Stoic Rhythm

The Poetry and Criticism of C. H. Sisson

In the first chapter of *English Poetry 1900-1950: An Assessment*, C. H. (Charles Hubert) Sisson writes, “In some sense, any poetical development presents itself as the purification of language” (16). One may argue, as a corollary to Sisson’s statement, that all innovative poets react against what they interpret as the excesses of their time and conceive their work as a correction of those excesses ⎯ a correction that somehow brings poetry closer to its ideal. Of course, the vision of a poetic ideal is a myth. Poetry neither descends from pre-fallen purity nor ascends toward teleological perfection. Instead, one reaction merely follows another, each emerging, gaining ascendancy, exhausting its creative potential, and stagnating until overthrown. Indeed, as Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence suggests, a successful reaction often depends on a creative misreading of one’s artistic predecessors, a reading which unfairly devalues their work. Sisson is unusual, however, in his awareness of the potential self-deception of this process, as his phrasing (“presents itself”) shows. His poetry and criticism demonstrate a consistency of sensibility and purpose unsurpassed among his contemporaries.

Sisson’s consistency may be explained in part by his turning to the writing of poetry and literary criticism rather late in life, despite having a passionate interest in literature from an early age. In his autobiographical essay “Natural History” (written the same year his first book of poems was published), he describes how he read poetry incessantly as a youth and, as one would expect, wrote some “hopelessly imitative” verse of his own (157). Soon, however, a combination of “an appalling adolescent grief” and exposure to the harsh political realities of 1934 while studying in Berlin led him to abandon his efforts: “I despaired of being a poet myself (I was despairing of everything at that time, you will remember). I believe I must have aspired to be an educated man” (157-58). Over the next twenty years, while earning a reputation as a political essayist and book-reviewer, he produced only two poems, one an epigram. In the 1950s, he began writing poetry again, finally publishing a small volume in 1961 at the age of forty-seven. He wrote steadily until his death in 2003.

A poet who begins his serious poetic efforts when approaching the half-century mark, especially if those years were largely devoted to reading literature and philosophy, is likely to have made conscious aesthetic judgments. While a younger poet may have definite aesthetic sensibilities, and may even struggle to formulate them into a coherent scheme, his work is almost necessarily an exploration, an attempt to discover where those sensibilities can lead. Sisson’s mind, however, is more analytical and skeptical than creative and exploratory. His outlook is fundamentally Cartesian: unsure of his capacity to know anything for certain, his goal is less to establish truth than to expose error.

Sisson’s attitude toward poetry (as well as other forms of writing) is rooted in this outlook. Although insisting that poets should tell the truth “as it seems to them, which is the only form of truth anyone can tell, except inadvertently,” he places more importance on not adding to the store of falsehood in the world:

As a piece of technical advice to the writer: Tell the truth and hope for the best is, however, inadequate. Some good writers have been extraordinary liars, as for example Ford Madox Ford. The truth is interesting if you can tell it, but the writer will feel a need to simplify his problems by abridging it in some way. What is not good is putting in phoney bits. This also everybody does more or less, but the better writers less. (“Natural History” 163)

On the technical level, *phoney bits* refers to elevated diction, archaisms, and the like, but Sisson is also concerned with the author’s stance in relation to the reader. Despite (or perhaps because of) his philosophical orientation and rigorously intellectual tone, he lacks a poetic persona. His poetry is essentially essaistic, an attempt to work through an experience or moment of insight, and like all good essayists he must stand naked before the reader, without affectation. The tendency of some poets to present themselves as “the Poet,” a consciously constructed self, is anathema to him. He attacks “the enduring obsession about being a poet — as if this took precedence over merely being a man, which is the subject of the most serious poetry” (*English Poetry* 157). This point is at the root of his criticism of W. B. Yeats.

In a postscript to his *English Poetry* volume, written ten years after the book was originally published, Sisson writes,

The over-sized magician, W. B. Yeats, was desperately in need of, and here got, a more sceptical and ironical treatment than was, until the very recent past, usually accorded to his flamboyant figure. It is in a deflated form, with the wind of cult and fashion taken out of them, that even the greatest figures have to settle into history. (266)

We see here a revolt against the cult of personality. While here and elsewhere acknowledging Yeats’s greatness, Sisson skewers what he sees as his pretensions. In the first paragraph of his original essay on Yeats, he quotes the poet’s self-made epitaph (“Horseman, pass by!”) and comments, “Yeats was a great egotist, and frivolous enough to think it worth while cutting a figure even after death” (155). This egotism had been a central tenet of poetry since the English