**Clive James: Dying by Inches**

Over recent months, I have been spending time in the company of Clive James, the writer, critic and poet. After a lifetime of heavy smoking and intemperate drinking, James was diagnosed with emphysema and kidney failure in 2010 as well as chronic leukemia and by June 2012 admitted on Radio 4 that the disease “had beaten him” and that he was “near the end.”

Three years on, he is still with us and in that time, he has also had to deal with the revelation of an eight year affair, first made public in 2012, that resulted in him being thrown out of the family home. Thankfully, the extra time granted him since, has given him opportunity for spending time with his daughters, something he had not been good at, and a gradual rapprochement with his wife, Prue Shaw.

Having read his ‘Poetry Notebook 2006-2014’ over the summer, (and thoroughly enjoyed his pertinent observations oa wide range of poets), I purchased the latest collection of his own poetry, ‘Sentenced to Life’ as well as a collection of short essay and observations, entitled ‘Latest Readings’ both published this year. While the latter was a disparate mixture of essays and reflections, uneven in quality and clearly rushed out in advance of his anticipated demise, his poems are the subject of his coming to terms with pending death and the remorse he felt over his marriage. The poetry is raw and bare as he struggles to deal with his guilt that was consuming him and his failure to have been a good husband and the consequences of his actions:

*‘My heart had spiritual duties too*

*and failed at all of them. Worse than a waste*

*Was how I hurt myself through hurting you.”*

Balcony Scene

He was in no doubt of the damage he had caused, that what had brought him so low , and had wrecked his life was his *‘gift for deceit.’*

Contrition runs through many of the poems in the collection and you just want to offer a word of comfort, urge his betrayed wife to forgive him although he voices his fear, that her fear will be that ‘*repentance comes too easily.*’’

He beats himself up terribly as he reflects on the mistakes of his life and especially that all his life, he *‘put his labour first’* and didn’t show the generosity he should have. As he put it in ‘Leçons de ténèbres:

*“I should have been more kind. It is my fate*

*To find it out, but find it out too late.”*

Some would no doubt feel uncomfortable reading of his waiting for death, others would find the poems mawkish and rather mawkish. I found them scarifying, unrelenting, a little embarrassing (as if I shouldn’t be reading this stuff which was strictly between James and his wife and / or creator, but I felt that his rawness was as close to honesty as any poet allows. His sense of contrition did get to me and his confessional also:

*“I was born weak and always have been weak.”*

What? Clive James? Yes, one of the messages that permeates the collection is that all of us are less than our bark, that whatever wars we wage out there are nothing to the wars within.