We come to realize that what makes James’s poetry, despite the qualities I have outlined, seem characteristically thin-textured, is that it is essentially univocal, there lacks the torque or texture of ‘a battle won – or lost – against silence and incoherence’ which for Hill defines the poem. There is lacking the authentically dramatic element, the ‘antiphonal voice of the heckler’; there is somehow

insufficient impediment, the submarine rocks, the currents, the small whirlpools and counter-currents that create interesting disturbance on the surface of a great, light-bearing river. The voices, the ghosts, even the friends and the loved ones are summoned up in an orderly way, and he can conjure them away as quickly. His experience is centripetal. What impedes him is always a shame or guilt of his own imagining, and frequently it is quickly righted; he is chiefly haunted by ‘the shadow of my former life’. ‘Your life has turned to look you in the face’ is the final line of a critical and moving poem that confronts his own mortality. Is it because he discovered that ‘life is arbitrary’? Finally, no transcendent or demonic Other provides impediment or gives him pause. He is not to be blamed for that, but the lack of it makes for a thinness in the work. This is to judge him by the severest standards (as presumably he would demand, summoning Yeats and Hill as he does). He does dearly, touchingly, want something to remain ‘When we are gone’; possibly a ‘fistful of poems’ as he has opined in public, ruefully. He has every right to such a modest claim, and I think it will be borne out. But not necessarily for the poems he would have chosen himself. The world being pig-headed and lazy, he will be remembered for his ‘funnies’ and for giving, generously and unstintingly, much pleasure.

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