

Est.
1841

YORK
ST JOHN
UNIVERSITY

Wyllie, Alex (2023) 'Here Lies a Civil Servant': C.H. Sisson and the Possibility of Honesty. In: EditorsEmailORCIDMoul, V.UNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDTalbot, J.UNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIED, (eds.) C.H. Sisson Reconsidered. The New Antiquity . Palgrave MacMillan

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/7355/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14828-6_10

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repositories Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at
ray@yorks.ac.uk

“Here lies a civil servant”: C.H. Sisson and the Possibility of Honesty

How do you know if someone is dishonest? If, when you ask him if he’s honest, he answers “yes”. There is a certain moral rightness about this proverb, or truism, or joke, which seems both instinctive and borne out in experience. There is, however, an obvious flaw in the pearl: namely, that a genuinely honest person (if we can imagine one for a moment) would also, in a strictly logical sense, give the same answer. This is rather like the problem of being the messiah: Jesus of Nazareth cannot proclaim himself as the messiah (as in the Gospel of Matthew) but has to be indicated, and vindicated, as such by John the Baptist – even by the very voice of God.¹ One cannot proclaim oneself honest; but one can, perhaps, legitimately proclaim oneself *dishonest*. As such, there may well be a big difference between a moral or psychological belief in honesty and proof of it.² It is in this tension that much of Sisson’s poetry operates, and in which much of his political writings are rooted; and it is perhaps a question of personal tendency whether one reads Sisson, in these terms, as exploring ineluctable tensions at the heart of human identity or as being cynically self-contradictory, misanthropic, and toneless in his poems’ frequent proclamations of deceit and malice.

Many of C.H. Sisson’s finest and most important poems subvert the very possibility of honesty, whilst retaining a desire for it which is akin to, and as thwarted as, the desire for perfection: “Everything paid up, honest as the day | But I am nearest to my own language in sleep”³, as the speaker of ‘Good Day, Citizen’ puts it. Honesty in these lines is somewhere between the proverbial and the instinctive, “honest as the day” (‘as honest as the day is long’), but also, significantly, not the dream-language and silence of sleep which is the speaker’s “own language”. His ruthless analysis of political corruption is spoken from within that very political

¹ Matthew 3:13-16, KJV.

² Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth and Parrhesia* (U of Chicago P, 2019). p. 22/23.

³ C.H. Sisson, *Collected Poems 1943-1983* (Carcenet: Manchester, 1984) p. 63.

system, as a civil servant in Whitehall (“[o]ur public life is more than commonly disgusting”⁴): a tortuous position, in terms of authenticity and authority, which prompts one of his speakers to insist in ‘Human Relations’ that “inside the palace of my smile | Is the grovelling worm that eats its own tail”.⁵ Sisson’s poetry is animated by his aversion to being a “[manipulator] of sentiment”⁶ and by his perception that “bad writing is writing which expresses the politically manoeuvrable sentiments and is therefore part of the system of force which is government”⁷; and also by his profound anxieties about poetry’s rhetorical, persuasive, powers. It is such anxious perceptions which drive his poetry’s plainness of style and studied imperfection, and which prompted his well-known epitaph, ‘On a Civil Servant’, in his first collection, *The London Zoo*:

Here lies a civil servant. He was civil

To everyone and servant to the devil.⁸

But there are other forces at work in Sisson’s writing which direct his interrogations of honesty, and even the very possibility of it as habitually conceived. As Natalie Pollard observes, “For Sisson, a poet’s style is not an innocent expression of his ‘inner mind’.”⁹ This conviction, for Sisson, encompasses the perception that “a poet’s style” is answerable to the claims of rhetoric, manipulation, and persuasion also: and it extends to a conviction, both philosophical and political, that all speech is less than innocent. Sisson as poet, political analyst, and philosopher disregards on many occasions the conception of speech and action as an expression of some

⁴ C.H. Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature: Collected Essays*, Michael Schmidt ed. (Carcanet: Manchester, 1978) p. 89.

⁵ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 100.

⁶ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 91.

⁷ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 93.

⁸ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 49.

⁹ Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (OUP: 2012) p. 111.

authentic inner state, which may be obscured and thwarted by social and political circumstance. “A sentence is construction more than I”, he writes in ‘In Insula Avalonia’.¹⁰ That is, language is not some outpouring or expression of some pre-existent self; if there is a self to speak of, it consists only in that we speak of it:

There is, of course, a sense in which ‘I’ is self-evident. But it is a pretty silly sense, a sort of tautology. ‘I’ is the fact of the assertion being made.¹¹

If the ‘I’ is a product of assertion, then it might just as well be a product of persuasive and forceful speech as of logical inference. In the same essay, ‘An Essay on Identity’, Sisson anticipates Foucault’s concept of power-knowledge: “To discuss ‘Man’, in fact, one can only proceed by taking some traditional universe of discourse, and defining him in terms of it. There is nothing else.”¹² This is a view which obtains in poetry also: “A poem can have meaning only in terms of words other people use, and which we have from our ancestors. It is a part and not a whole”, Sisson asserts in ‘Poetry and Myth’.¹³ At the heart of Sisson’s work in poetry and prose is a questioning of the nature of the self – indeed, taking issue with the notion that the self is ‘natural’ at all – in a scepticism regarding mind and body, inner and outer (a crucial relationship for intuitive conceptions of honesty, as I shall suggest): as in the poem ‘Orpheus’, “The inside and the outside of the body; | These are the two minds that I am in.”¹⁴ Sisson’s questioning of honesty goes hand in hand, then, with a questioning of the nature of mind and body, inner and outer. Such doubts have implications for established Western notions of the

¹⁰ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 201.

¹¹ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 207.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 514.

¹⁴ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 134.

“voice of one crying in the wilderness”¹⁵, or of ‘speaking truth to power’¹⁶ – or even just saying what one means, since the status of the ‘one’ is radically in doubt, and since meaning is a linguistic and social construction (hence the “two minds” that the speaker of ‘Orpheus’ is in). As Sisson asserts in the *Sevenoaks Essays*, “We speak as historical persons – well, to say person is to beg the question, but we do not speak as ourselves. If we are selves, it is by virtue of other selves that we are so.”¹⁷

In *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, Mieke Bal and Ernst van Alphen remark that traditionally “sincerity indicates the performance of an inner state on one’s outer surface so that others can witness it”.¹⁸ The way people tend to think about honesty entails the notion of an integrated self, the reconciling of private and public, inner and outer. It is this integration of the self which constitutes a person’s ‘integrity’. Integrity is a correspondence between being and seeming which ‘No Title’ (in the 1965 collection *Numbers*) explores and subverts: “My nature is not what I am | But what these manipulations appear to be”, and “Being is not necessarily at one with person; | It is rare indeed for the conception | To fit in the body or even the manner of walking.”¹⁹ The condition that “others can witness it” – the ‘witness’, in St Paul’s sense in Hebrews 12:1, confirmed only by being witnessed in turn²⁰ – is of crucial importance in this context. However, Sisson reverses this idea, too, in ‘The Discarnation or, How the Flesh became Word and dwelt among us’:

¹⁵ Mark 1:3 (and Isaiah 40:3), KJV.

¹⁶ The origin of this phrase lies in a Quaker pamphlet of 1955, *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence*. The importance of the Society of Friends in the context of honesty and speaking truth to power is argued in Martin L. Warren, ‘The Quakers as Parrhesiasts: Frank Speech and Plain Speaking as the Fruits of Silence’, *Quaker History* 98:2, Fall 2009, pp. 1-25. “The figure of the soldier-poet reunited art and ethics, and undertook new obligations by speaking truth to and about power.” Tim Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (OUP, 2013) p. xxii.

¹⁷ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 204.

¹⁸ Bal, Mieke and Ernst Van Alphen ed. *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (Stanford UP, California, 2009) p.3.

¹⁹ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 67.

²⁰ Hebrews 12:1, KJV: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” Paul’s ‘cloud’ here admits the possibility that the ‘witness’, who throws off sin and everything that hinders, is enabled (or forced) by his or her being witnessed in turn, as a droplet in the great cloud.

But the observer is observed,
You think. He is not. What you see
Is me
As something linear, straight or curved,
Which I, as I, should certainly deny.²¹

If honesty is a matter of being perceived, then by the same token (as Sisson suggests here) it is a matter of perception and, as such, part of a rhetoric of assertion and denial. Many of Sisson's best poems on the theme of honesty issue, unlike this one, from Machiavellian soliloquists – that is, performing the inner on the outer with, nominally, no-one to witness it²² – and indeed in the poem 'Virgini Senescens' the speaker drily observes that "Iago was an honest man; | I have that reputation too."²³ It is Iago as Machiavellian manipulator which interests Sisson, not to mention his honesty about being dishonest while speaking in soliloquy, and his dishonesty about his honesty when there are others to witness. Indeed, Sisson would have been interested in the strange, and strangely telling, ambiguity in van Alphen and Bal's formulation, that honesty is a "performance" for others to "witness" – a formulation which accords with the traditional Christian account of St Paul.

Sisson's poetry, from 'No Title' in *Numbers* onward, is littered with poems spoken by figures, usually nameless, soliloquising their duplicity, proclaiming their Machiavellian *virtú*. They are being honest about being dishonest, a classically ambivalent Sissonian position. In a linguistic twist which exemplifies Sisson's complex (and often paradoxical) sense of this matter, that word, *virtú*, is out of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and means something like

²¹ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 154.

²² As Natalie Pollard argues: "This is, at times, a one-sided poetry that desires merely to *appear* dialogic". *Speaking to You*, p. 149.

²³ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 104.

realpolitik – but in the eighteenth century the word also came to mean a work of art or the appreciation of art.²⁴ It is this implication of seemingly-opposed meanings – of *Art and Action*, you might say, the title of one of his collections of essays – which animates Sisson’s work. In the index of *The Spirit of British Administration*, for example, there is an entry for Goethe next to one for Goering. One might see Pontius Pilate’s “What is truth?”²⁵ as being the ultimate in *virtú*, or political pragmatism, or one might see it as an honest attitude toward truth. Pilate is honest about being dishonest, perhaps, or at least honest about being in a state of radical doubt about the very possibility of honesty.

Indeed, several of Sisson’s speakers seem to exhibit the kind of disavowal described by Peter Sloterdijk in *Critique of Cynical Reason* – in which the subject knows that what she is doing is inauthentic, but does it anyway.²⁶ This is the characteristic position of the post-ideological West according to Slavoj Žižek, and it is this cynical position which several of Sisson’s speakers enunciate. It is Sloterdijk’s “enlightened false consciousness”²⁷, the conscious bearing of the mask. This bears some similarities to what Sisson calls in ‘Order and Anarchy’ “the machiavellian” function of government: “All politicians, so far as they really govern, are utilisers of physical force and manipulators of sentiment. None is entirely in sympathy with the people and the distinction of the Machiavellian is merely that he understands that he is not in sympathy.”²⁸ In his descriptions of the bureaucratic state, both in his critical prose and his cynical poems, Sisson has a tendency to sound a bit like an anarchist²⁹, but herein

²⁴ OED: 1. a. The fine arts as a subject of study or interest; (also) appreciation or taste for, or expertise in, the fine arts. In later use frequently *depreciative*: interest in or collection of antiques, natural curiosities, rarities, etc., pursued in the manner of a dabbler or dilettante. 2. Chiefly with reference to the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli: the strength of character necessary for political or military success; forceful vitality; ruthless determination.

²⁵ John 18:38, KJV.

²⁶ Quoted by Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso: London; NY, 2008) p. 25. For further discussion of this point see Alex Wylie, “‘It is not anyone’s dream’: C.H. Sisson’s Utopias”, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 44:1, March 2015, pp. 25-42.

²⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (U of Minnesota P, 1988) p. 5.

²⁸ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 91.

²⁹ And indeed Sisson is on the side of anarchism on occasion, albeit with characteristic reserve and ambivalence: “The only society in which the individual *can be conceived* as being realized is an anarchist

lies a large focus of his ambivalence: Sisson is a strange sort of patriotic anarchist (leading him to invent the term ‘particularism’) evincing absolute monarchist leanings, offering as this may in some future when “the mechanical civilisation of the west ... break[s] down” “a compact and simple administration”.³⁰ Much of Sisson’s opprobrium is directed toward this very administration, the bureaucratic state, from which, however, many of his speakers speak. (Sisson himself had much direct experience of the bureaucratic state, both at home and abroad during the war when stationed in India, and it is certainly tantalising to imagine how much this wartime experience influenced his political outlook and his attitude to bureaucracy.) What connects the anarchist with the monarchist – and J.R.R. Tolkien was also both of these things³¹ – is the desire for the abolition of bureaucracy, for transparent structures of power; for the inner workings and outer manifestations of power to be reconciled. In this, Sisson and Tolkien remain romantics. Bureaucracy creates a “mechanical” (to use Sisson’s word) outer life, which increasingly alienates the inner life that is the (more) authentic one – a perception which presumes the opposition of authenticity and inauthenticity, inner and outer. We see this described by various of Sisson’s speakers, as in the poem ‘Human Relations’, for instance:

My mind is so evil and unjust
I smile in deprecation when I am flattered
But inside the palace of my smile
Is the grovelling worm that eats its own tail
And concealed under the threshold of my lips
Is the trustless word which will wrong you if it can.³²

society”; however, “[a]narchism is not a practical possibility in any future that can interest us”. Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 29.

³⁰ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 133.

³¹ Letter from J.R.R. Tolkien to Christopher Tolkien, 1943. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/11/anarcho-monarchism#> Accessed 06/08/2019.

³² Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

This is both the “enlightened false consciousness” of Sloterdijk – acknowledging “the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but [still finding] reasons to retain the mask”, as Žižek puts it³³ – and also a confession of such “trustless” and “grovelling” cynicism. Indeed, the speaker himself is toneless, inscrutable, in that very Sissonian way: he is neither praising nor blaming himself (or he is doing both). Whatever one makes of the speaker’s toneless ambivalence here, it remains true that there is an implied opposition between outer performance and inner ‘truth’, and that we are still within the moral universe of Matthew 23:27: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men’s* bones, and of all uncleanness.”³⁴ Perhaps a telling question for this poem is this: though the speaker tells his reader that he is lying, and that he will wrong you if he can with his “trustless word”, do we believe him about that? The speaker’s authority here becomes a matter of the poem’s authority, resting on accomplishments of rhythm, syntax, voice, timing, tact.³⁵

In his more philosophically deliberate moments, Sisson explores those traditional constructions of the self, of inner and outer, and consequently of honesty and the ‘mask’. In ‘No Title’ (*Numbers*, 1965) he writes:

My nature is not what I am
But what the manipulations appear to be.
It is not the world that is reflected in my eye
But the dark interior of my face.³⁶

³³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 26.

³⁴ Matthew 23:27, KJV.

³⁵ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 96. In the essay ‘Charles Maurras’, Sisson quotes the father of the French poet and demagogue: “reason may convince, but it is rhythm that persuades”. It is of course this apprehension in the context of the relationship between poetry and demagoguery that interests Sisson.

³⁶ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

The first two lines here distort the sense in a way apt to a rhetoric of reversal in which human nature is manipulation and appearance. ‘Manipulation’, and its variants, is a word with a deep political resonance in Sisson’s work: in ‘Order and Anarchy’ the politician is described as the “manipulator of sentiment”³⁷; elsewhere in the same essay, “the Machiavellian prince” “is highly conscious of the moral forces at work [in the state] and is therefore able to manipulate them”.³⁸ What troubles Sisson is that the poet himself may be a manipulator of sentiment: the troubling thought is that poetry is a form of rhetoric, perhaps *the* form of rhetoric, that ‘manipulation’ is also skilful crafting. Can we ever finally place poetry in a separate moral category from the politician’s speech, then, or even that most powerful contemporary manipulator of sentiment the advert? ‘Manipulation’ is a word which is associated for Sisson with the “system of force that is government”, which is the essential fact of any state, repressed of necessity by those within it; the citizen is dishonest about being dishonest, if you like; they know the reality but retain the mask. In this sense, then, Sisson’s Machiavellian politician is simply more honest than those whom he or she manipulates – and it is this honesty which gives him or her power. When he tells us that his “trustless word” will wrong us if it can, we believe him.

As claimed in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, the traditional or intuitive view of honesty relies on a certain view of the subject and its relation to the world. There is an inner life which is suppressed by its duties and ambitions in the world ‘out there’ – and the more ‘honest’ the person the less this is the case. This person has been called the *parrhesiastes* – the speaker of *parrhesia*, a word used extensively in Paul’s writings in the Christian Bible. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor defines St Paul’s use of the word thus: “*parrhesia* ... connotes ‘confident openness’

³⁷ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

in both the political and moral spheres”.³⁹ The *parrhesia* of Jesus Christ and his followers brings the moral and political spheres together as “confident openness”, the necessity of the witness being open to witness. As Michel Foucault observes, “[t]he specific ‘speech activity’ of the parrhesiastic enunciation thus takes the form: ‘I am the one who thinks this and that’.”⁴⁰ This is the “confident openness” on which gospel interpretation of Christ depended, which assumes the existence of a self prior to its utterances, which can be opened up to witness: a self which knows what it thinks, and which can reflect openly (and accurately) on itself. Again, in Foucault’s archaeology of the concept, the speaker’s essential identity is what his sincere pronouncement is based upon: “I am the one”. However, in ‘Anchises’, for instance, Sisson’s speaker throws radical doubt upon his own selfhood from his own point of view, which again might be seen as a kind of paradox: “There are those who exist, but it is not I.”⁴¹ ‘I’ here means not only the speaker’s own subjectivity, but subjectivity itself in the sense of the individual soul, or as some kind of quiddity, from which speech issues and which constitutes a mind. Again, in that very Sissonian way, the speaker here proclaims his lack of a ‘voice’ – just as his poetry is distinctive for its discomfort around the idea of the poetic voice.

Sisson writes from the point of view of the underworld, or afterlife, quite a lot. These ghostly speakers are a means for exposing the self, the speaking subject, as essentially a ghost or fantasy, as, again, in ‘Anchises’: “NON SUM, therefore NON COGITO, although there are shapes | Upon a mind I sometimes take to be mine.”⁴² The speaker here, Anchises (dead father of Aeneas in *The Aeneid*), is a ghost who speaks for the essential ghostliness of ‘the person’. Non sum, non cogito: and therefore there cannot be that reconciliation of inner and outer which constitutes honesty, or that sense of the *parrhesiastes* ‘knowing what she thinks’. In order to

³⁹ Jerome Murphy O’Connor, *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians* (CUP: 1991) p. 36.

⁴⁰ Foucault, ‘Discourse and Truth’ and ‘Parrēsia’, p. 41.

⁴¹ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 236.

⁴² Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 236.

be honest, you need to know what it is you think, and who you are. But in many of Sisson's writings the mind is a supposition, an assertion, an inference. As Foucault puts it:

It would be interesting to compare Greek parrhesia with the modern (Cartesian) conception of evidence. For since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a verbal activity, namely, parrhesia. It appears that parrhesia, in this Greek sense, can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework.⁴³

In Foucault's reading of the concept, for the Greeks the condition of sincerity was in "verbal activity" and not in some abstract reconciliation of a ghostly inner with an abstract outer through logical verification. It was also the cost of the verbal activity in question which guaranteed the authenticity of both speaker and speech act: it corresponds to our modern notion of 'speaking truth to power', in which the sincerity of the speech act (we might say the text) is attested to by its butting against its social contexts, by being costly to the speaker in material, political, or judicial terms. (I would suggest that Sisson is worrying at the falling away of this moral context for the 'honest' text or statement, in the 'false enlightenment' of Cartesian dualism.)

There is another facet to Sisson's interest in ghosts, which is about the importance of bodies in anything which can be thought of as 'authentic'. In *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, again, van Alphen and Bal argue that "sincerity is considered fundamentally corporeal rather than textual." It is "an integrated semiotic field" which includes "the unwittingly emitted signs of

⁴³ Foucault, 'Discourse and Truth' and 'Parrhesia', p. 42.

the body”.⁴⁴ These statements throw a revealing light on Sisson’s insistence on corporeality throughout his poetry and prose works. His ghostly speakers, then, are ways of exploring this sense of the poem as disembodied voice, floating free of the “integrated semiotic field” which the physical body might (at least in theory) afford. Sisson is deeply invested in the body as the only meaningful site of what we might call a ‘self’. There is not only an explicitly political emphasis here, which is, broadly speaking, the emphasis on the particular against the abstract, in which corporeality perhaps serves the political desire for “particularism”⁴⁵, but an implicit one, in which the disembodied nature of the poem throws into radical undecidability the honesty of the poem. A poem is a semiotic field without body-language, and in Sisson’s work this is a crucial point.⁴⁶ In ‘Virgini Senescens’, the speaker asks, “Do you consider that I lied | Because I offered silent hands?”⁴⁷ The silent hands, the lack of self-betraying gesture, are posited as a marker of untrustworthiness by the hearer, the reader of his words – or at least the speaker is concerned that this is so. However, in the next few lines the poem continues into an obsession with bodily gesture, which is also an obsession with honesty: “And are my lips no use at all | Unless they have a lie to tell? || Because my eyes look doubtfully | Must they not look on you at all? || And if my hands drop to my sides | Are they then empty of desire?” This is a poem which turns obsessively around honesty and lying: “Iago was an honest man; | I have that reputation too”, says its speaker; and “The honest thing for you to do | Is take your clothes off while you can | And let me look upon your mind.” “Although the body is your truth”, section 2 opens, “The mind may have some part in it”.⁴⁸ This is a poem whose form, of unrhymed regular octosyllabic couplets, enacts the poem’s ethical thrust – the ear anticipates rhyme, due

⁴⁴ Bal et al., *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Sisson advances a New Critical-like point of view in the *Sevenoaks Essays*, in a passage which iterates the ‘intentional fallacy’: “The poem is words on a piece of paper, or spoken, just as ‘the building’ is erected before you and you must make of it what you can. Nobody supposes that you feel what the builder or architect ‘felt’, as he sweated through his work...” Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 217.

⁴⁷ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 85.

to the rhythmical symmetry of the lines, and is denied it. There is something decidedly *unbalanced* about this speaker's well-balanced lines.

It is telling to compare Sisson's army experience with the famous soldier-poets of the First World War. Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are the absolute types of the poet who "[speaks] the truth to and about power"⁴⁹, the parrhesiast writing against military authority and public opinion (indeed, against the prevailing mood in the army, according to Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That*), against the evils of trench warfare and the political cynicism and callousness of the war. In the Second World War, Sisson occupied a different and more politically-inflected, even bureaucratic, position, on the North-West frontier in India. There is a desire for the political authenticity of the body in his poetry – "Although the body is your truth, | The mind may have some part in it"⁵⁰ – and for Owen and Sassoon, also, corporeality points to a political authenticity, which in them is given the sanction of having experienced the horrors of the trenches. The most famous example is of course Owen's 'Dulce Et Decorum Est', whose authenticity is rooted firmly in eyewitness descriptions of bodily horrors, the reader's deficit of authenticity emphasised by the injunction to "watch the white eyes writhing in his face, | His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin." We are reminded that we were not physically there in the scene of the poem, that reading the poem implies a separate experience: "If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood | Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs".⁵¹ However, though the body may be characterised by its 'unwitting emissions', the poem is neither 'unwitting' nor an 'emission', in the sense of being something unconscious and entirely natural as bodily process; though Owen's and Sassoon's authority rests on the (erroneous) assumption that their poems *are* indeed relatively unwitting, that is, innocent, in some way,

⁴⁹ Tim Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, p. xxii. "The true poet', Owen went on to explain, 'must be truthful', not least because the official language of the state and its media had become untrustworthy."

⁵⁰ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 101. 'Virgini Senescens'.

⁵¹ Tim Kendall, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, p. 202.

spontaneous emissions of, and from, trauma and melancholia. Where the body does ‘emit’ in Sisson’s work, it is often indicative of the speaker’s predatory nature, not, as in Owen and Sassoon, the victimhood, the bleeding and weeping, of those depicted: “My eyes shot glances and I salivated; | My words came like honey and I was just”.⁵² In Owen and Sassoon, the emitting, unwitting body is the guarantor of sincerity; in Sisson, the reverse is the case. (This is of course also a satire of self-expression on Sisson’s part, in which the speaker’s ‘confidently open’ glances and words are grotesquely secretive secretions.) Having worked within the British colonial system, as he had in the 1940s, and from within its ‘corridors of power’ in Whitehall, as a civil servant, Sisson is all too aware of the relationship between honesty and power, a relationship which is summed up in the word ‘diplomacy’, or perhaps ‘tact’ – qualities which the poetry of Owen and Sassoon, again, goes out of its way to avoid (or perhaps ‘unwittingly’ avoids). One might suggest, here, however, cynically or not, that rejection of social propriety and expectation may well be artistic tact of a very high order, and that the writing of poetry demands diplomacy and tact on its own terms.

On this topic, I find it very interesting that the epigraph to *Antidotes*, one of Sisson’s later collections of poetry, is taken from the fifteenth-century poet John Lydgate: “no surfett in word ne in langage”. The poem from which this is taken is itself a poem of political tact, in the genre of *bonum consilium*, entitled, appropriately enough, ‘Consulo quisquis eris’ (the poem’s first line Latinised):

I counseyle what-so-euyr thou be
Off policye, foresight and prudence,
Yiff thou wilt lyve in pees and vnite,
Conforme thy-sylff and thynk on this sentence,

⁵² Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 111.

Where-so-evere thou hoold residence.
Among woluyss be woluyssh of corage,
Leouw with leouws, a lamb for innocence,
Lyke the audience so vttir thy language.⁵³

It is a characteristically Sissonian moment of ambiguity that the line, shorn of its context, seems to be an espousal of a certain kind of honesty, whether that be technical or moral (and in poetry, certainly for Sisson anyway, those two things equate), but restored to its context it is an espousal of “policye, foresight and prudence”, in a poem that counsels to “[c]onforme they-sylff”. Is Sisson’s use of this epigraph, then, a hint at the inevitability of spiritual, political, moral defeat, an acknowledgement of the necessary cynicism of the speaking voice? Certainly, in Lydgate’s poem, the injunction “To do no surfett in word ne in langage” has to be weighed against the poem’s earlier injunction, “With dronke men do surfetys by excesse”. Surfeit in one context might be prudence in another; what is good for one audience may be bad for another. Sisson’s great poem ‘The Garden of Epicurus’, which appeared in 1968’s *Metamorphoses*, stands out against the background of John Lydgate’s poem, also, with its confession, or boast, of “policye” and cynical conformability; it is the dark reflection of Lydgate’s espousal of “policye, foresight and prudence”:

My heart was evil but I did no wrong.
Then I designed a way of doing evil.
Smiling was my first fault. I counted myself pleasant,
Which I am not. ...

⁵³ John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate: Part II*, Henry Noble McCracken ed. (Early English Text Society: U of California P, 1961) p. 750.

...

My words came like honey and I was just.

Soon I had the rewards of this conduct...⁵⁴

The poem's clinching line, "It may be that happiness is a sign of evil", perhaps just brings the speaker's attitude down on the side of self-blame – though the speaker's sincerity is of course by this point radically uncertain, and I would suggest that part of the immense power of this last line is the indeterminacy of its speaker's gesture or posture. 'The Garden of Epicurus' is a masterpiece of political cynicism and of sinister comic timing. But it is notable also for its *oratio libera*⁵⁵, its plain-speaking, deliberately undeliberated voice, and this is an aspect of Sisson's poetic writing which must be reckoned with, in this context or in any other. Foucault observes that "[t]he parrhesiast uses the most direct words, the most direct forms of expression he can find. Of course, that does not mean the parrhesiast does not worry about the effects of his speech on other people's mind. But whereas rhetoric provides the speaker with technical devices in order to act upon an audience's mind, whatever his opinion is, in *parrēsia*, the speaker acts on other people's minds by showing them as directly as possible what he thinks."⁵⁶ Sisson's poetic style is notable for its plainness, its deliberate imperfections, even. For all of Sisson's apparent cynicism regarding the possibility of honesty, whether in the socio-political sense or *per se*, his poetry is marked by a drive for plainness of speech and the 'anti-rhetorical' voice of the parrhesiast, and the preponderance of interior monologue in his poetry shows a desire to "[show] as directly as possible what [the speaker] thinks" – though this is of course ironically qualified by his speakers' self-professed unreliability. 'The Garden of Epicurus', for example, is remarkable for its bluntness of voice and syntax. Similarly, Sisson's fascination

⁵⁴ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 94.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *'Discourse and Truth' and 'Parrēsia'*, p. 13.

⁵⁶ Foucault, *'Discourse and Truth' and 'Parrēsia'*, p. 40.

with secreting, pustulating bodies finds its apotheosis in the figure of the “incarnate Christ”⁵⁷ – who is, of course, the ultimate parrhesiastic figure. In the figure of Christ, Flesh and Word are combined in one perfect “confidently open” individual, offering the ideal of this reconciliation of body and mind, outer and inner.

Ultimately, Sisson’s attitude to honesty corresponds to his apophatic view of God: honesty, authenticity, can only be adumbrated by sketching the outlines of its absence. His poetry is the work of a mature and disillusioned man, his first collection appearing when he was forty-seven years of age, having worked in government by that time for many years, a bureaucratic servant of the “public life” which he found “more than commonly disgusting”. “The passion that consumed my youth | Was for a different kind of truth. || When I am quiet I am free”, he writes in ‘On a Favourite Death’.⁵⁸ This “different kind of truth” is the absolute and unselfconsciously ‘authentic’, even dogmatic, kind – that of an Owen or a Sassoon, perhaps – the pursuit of the young and idealistic. Yet authenticity now lies in silence, the ultimate incorporeal state. Honesty, that great abstraction, lies outside language, and to deal in the things of the world is to deal in “policye, foresight and prudence”. When the speaker of ‘Good Day, Citizen’ describes himself as “honest as the day” and “nearest [his] own language in sleep”, this is perhaps not quite the “Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo” [‘I long to be dissolved and to be with Christ’] of Archbishop Laud on Tower Hill, but it may not be far off it.⁵⁹ To speak is to be compromised; yet not to speak at all is to be in some symbolic or literal way non-existent. Speech is unredeemable, for Sisson, and so in his work we encounter a poet whose spiritual longing is toward the great neutrality of silence, the deeply-perplexed aspiration of the living toward death: or as the title of one of the ‘Sevenoaks Essays’ has it, ‘Call No Man Happy

⁵⁷ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 67.

⁵⁸ Sisson, *Collected Poems*, p. 85.

⁵⁹ Sisson, *The Avoidance of Literature*, p. 218.

Until He Is Dead'. Truth is elusive, perhaps illusory, like the person who asserts it: and this rings true in Sisson's poetry, as does so much of the poetry itself.

List of Works Cited:

Bal, Mieke and Ernst Van Alphen ed. *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*. Stanford UP, California, 2009.

Foucault, Michel. '*Discourse and Truth*' and '*Parrēsia*'. U of Chicago P, 2019.

Kendall, Tim ed. *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*. OUP: 2013.

Lydgate, John. *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate: Part II*, Henry Noble McCracken ed. Early English Text Society: U of California P, 1961.

Pollard, Natalie. *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address*. OUP, 2012.

Sisson, C.H. *Collected Poems 1943-1983*. Carcanet: Manchester, 1984.

Sisson, C.H. *The Avoidance of Literature: Collected Essays*, Michael Schmidt ed. Carcanet: Manchester, 1978.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. U of Minnesota P, 1988.

Tolkien J.R.R. Letter to Christopher Tolkien, 1943. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/11/anarcho-monarchism#>

Warren, Martin L. 'The Quakers as Parrhesiasts: Frank Speech and Plain Speaking as the Fruits of Silence', *Quaker History* 98:2, Fall 2009, pp. 1-25.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso: London; NY, 2008.