Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide
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*Even As We Speak* is Clive James’s 6th collection of essays, and covers the broad range of cultural, historical and literary criticism we have come to expect. Reading James’s essays is rather like conversing with an old friend. Often what he says is riveting and eloquent, at other times it’s a bit tedious or facetious, and sometimes you wish he’d stop carrying on about a particular obsession you don’t share. But overall, it’s worth while spending time with him, and interesting to hear his views on almost anything.

Clive James is a remarkable man. He is best known as a television personality, but he has the intellectual commitment of a scholar. He has learnt many languages, including Russian and Japanese, so he can read their literature untranslated, and his knowledge of European literature and film is daunting. He is also an accomplished novelist and poet in his own right. He is modest, although his modesty is sometimes so exaggerated it might pass for its opposite. His essay about the Sydney University Anglo-Saxon lecturer George Russell begins “George Russell is a great teacher and I was the worst student he ever had.” He proceeds to describe a student-teacher friendship that belies this assertion. But false modesty, or self-deprecation, is an integral part of James’s style, which on the whole is so satisfying and entertaining that its excesses are forgivable.

He is at his best as a literary critic, and he always informs his ethical criticism with a sensitivity to language. His introduction begins, ‘Finally, it is a
writer’s way of putting things that gives unity to his work.’ He always notices “a writer’s way of putting things” and this is a great strength, because it is always essential. He claims, for example, that his review of Goldhagen’s controversial book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, when it first appeared in *The New Yorker*, was shorn of what he calls his ‘animadversions on Goldhagen’s prose style’ because

they were held to be a potentially embarrassing irrelevance: …[however]

I thought the callow over-confidence of his jargon-ridden style was a clear index of how he had been simply bound to get his pretended overview of the subject out of shape from the start.

The first and best essay in this book is a review of the new complete edition of Orwell’s works. James understands Orwell, and understands how important language was to him.

For him, prose style was a matter in which the ethics determined the aesthetics. … Anyone’s prose style, even his, sets out to seduce. Orwell’s, superficially the plainest of the plain, was of a rhythm and a shapeliness to seduce the angels. Even at this distance, he needs watching, and would have been the first to admit it.

Of course, talking like this, James implicitly draws attention to his own seductive style:

Any successful style is a spell whose first victim is the wizard. Unless he is alert to the trickery of his own magic, he will project an air of Delphic infallibility that can do a lot of damage before the inevitable collapse into abracadabra. No master stylist has ever been exempt from the danger.
For James to include himself explicitly in the ‘master stylist’ category would undermine his vaunted modesty, but it certainly applies to him as much as to Orwell. James’s combination of self-deprecating humour and erudition makes him a very seductive writer indeed, and his readers must be alert to all his magic.

I find that it is easiest to resist him on women. Others may find his politics unpalatable, but when he spends 500 words rhapsodising over Italian film actresses, he leaves me cold. His articles on Princess Diana, especially his Requiem written in the days after her death, at least have the virtue of being heart-felt and uninhibited, even if they are a little embarrassing. There is a long article reviewing an endless collection of books on photography which has little to recommend it except, I suppose, to readers with that particular interest. The final suite of articles is made up of his Postcards from the Olympics, which is entertaining but shamelessly romanticises the event and Australia in general. Then again, perhaps it is salutary to be reminded that to some overseas visitors – even if they are expatriates – Australia can seem like paradise.

In his introduction, he dedicates his book to ‘the true, the eternal students,’ who realise, like him, that ‘such non-utilitarian concepts as humanity and individuality will always have to be fought for’. And he emphasises the primacy of words in this fight: “It is all talk, but this is a job that can be done only by people talking. Even as we speak, so shall our children live.” In this way he converts the title of his book from a jokey glance at his own television show to a profound statement about his belief in the power of words.