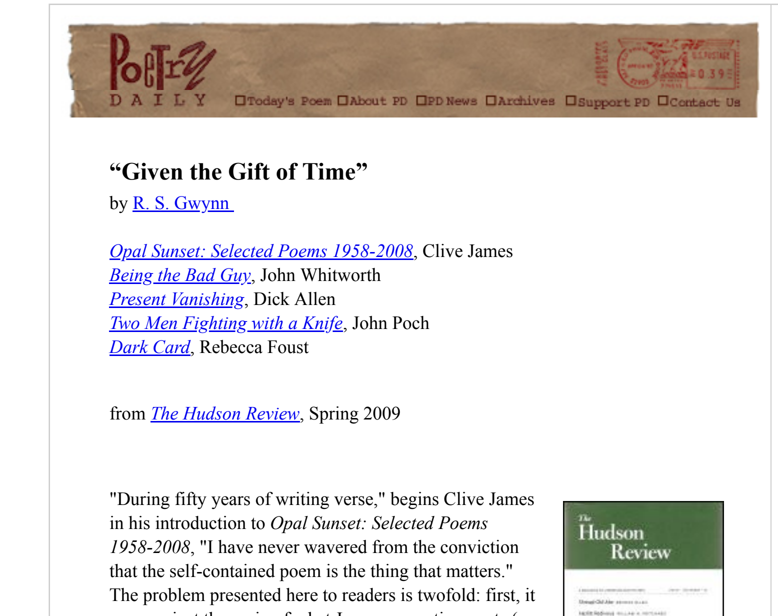


"Given the Gift of Time"

by R. S. Gwynn

Opal Sunset: Selected Poems 1958-2008, Clive James
Being the Bad Guy, John Whitworth
Present Vanishing, Dick Allen
Two Men Fighting with a Knife, John Poch
Dark Card, Rebecca Foust

from *The Hudson Review*, Spring 2009

"During fifty years of writing verse," begins Clive James in his introduction to *Opal Sunset: Selected Poems 1958-2008*, "I have never wavered from the conviction that the self-contained poem is the thing that matters." The problem presented here to readers is twofold: first, it runs against the grain of what James, excepting poets (or writers of verse) like himself, calls "the total achievement of a professional poet with a reputation," one of that tribe who has built careers "writing poems that could not be spoken aloud at all even in the merest moments of their language" and who have profited from the curious academic belief "that this development might even be considered an advance in the art form." The second is that James arrives on the shores of American poetry preceded by a reputation as a television celebrity and cultural critic who, though he is not as well known here as in his adopted Great Britain, is doubtless familiar to readers of *Slate*, where a good number of the essays in his recent bestseller, *Cultural Amnesia*, originally appeared. On the one hand, we are asked to read the poems of a relatively unknown poet, each on its own terms; on the other, we may be reminded that in order to write the poems of Clive James one has to *be* Clive James—globetrotter, intellectual-without-portfolio, media maven, inquisitor of the Spice Girls, and pal of Princess Di—and that it's not always easy separating the message from the messenger.

That caveat out of the way, I can report that *Opal Sunset* is a joy to read; and, if it's not always clear if one is enjoying the Poetry of Clive James or a collection of poems written by someone who happens to be named Clive James, it is nevertheless a pleasure to meet a poet so deliberately out of tune with the critical temper or, for that matter, "any field of creative endeavour that becomes a successful commodity." True, there may be one too many cameos by Elle MacPherson and one too many *jeux d'esprit* like "Bring Me the Sweat of Garbriela Sabatini" or "Last Night the Sea Dreamed It Was Greta Scacchi" that do go on a bit, but a book that begins like this is hard to resist:

> 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 that kind of bookshop where remaindering occurs.

I wouldn't ordinarily recommend picking out poems to read first on the basis of the table of contents alone, but James's titles—"Deckard Was a Replicant," "Johnny Weissmuller Dead in Acapulco," "Museum of the Unmoving Image," "The Australian Suicide Bomber's Heavenly Reward"—are beguiling enough to get anyone flipping the pages and ignoring the poet's careful arrangement.

It's not difficult to ascertain the poet of the canon whom James most admires. In an article on five favorite poetry collections he lists Yeats, Frost, Auden, Wilbur, and Larkin. Reaching further back, he might have added Byron, the guiding spirit behind his several ottava rima digressions, and his countryman A. D. Hope, who wrote the kind of poems for the "international English-speaking world" to which James also aspires. Of the moderns, Larkin, as one could predict, is the most persistent guide and thorn in James's flesh. "A Valediction for Philip Larkin" contains James's typical vices and virtues; at 166 lines (in the five-line stanza that Larkin used in "Reasons for Attendance") it rambles on, from James's learning of Larkin's death after landing in Nairobi, through several pages of witty though inconsequential travelogue:

> And had I not observed the elephant
> Deposit heaps of steaming excrement
> While looking wiser than Immanuel Kant,
> More stately than the present Duke of Kent?
> You start to see why I was glad I went.

Which is to say, until I began to feel that the poet's chatty self-indulgence had got the better of him. Then, at precisely the point of no return, he finally manages to get down to Larkin's brassbound tacks:

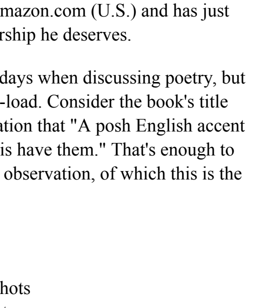
> You were the one who gave us the green light
> To get out there and seek experience,
> Since who could equal you at sitting tight
> Until the house around you grew immense?
> Your bleak bifocal gaze was so intense,
>
> Hull stood for England, England for the world—
> The whole caboodle crammed into one room.
> Above your desk all of creation swirled
> For you to look through with increasing gloom,
> Or so your poems led us to assume.

The implicit envy here reminds me of Auden's "Who's Who," where "the greatest figure of his day ... sighed for one / Who, say astonished critics, lived at home." James has surely learned one lesson from the Sage of Hull, to write verse that doesn't "sound like poetry one bit, / Except for being absolutely it"; nevertheless, he must still rue the vast space that separates the poet from the gifted journalist, the one who is forced to admit, "Those who can't see the world in just one street / Must see the world. What else is there to do ... ?" Well, Byron wouldn't have been much of a poet either if he'd stayed home in Nottinghamshire instead of heading off for points south and east.

"Heading off," first from Australia to England and thence to almost everywhere else, has been such a defining characteristic of James's life that the consequent theme of "heading back" provides him with one of his richest veins. Australia, specifically Sydney, is revisited in the book's title poem and in several others, especially the marvelous "The Eternity Man," a narrative about the life of Arthur Stace, a near-illiterate homeless man who, after a religious conversion, spent the rest of his life on a singular mission, writing the word "Eternity" an estimated half-million times on the public sidewalks and walls of Sydney (a replica of Stace's flowing cursive, with lighted fifty-foot-tall letters, now adorns Sydney's Harbour Bridge). There are also affecting poems about and addressed to the poet's father, who died in an airplane crash returning from a Japanese prison camp in 1945, and about the death of his widowed mother, who "now ... wears / The same robes of forgetfulness you do." Finally, there is the touchy matter of James's long marriage and family life, about which he has been famously silent except to lament his shortcomings as husband and parent. "Anniversary Serenade," a frankly sentimental ("You are the stroke of luck I can't forget") yet touching love poem, manages to say the "private words addressed to you in public" that Eliot could muster only once; "The Nymph Calypso," the penultimate poem in the collection, is perhaps the best of the lot, becoming in context the poet's *apologia* for a life of Odysseus-like rambling. At its conclusion, having returned to Ithaca and reclaimed his throne and bed, our hero looks into Penelope's face

> And saw Calypso. What the nymph would be,
> Given the gift of time, was there made plain,
> Yet still more beautiful. Penelope,
> Because she knew that we grow old in pain
> And learn to laugh or else we go insane,
> Had life unknown to immortality,
> Which never gets the point. 'Well, quite the boy,'
> She murmured. 'And now tell me about Troy.'

Clive James can certainly tell us about Troy and a slew of other places. He may be known primarily for asking the questions, but his answers to the self-interviews contained here are the sort of things you simply cannot get from any other living poet.



Though he was born near Mumbai and grew up in Edinburgh, the location of his fine sequence of autobiographical poems, *Landscape with Small Human*, John Whitworth has been one who has been, in Auden's words, content to have "lived at home"; after finishing at Oxford with the class of degree that didn't immediately open the gates of academia, he has lived in Canterbury, a proper enough location for a poet, and has spent his time teaching part-time, helping to raise two daughters, and entering every poetry competition under the sun, including those run annually by the *TLS*, monthly by *The Oldie*, and weekly by *The Spectator*. In England, a "poetry competition," as opposed to the ubiquitous "blind-judged" American book contest, usually requires that a poet write on a set theme or with a seemingly impossible set of restraints (a recent *Spectator* comp involved writing a new poem—"16 lines or less"—that was an anagram of a famous one). Most serious poets disdain this sort of thing, but John Whitworth, thank god, doesn't have much patience with imperatives to be serious, consistently displaying that there's really nothing wrong with occasionally being utterly unserious. Despite having published ten collections, of which *Being the Bad Guy* is the most recent, he can hardly be found on amazon.com (U.S.) and has just begun, in his sixties, to acquire the American readership he deserves.

"Whimsy" is not a term that is much in favor these days when discussing poetry, but Whitworth (what's in a name?) has it by the barrow-load. Consider the book's title poem, which takes as its stimulus the poet's observation that "A posh English accent is Hollywood shorthand for villainy—even the Nazis have them." That's enough to set the poet off on five rollicking stanzas of shrewd observation, of which this is the first:

> I've been the Bad Guy a long time:
> Sir Farquar Fitz-Arthur Fitz-Arse.
> For hundreds of years I've been calling the shots
> And I soon had my copybook covered in blots
> As I duffed up the Irish, the Welsh and the Scots,
> But you have to admit I've got class!
> *He's got Class,*
> *Yes, we have to admit he's got Class!*

If sometimes his poems sound like songs from nonexistent comic operettas, more's the pity that we don't have the Gilberts and the Chesterbellocs to write them for us.

I must here confess that one of my highest expressions of praise for a poem is "Damn! Why didn't *I* think of that?" To use an American baseball term in describing a poet for whom daydreams of cricket lead to a poem like "Edgar Allan Poe at Lord's," I would say that Whitworth is clearly batting over .400 in this regard. Starting with such observations as the fact that the Greek word for "ostrich" literally

[illegible]

homegrown surrealist (witness such road-film classics as *Harry and Tonto* or *About Schmidt*), and one of Allen's poems, "The Post-Surrealist," may provide a poetic precedent and rationale for his unfettered footlooseness:

> When he learned about Gérard de Nerval
> leading a lobster around the Jardin du Luxembourg
> at the end of a blue ribbon
> he began placing lobsters everywhere:
> a Sears Tire Center,
> at the end of a sentence concerning cheesecake,
> in several women's basketball team photographs.
> Once he set two lobsters
> out in the desert where they could die a good death.
> Lobsters, he declared,
> are why we distrust maps.

May Dick Allen continue to distrust those maps and wander wherever the lobster leads him.

Two new collections, one a full-length book and one a first chapbook, caught my attention, admittedly because I am always interested in books that have local (i.e., Texas) connections. John Poch was born in Pennsylvania and currently teaches poetry writing at Texas Tech in Lubbock with his colleague William Wenthe, another Easterner who managed to make a successful migration to the land of Buddy Hollywood, fragrant downtown feedlots, and over-achieving football teams. Poch's second book, *Two Men Fighting with a Knife*, opens with a section of darkly satirical sonnets about the tattered remnants of the American West that may remind some readers of Richard Hugo, had Hugo been inclined either to sonnets or to satire. I use the former term advisedly, for Poch is not after laughs here, only the kind of rueful grimace that we experience when visiting a tourist trap like "Taos Pueblo":

> The glossy pueblo pamphlet lets us know
> we're WINNERS (poker, craps, blackjack, slots),
> though we don't need the top shelf liquor shots
> for close-to-free at Taos Mountain Casino,
>
> luring us with the pecuniary porno-
> graphic. We came for culture, the native arts,
> but the shops are as unique as mini-marts.
> We prefer the kiva, the drying rack, the horno.
>
> I wouldn't be surprised to see a kimono
> hanging with the kachinas, dreamcatchers, pots,
> and Chinese turquoise rings (forget-me-nots).
> Who comes to praise this sacred place should know,
>
> in San Geronimo, a symbolic casket
> lies to the right of the dais. What would you ask it?

The book's other three sections contain a witty sestina about the under-appreciated May Swenson that uses "one," "two," "three," "four," "five," "six" and various homophones and puns as repetends; a funny curse on the Denton (TX) cops, who are apparently overzealous in protecting their domain from double-parked poets; "The Angel on the Lamp," a meditation on love and childlessness that draws on *The Tempest*, and a further section of sonnets (a *crown* of them, by Jove!) in which the poet thanks "My Neurosurgeon" and somehow manages to make both a line and theme out of "Anterior cervical decompression and fusion." Poch is an inventive poet who knows his formal options and uses them with skill.

One of Clive James's poems is titled "Special Needs," and it is about an encounter with an "idiot boy, holding his father's hand," whom James encounters while sitting on the Quay. It details the social embarrassment that comes in moments that have presumably been shared by many of us, how, in the presence of physical and mental misfortune, we look, pretend not to look, then pretend to look at *something else* before we look again: "The father's eyes try not to say 'Two seconds / Is what you've had of looking at my boy. Try half a lifetime.'" Rebecca Foust's *Dark Card* is about that "half a lifetime," and more, for the twenty-seven poems here are about, indeed dedicated to, the poet's autistic son (to be more precise, he was born with Asperger's Syndrome). *Dark Card* is the 2007 winner of the Robert Phillips Poetry Chapbook Prize from Texas Review Press. Most chapbooks that I see are either scattered samples from an unpublished younger poet's work or, perhaps more ambitious, unified-by-theme creations whose single note wears out its welcome in under forty pages. But this one is the real thing from a poet who rediscovered poetry in her fifties, a seamless sequence following the child from birth to high school (and troublesome puberty) in a prolonged celebration of how one child's difference can make us fully cognizant of how isolated our own small islands of humanity are. Sometimes deliberately brutal ("the doctor's ohfuckingshit / when he lifted it, and / / it broke; your blood / on his face, my face, the ceiling / the back wall") and sometimes deliberately harsh ("What do you see behind your wide-open / dream-blind eyes, what dumb-bully night terror / yanks you awake, sweats you / and chatters your teeth?"), Foust's poems are remarkably free of self-pity for both mother and son. There's an attitude expressed in the book's title, the gambler's honorable and defiant one of *Well, this is the hand we've been dealt, so let's see what we can make of it.*

I can't predict how long Foust's subject matter will sustain her, for there are too many poets who have gone some distance on a first impetus only to flame out in search of further themes. That said, there is a quality in this book's opening stanzas that makes me hope that she will find them:

> When they look at my son like that
> at the grocery story check out
> or at school assemblies,
> I wait for the right moment, till they move
> through laughter, raised eyebrows, clamped lips
> —but before fear. Then I switch gears,
> go into my tap dance-and-shuffle routine.
>
> Yes, he's different, all kids are different, him
> just a little bit more—oh, he's knocked down
> the applesauce pyramid? So sorry, here,
> my sleeves conceal napkins for messes like this,
> and I can make them disappear. But before I do,
> make sure you marvel at how the jars
> made an algorithm when he pulled that one free.
>
> Oh, he was standing on his desk again, crowing
> like a rooster in your third-period class?
> Yes, bad manners, and worse luck
> that he noticed how today's date and the clock
> matched the hour of what you taught
> last week in a footnote—the exact pivotal
> second of the Chinese Year of the Cock.

As Mr. James has said, Foust may well—"given the gift of time"—continue to astonish (a second chapbook, *Mom's Canoe*, will soon appear from the same publisher). *Dark Card* is the kind of first collection that engenders the highest of high hopes.

About the Author
R. S. Gwynn has recently published new editions of *Poetry, Fiction, Drama* and *Literature* in the Penguin Pocket Anthology series.

The Hudson Review
New York, New York

Editor: Paula Deitz
Founding Editor: Frederick Morgan (1922-2004)
Managing Editor: Ronald Koury
Associate Editor: Julia Powers
Assistant Editor: Zoe Slutzky

Copyright © 2009 by The Hudson Review, Inc.
All rights reserved.

Reprinted by permission from *The Hudson Review*, Vol. LXII, No. 1 (Spring 2009)

Poetry DAILY

Copyright © 1997-2010. All rights reserved.