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‘Out from under the Body Politic’:  
Poetry and Government in the Work  
of C.H. Sisson, 1937-1980

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between government and poetry in the verse, essays, and translations of Charles Hubert Sisson (1914-2003). Theories of sovereignty and government drawn from the work of Giorgio Agamben are used to interrogate these issues in Sisson's critical and creative writing. Sisson's work is contextualised within the politics of post-WWII Britain, taking in such issues as the altered relationship between the arts and the state, the decline of the British Empire and the subsequent influx of Commonwealth immigration, the changing status of the monarchy, and the importance of the environment.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first comprises a preliminary theoretical excursus, focussing on poems by Sisson and C. Day Lewis. The second analyses Sisson's portrayal of the country and the city, and his own position in relation to them. The third places Sisson's work in the context of the changing nature of laureateship in the era 1945-1976, comparing his work with that of Philip Larkin and C. Day Lewis. The fourth investigates the politics of translating Virgil after the Second World War, and especially after Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech of April 1968. The final chapter returns to Sisson's wartime and immediately post-war writings, especially on the subject of India, before moving on to the poems collected in *Exactions* (1980).

*Out from under the body politic  
Walking in twilight, one after another  
Yet a conversation  
Hurts, it is a string tied round the body*

– C.H. Sisson, ‘The Corridor’, ll.192-5

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>Aen</i>	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
<i>Anc</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>Anchises</i> (Manchester: Carcanet 1976)
<i>Age</i>	'C.H. Sisson Special Issue', <i>Agenda</i> (Spring 2010) vol. 45 no. 2
<i>AL</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>The Avoidance of Literature: Collected Essays</i> , ed. Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet 1978)
<i>AR</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>An Asiatic Romance</i> (London: Gaberbocchus Press 1953)
<i>CH</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>Christopher Himm</i> (Manchester: Carcanet 1975)
<i>CP</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>Collected Poems</i> (Manchester: Carcanet 1998)
<i>CT</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>Collected Translations</i> (Manchester: Carcanet 1996)
<i>HS</i>	Giorgio Agamben, <i>Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life</i> (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998)
<i>ICE</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>Is there a Church of England?</i> (Manchester: Carcanet 1993)
<i>ITD</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>In the Trojan Ditch: Collected Poems and Selected Translations</i> (Cheadle Hulme: Carcanet 1974)
<i>ITM</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>In Two Minds: Guesses at Other Writers</i> (Manchester: Carcanet 1990)
<i>KG</i>	Giorgio Agamben, <i>The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government</i> , trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini) (Stanford: University of Stanford Press 2011)
<i>OLO</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>On the Look-Out: A Partial Autobiography</i> (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989)
<i>PNR</i>	'C.H. Sisson at Seventy: A Special Issue', <i>PN Review</i> 39 (1984) vol. 11 no. 4
<i>RP</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>Roman Poems</i> (Sevenoaks: Westerham Press, 1968)
<i>SP</i>	C.H. Sisson, <i>Selected Poems</i> audio cassette (Bournemouth: Canto Publications 1987)



## Introduction: A Dual Career

For thirty years, C.H. Sisson pursued a dual career: a civil servant by day, and by night, as it were, a writer. Though not unique in this – he records that when he started work in the Ministry of Labour, Humbert Wolfe and F.S. Flint were also to be found there (*OLO*: 170) – the details of these two aspects make his case an unusual one. As a civil servant, Sisson’s career began before the Second World War and culminated in the position of Under Secretary, which he occupied from 1962 till 1973. Simultaneously with his administrative career, Sisson published two novels, three collections of poetry, translations from three languages, and a volume of literary criticism, as well as a study of public administration and a critical biography of the Victorian economist and constitutional theorist Walter Bagehot. After retiring from the civil service, he went on to publish six more poetry collections, numerous translations (of Dante, Virgil, Lucretius and Racine, among others), and a voluminous output of criticism. The weight of his official experience – “[n]o English poet”, as Robert Wells (2009) states, “has had greater experience of public affairs and the practical business of government” – is matched by the distinction of his literary oeuvre, leading Donald Davie (*PNR*: 2-9) to compare him with Czeslaw Milosz.

Unsurprisingly therefore, Sisson displays, as Geoffrey Hill (*PNR*: 11) has noted, a ‘keen engagement’ with politics, whether in his poetry, his prose, or his translations. Indeed, Davie (1976: 86) argues that Sisson is among the few English poets of the late twentieth century who have ‘[a] politics [...] on a par with, and indeed related to, a poetics’. As such, his eminence in both facets of his dual career, and the tenacity with which he connected them from his first pre-war essays to his last works, give Sisson a kind of stereoscopic vision, and make him singularly illuminating for the study of the relationship between poetry and government in post-war Britain.

This being the case, the most remarkable fact is the near-absence of sustained critical engagement with Sisson’s work. The two main sources of Sisson criticism are the special issues dedicated to him by *PN Review* (*PNR*) and *Agenda* (*Age*), though these are separated by a gap of twenty-four years. Contributions to these mostly come from poet-critics such as Hill and Davie, Michael Schmidt, Clive Wilmer and Robert Wells, many of whom were Sisson’s personal friends. This is not to deny their

validity or insight, but does highlight the fact that critical assessments have tended to emanate from a small group of appreciative acquaintances, several of them also published by Carcanet Press.

More recently, Natalie Pollard has analysed Sisson's work within the context of 'Contemporary Poetry and Public Address', comparing him with his modernist forebears (particularly Pound and Eliot) and contrasting him with his near-contemporaries in the Movement. Pollard (2012: 105) recognises some of the political aspects of his writings, and finds that:

[Sisson's] lyric voicing of *you* (like Marvell's) is bound up in questioning the language in which affairs of state are conducted, continued, and disrupted, and in probing poetry's capacity to achieve a measure of verity in forging links between history and art, past and present voicings.

But her reading is hampered by the terms of her enquiry, and the approach she takes to Sisson's contexts. Though Pollard acknowledges that Sisson 'wrote most of his best poetry in the 1960s and 1970s' (ibid.: 101), she complains that Sisson does not directly engage with:

the significant historical and political events of the late twentieth century: the handling of the miners' strikes we find in Harrison's poetry; the ethical and social questions raised by Shapcott's 'Phrase Book'—and by Tom Raworth's 'The West'—both in relation to the Falklands War[.] (ibid.: 147-8)

But these events of the early 1980s occurred after the period of Sisson's major poetry; it can be no great surprise that he did not engage with the same subjects as poets twenty-three, twenty-four and thirty-nine years younger than himself, or employ similar poetic strategies. Returned to its proper contexts, Sisson's work is more than able 'to respond to [...] identifiable political turbulence' (Pollard 2012: 147).

Which contexts are most relevant to an understanding of Sisson's work, and which can Sisson in turn help us to understand? Although he joined the civil service and published his first article before the War, Sisson's dual career began in earnest after

his return from active service. In the immediate post-war period, the social historian Kenneth O. Morgan (2001: 29) writes, ‘Britain appeared to undergo a massive transformation unique in her history’:

[o]ver twenty per cent of the economy was taken into public ownership or was well on course for it. The framework for a welfare state was boldly set out, with the National Health Service Act passed in May 1946, along with a National Insurance Act that enacted the Beveridge proposals[.]

This expansion of the state into the lives of its citizens made Whitehall ‘*the* place for the young and clever with a high personal charge of public duty’ (Hennessy 1989: 135). Sisson was among these, and his administrative career was borne on the tide of the post-war state. More specifically relevant to his artistic career was ‘the wider involvement of central agencies, backed by state funding, in matters of the mind and the spirit’ (Morgan 2001: 31) inaugurated by the creation of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1945.

The first post-war years also saw great changes in the British Empire. In 1947, India (where Sisson had served during the War) was granted independence and the state of Pakistan was created (Burma having gained independence in the previous year; Sri Lanka would in the next). This began the process of decolonisation that would continue in fits and starts for decades to come (Morgan 2001: 47). It was also in this period, in June 1948, that the Empire Windrush arrived, symbolically beginning the movement of immigrants from the Commonwealth to Great Britain.

These are the circumstances in which Sisson developed as a writer, and to which he responded as an administrator, an artist, and an ordinary subject. But it would be a mistake to look among his writings for running polemical commentary on every issue of the day. The value of Sisson’s work lies in how he contextualises these events within a larger history – and furthermore, seeks the ultimately metaphysical basis for this. Nor does the interest lie only in his philosophical position, considered in the abstract: Sisson’s political, historical and philosophical concerns are to be found in his poetics, in the very texture of his verse.

This thesis will begin with a chapter primarily of theoretical exposition, in which I shall build up a model through which to approach key themes in Sisson's creative and critical writings. In doing so, I draw upon the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. This unlikely choice – given Sisson's lack of direct engagement with poststructuralist theory – is prompted partly by how germane the issues Agamben raises are to Sisson's concerns, but it also shows that Sisson, intentionally or otherwise, is in dialogue with a wider debate about questions of sovereignty, government and nationality; and that his work is of value outwith the terms of reference set out in his own criticism. I therefore draw upon Agamben's theory of sovereignty laid out in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (HS)* and *The Kingdom and the Glory: for a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government (KG)* to analyse the political dimensions of Sisson's poetics, and theorise the institutionalised relations of poetry and sovereignty in British history. In using this body of theory, it has not been my intention to apply a doctrinaire Agambenian theory of literature, such as may be found in William Watkin's *The Literary Agamben* (2010). Rather, I have taken those insights that seemed most relevant to Sisson, and utilised them in constructing my own paradigms for reading his poems and other texts.

This first chapter begins with two poems both published in 1968: one by C.H. Sisson, the other by C. Day Lewis, his first as the new Poet Laureate. Patrick McGuinness (*Age: 71*) has stated that '[i]t is hard to imagine a less appropriate poet laureate than C.H. Sisson, despite the probability that he alone among his contemporaries really *believed* (spiritually, institutionally, culturally) in the post'. Without necessarily agreeing with McGuinness on what Sisson thought about the laureateship, this suggestive proposition serves to guide my investigation. The laureateship ties together sovereignty, poetry and patronage, and provides a historical perspective through which to scrutinise these themes. I will therefore elaborate a possible theory of laureateship as part of the groundwork for my later investigations.

In starting at 1968, with a poem from Sisson's third poetry collection, *Metamorphoses*, I am entering at what we might think of as the end of the beginning. Sisson published nine collections of poetry, falling into a neat pattern – three sets of three – which, far from being a merely arbitrary division, corresponds to stages in

Sisson's stylistic development, and his life beyond poetry. The first three collections – *The London Zoo* (1961), *Numbers* (1965) and *Metamorphoses* (1968) were all published while Sisson was working in the Ministry of Labour. They demonstrate Sisson developing in confidence and range; but almost all the poems – even those written in free verse – maintain standard discursive syntax. In the collections published after retiring from the civil service in the early 1970s – *In the Trojan Ditch* (1974), *Anchises* (1976) and *Exactions* (1980) – Sisson would develop a 'more formally modernist' style, as Calvin Bedient (1975: 58) notes, 'crumpling syntax, erasing punctuation, changing direction, and structuring poems in tenuously related sections'. His final three collections, however, retreat from this kind of overt modernism towards more traditional, often rhyming and metrical, forms.

Having begun at the end of his first period, I go back in my second chapter to look at how, in his early collections, Sisson created his poetic persona with reference to his birth in Bristol and his family connections with the West Country. This contrasts with his often satirical presentation of the capital and the world of modern bureaucracy – a contrast that also determines aspects of Sisson's response to the relationship of poet and state, to be explored further in the third chapter.

1968 is also an *annus mirabilis* in the two chapters at the heart of this thesis, 'The State of the Arts: Modern Laureateship' and 'I Came from Troy: Virgil and National Identity'. The allusion to Dryden is deliberate: 1968 marked the tercentenary of his appointment as the first official poet laureate. My third chapter develops on the framework of laureateship laid out in the opening chapter, comparing Sisson with C. Day Lewis and Philip Larkin to examine the changing relationship between poetry, the state and the environment, from the creation of the Arts Council immediately after the Second World War to the Silver Jubilee of 1977.

The reference to Dryden also alludes to the Classical elements of his verse, and his work as a translator from Latin. Sisson cites Dryden as an exemplar in the forewords to both the original poems and the translations included in the second section of *In the Trojan Ditch*, and this, Davie (1977: 272) argues, 'is our warrant for taking his translations, unusually but very properly, as of equal importance with his poems'. While in the third chapter I give special attention to Sisson's versions of Horace, my

fourth chapter is concerned with the use Sisson makes of Virgil, particularly the *Aeneid*. C. Day Lewis, who also translated the *Aeneid*, is again an important interlocutor within the context of state patronage; but more significant within the terms of this chapter's title is the Conservative politician Enoch Powell. Powell made a line from Virgil a proverbial phrase when he quoted from the sixth book of the *Aeneid* in his infamous anti-immigration speech from 1968; that year, Sisson made a translation of the same book, which appeared in the pamphlet *Roman Poems*. This chapter will therefore investigate their use of this Virgilian discourse in the context of imperial decline and Commonwealth immigration.

The 1960s witnessed a 'profusion of networks of little magazines and presses' forming a 'community of exchange for writer-editors' (Sheppard 2005: 38), such as the *English Intelligencer*, 'a privately distributed poetry and discussion sheet, which was issued to a mailing list of around 30 between February 1967 and April 1968, edited by poets Peter Riley and Andrew Crozier, with [J.H.] Prynne's assistance' (ibid.: 37). C.H. Sisson was not part of this particular community, and given its predominantly left-wing orientation and interest in Black Mountain poetics, probably would not have wanted to be. In the same period, however, Sisson privately printed *Roman Poems*, *The Discarnation* (a long discursive poem in three parts, intended for *Metamorphoses* but rejected by his then publisher, Methuen (Age: 100)), and a collection of prose pieces simply entitled *Essays* (1967). These were distributed among friends, including W.S. Graham (1999: 211-2) – then languishing in obscurity, not having published anything since *The Nightfishing* in 1955 – David Wright, and Geoffrey Hill. This network parallels that associated with the 'Cambridge School' poets, away from the mainstream of poetry publication. But following the publication of *In the Trojan Ditch* (which collected the privately-printed poems of the late 1960s) and *The Avoidance of Literature: Collected Essays* (including the volume from 1967), and his becoming a co-editor of the journal *PN Review*, Sisson would steadily rise in prominence – to the point of finding himself attacked in a rival poetry magazine, *Stand*, and even in Parliament.<sup>1</sup> His relatively peripheral status in the first decade of

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<sup>1</sup> 'An eminent life peer assures the world that I intend to resuscitate the Restoration settlement, and no doubt the Act of Uniformity, while he personally—as a scientist—has observed that times have changed. Others—but commoners, I fear—assert that, not content with re-establishing the past of England I design to re-model it on the pattern of a French analyst

his poetic output should not, therefore, be taken as vitiating the importance of his oeuvre, and the cultural interventions made through his poetry.

My final chapter, 'The Return Journey: India and the Church of England', bookends the study by going back to Sisson's earliest mature poems, written in India during the Second World War, and the fiction he wrote in the post-War decades; it then moves forward to his poetry of the late 1970s, at which point Indian themes and imagery re-emerge in his writing at a point of crisis in Sisson's relationship with the Church of England over the place of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. If by ending this study at 1980 I cut off the last third of Sisson's poetic output, not to mention his many subsequent translations and continued critical work, I aim to provide a rationale for this decision based on the circumstances of his intellectual life in his final decades.

This study of Sisson's work is not exhaustive: there are many more facets to him than I have had space to cover. Moreover, in pursuing my research along certain lines, limitations have arisen as it were from within the material, giving it its final shape. It is my hope that this thesis will foment interest in Sisson's oeuvre, and lead to further work.

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and controversialist who cast an understandably sceptical eye on the legends surrounding the Revolution of 1789.' (Sisson 1980a: 1)

## I. Poetry, Sovereignty, Government

In 1968, C.H. Sisson published his third volume of poetry, *Metamorphoses*. The collection's opening poem is entitled 'To the Queen' (CP: 83):

It is long, Elizabeth,  
Since the crown you wear  
Was justly celebrated. (ll.1-3)

Directly addressing the monarch and taking the symbol of her sovereignty for his theme, the poet announces the public nature of his utterance, adopting the role of a poet laureate in a form of self-positioning we may call pseudo-laureateship. Rather than offering formulaic praises, however, the poet commiserates that the monarchy is no longer suitably revered.

The dogs bay in the streets  
And those that call you Queen  
Understand less than they. (ll.4-6)

Poets laureate have conventionally depicted themselves as representatives of a united, supportive nation; here, the poet asserts that the queen's subjects do not understand the nature of sovereignty, and that their language, when they speak of her, is correspondingly empty. The poet sets himself against this, representing himself as one who does understand, almost in conspiracy with her. 'Monarch, but under God,' (l.7) he then calls her, recalling that monarchy has sometimes been justified as a divine appointment:

Your sceptre cannot fall  
Or, if it does, your son

Will hold it in your stead  
And will, until this realm  
Is covered by the sea

Or worse democracy. (ll.8-13)

Adopting an adulatory tone, the poet contemptuously dismisses democracy, a gesture likely to provoke readers who think of themselves as living in a democratic country. Even if the United Kingdom has an unelected head of state, the implication that democracy is a threat seems anachronistic: surely by the late 1960s, the democratic



tide (suggested by the *rime riche* of ‘sea’ and ‘democracy’) has already overwhelmed it. The anachronistic tone is augmented when the poet states that ‘now the people’s voice | Still conjures jackanapes’ (ll.14-5) – a near-obsolete term for a conceited, impertinent person; the *OED* records no uses from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the earliest citations, from the 1520s and 1530s, are from William Tyndale and John Skelton, perhaps recalling that Skelton claimed the honour of poet laureate (Meyer-Lee 2007: 205). The poet then returns his address to the queen, who ‘[b]rood[s] on the restless whole’ (l.17). ‘Your scorn is justified’ (l.18) he tells her, heightening the sense of a compact between the poet and his sovereign. Moreover, this characterises the queen as haughty and disdainful of the kingdom she has inherited – in contrast with the image cultivated at the time: in 1969, for instance, the television documentary *Royal Family* revealed the ordinary side of the Windsors. At this point, the poet switches to a hortatory mode:

Though you must hold the rein  
Loose on the errant back,  
Express no sympathy.

Gather your force until  
We all are of one mind;  
Then let the pagans go,

Deride the Scots and send  
The Welsh back to their holes.  
Drive out those Irish priests. (ll.19-27)

This exaggeratedly iconoclastic pose has a comic effect – it would be absurd to imagine Elizabeth II not only breaking the convention of remaining above party politics, but actually declaring war on her own Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish subjects – but also has serious implications. Just how united is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 1968, with the creation of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966, the Carmarthen by-election that returned the first Plaid Cymru Member of Parliament in the same year, and in 1967 the Hamilton by-election that established a permanent Scottish Nationalist Party presence in the House of Commons? These stanzas recall the civil wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as represented in Andrew Marvell’s ‘Horatian Ode’ (2000: 305-13), in which he describes how ‘the Irish are ashamed | To see themselves in one year tamed’ (ll.73-4) by Cromwell, and

The Pict no shelter now shall find  
Within his party-coloured mind,  
But from his valour sad,  
Shrink underneath the plaid (ll.105-8)

The poem thus frames issues of the current identity of the United Kingdom within a historical backdrop of national and religious conflicts. In the final stanza, the preceding anachronisms culminate in an historical sleight of hand:

O first Elizabeth,  
Your membrane now untie  
And bring this one to birth. (ll. 28-30)

The poet exploits the fortuitous circumstance that Britain in 1968 was, as in 1568, ruled by a queen named Elizabeth, ostensibly addressing the later before invoking the earlier. This partly explains the poet's manner of address, as Elizabeth I was the object of hyperbolic panegyrics from court poets such as Edmund Spenser (J.A. Burrow 2008: 152); and the greater power of the Tudor monarch, compared with that enjoyed by the modern Windsor, goes some way to explaining the active role the poet encourages her to assume. One effect of this might be to satirise the modern monarchy, mocking the current queen for being a head of state with so little power. But it also raises questions: exactly what power does the monarch have, and what role does she play in the constitution and society of contemporary Britain?

The origin of that 'membrane' is given in a note appended to the poem:

*The penultimate line refers, rather indelicately, to the gossip Ben Jonson reported to Drummond, that Queen Elizabeth I 'had a membrana on her, which made her incapable of man, though for her delight she tryed many.'*  
(CP: 83)

Here, the shift to a prose commentary with a wry tone and a higher count of polysyllabic words identifies the speaker of the poem as a distinct persona, distancing Sisson from his intentionally provocative statements. The reference to Ben Jonson is also significant, as Jonson continually identified himself in poems as a laureate (Helgerson 1983: 101-84), and (though he never officially held the title) his masques for the Stuart court and the royal pension he received mark him out as a precursor of

later official laureates. More importantly, within the context of continuities between the first and second Elizabethan periods, Jonson's presence raises the question of how poetry and sovereignty relate to each other in the modern day, and what modern equivalents of Tudor and Stuart patronage there might now be.

Though the poem's penultimate line refers to the queen's physical body, the poet urges her to bring to birth a new configuration of British (or perhaps simply English) politics, suggesting an interplay between her physical body and the body politic. The latter can be understood as the nation 'regarded as a corporate entity' (*OED*), but in this context it also alludes to 'the doctrine of the "king's two bodies"', by which the monarch is defined as composed of a mortal "body natural" and an immortal "body politic"' (Marcus, Meuller and Rose 2000: 52), to which Elizabeth referred in her first speech as queen. The allusion seems to ask what relevance this rarely remembered and little understood idea can have, four centuries later.

In 'To the Queen', therefore, Sisson uses the tradition of laureate poetry to raise numerous issues. What are the roles of monarchy and democracy in the British constitution? What is the relationship between the individual body and the body politic? How do poets relate to these? And what, indeed, is Great Britain? How can its corporate identity be understood in terms of religion, location and history? These are questions that Sisson's poetry, essays, novels and translations continually return to. Indeed, the lexis of this poem links it to an article first published in 1953, the year of Elizabeth II's coronation (published with some alterations as the final chapter of *The Spirit of British Administration* in 1959, which was republished in 1966, between *Metamorphoses* and Sisson's previous collection). In 'A Note on the Monarchy' (*AL*: 125-33) Sisson makes a case not only for the institution's continuing relevance, but its supreme importance. Against the assertion of liberal constitutional theorist Ivor Jennings, that 'the existence or absence of a monarch does not in itself make a fundamental distinction in a constitution' (*AL*: 125) and that '[t]he functions of a head of state, be he King or President, are ancillary' (*AL*: 126), Sisson argues for the 'monarchic principle', which 'is not that the king should have all power, but that he is the legitimate source of all power' (*AL*: 126). Sisson acknowledges that it would be 'a true anachronism for the Queen to express her preferences in the million and one topics that come before her government', but reserves to her 'one inalienable

function’, that of ‘securing the coherence and continuity of her realm’ (*AL*: 127). It could be argued that monarchy does not guarantee continuity, as the troubled successions that inaugurated the Stuart and Hanoverian dynasties demonstrate. Sisson’s assertion is more persuasive, however, if taken as referring to continuity with the past: a change to republicanism, even if achieved peacefully, would still constitute a historical rupture. Downplaying the importance of party politics, Sisson goes on to assert, in language re-echoed in the later poem, that ‘the reins of authority meet in the Queen’s hands’ (*AL*: 127), while she ‘broods over this body of laws and institutions’ which make up (again alluding to Marvell) ‘the great work of time’ (*AL*: 128) that is the British constitution. Rather than urging her to break up the United Kingdom, though, Sisson acknowledges that in present circumstances, ‘[t]he Queen’s duty perhaps demands any submission except what will break the realm’ (*AL*: 127). Sisson therefore approaches constitutional debates from a distinctly monarchist orientation – which appears to underpin his use of laureateship as a poetic trope in ‘To the Queen’.

#### Backing Britain: the official Poet Laureate

If in 1968 C.H. Sisson was a relatively obscure poet using laureate tropes, the contrast with the official post’s new incumbent is illustrative of how relations between poetry, sovereignty and society had changed since the era of Ben Jonson. C. Day Lewis published his first laureate poem on 5 January 1968. But rather than appearing in *The Times*, as did the laureate poems of Tennyson, Masfield and others, ‘Then and Now’ (Day Lewis 1992: 719) was published on the front page of *The Daily Mail*, suggesting a more populist audience. Moreover, the poem was not a New Year ode of the kind previously produced by laureates such as Nicholas Rowe and Laurence Eusden, but had been commissioned by the newspaper in support of the ‘I’m Backing Britain’ campaign, ‘based on a new-year resolution put forward by five women typists at a factory in Surbiton, Surrey, who suggested that everyone should work an extra 30 minutes a day without pay’ (Russell 1981: 188), aimed at boosting the flagging economy. Day Lewis valorises the movement by comparison with the German bombardment of 1940-41:

Do you remember those mornings after the blitzes  
When the living picked themselves up and went on living –  
Living, not on the past, but with an exhilaration  
Of purpose, a new neighbourliness of danger?

Such days are here again. Not the bansheeing  
Of sirens and the beat of terrible wings  
Approaching under a glassy moon. Your enemies  
Are nearer home yet, nibbling at Britain's nerve. (ll.1-8)

Although the fortitude shown by many people during the air raids is not in doubt, Day Lewis uses the Blitz to mythologise the courage and stoicism of the British people, and their unity in adversity. The laureate exhorts them to

Be as you were then, tough and gentle islanders –  
Steel in the fibre, charity in the veins –  
When few stood on their dignity or lines of demarcation,  
And few sat back in the padded cells of profit.

Boiler-room, board-room, backroom boys, we all  
Joined hearts to make a life-line through the storm.  
No haggling about overtime when the heavy-rescue squads  
Dug for dear life under the smouldering ruins. (ll.9-16)

Day Lewis here reprises the rhetoric of his early poems such as *The Magnetic Mountain*, from 1933:

You above all who have come to the far end, victims  
Of a run-down machine, who can bear it no longer;  
Whether in easy chairs chafing at impotence  
Or against hunger, bullies and spies preserving  
The nerve for action, the spark of indignation –  
Need fight in the dark no more, you know your enemies.  
You shall be leaders when zero hour is signalled,  
Wielders of power and welders of a new world. (Day Lewis 1992: 170)

In particular, 'the padded cells of profit' identifies capitalism with madness, and implies their respective scourges, Marxism and psychoanalysis – two great enthusiasms of the young W.H. Auden and his circle. During the War, though, Day Lewis (like Auden) had moved to a more conservative position, renouncing his membership of the Communist party. As Poet Laureate, therefore, Day Lewis recycles his radical left-wing rhetoric in support of a capitalist economy during a period of stagnation.

'Then and Now' evokes destruction by an external enemy, which inadvertently created national unity and forced people to draw upon native reserves of strength and

good will. Despite praising those who lived during the War for '[l]iving, not on the past,' it is this image of past virtue and unity that Day Lewis offers as inspiration in 1968:

To work then, islanders, as men and women  
Members one of another, looking beyond  
Mean rules and rivalries towards the dream you could  
Make real, of glory, common wealth, and home. (ll.21-4)

But despite the efforts of the laureate, a pop song and enormous media coverage, 'rules and rivalries' apparently prevailed: reactions from trade unions, politicians and commentators were mixed, and the 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign was soon abandoned. The new Laureate's inaugural poem was also panned: one journalist wrote that it 'made many regret their impulsive rejoicing at the death of his predecessor' (Levin 1970: 426). But though the success or failure of the poem is not proportional to that of the campaign it aimed to advance, it is illustrative of how Day Lewis adapted the laureateship to the perceived demands of the age. If the traditional role of the poet laureate has been to praise the monarch, the most obvious departure Day Lewis makes is in praising the people, commending their '[s]teel in the fibre, charity in the veins', and 'selflessness' (l.18). In his 1953 essay, Sisson discusses the 'new principle' of government that Ivor Jennings extrapolates from the 1832 Reform Act: '[b]efore it, the government reposed in the Sovereign's confidence; afterwards, in the people's' (*AL*: 127) – effectively placing 'the legitimate source of all power' in the latter. If this is so, one could argue that Day Lewis was belatedly bringing the same changes to the laureateship, making it over into a people's laureateship for 'a people's peace' (Morgan 2001: 3). Sisson offers a pragmatic response to Jennings:

there was never a time when a Government had not to be tolerable if it was to endure. [...] It is not the Reform Bills themselves, but the urbanization and literacy which produced them, which made it necessary latterly for the monarch to listen as attentively to the mutterings of the people as formerly to the growls of the nobility. (*AL*: 127)

These competing theories of sovereignty have practical effects on laureateship and laureate poetry. 'Then and Now' and 'To the Queen' are alike in dealing with national

unity and adversity, yet their approaches are at variance. If Sisson emphasises the faultlines within the United Kingdom, he also suggests that the sovereign's duty is 'to secure the coherence of her country' (*AL*: 127), and alludes to a corporate national identity guaranteed by the queen's second body. By contrast, Day Lewis appeals to a sense of national unity without reference to the sovereign – but instead figures internal division (“[y]our enemies | Are nearer home yet”) in terms of external aggression. If a laureate is a pre-eminently public poet (a publicness other poets may appropriate through laureate tropes), the laureate's manner of address, whether to monarch or populace, depends upon the kind of public they conceive themselves as speaking for or to.

'Then and Now' also differs from the encomia offered to monarchs by previous laureates – for instance, 'A Prayer for the King's Majesty' (Russell 1981: 177) by Day Lewis's immediate predecessor John Masefield – in that it is concerned not with the glory of the sovereign, but the quotidian political matters of economics and employment. In this respect Day Lewis can be seen to develop a role cultivated by Tennyson, who as poet laureate published poems designed to pressure the government of the day, such as 'The Fleet' (Russell 1981: 144-5) and 'Riflemen, Form!' (*ibid.*: 143-4). But in order to understand the significance of this development, it will be necessary to go back into the history of the laureateship, the constitutional history of Great Britain, and indeed to analyse the fundamental structures of politics.

### Primitive Things

In his 1982 interview for the *Paris Review*, Philip Larkin was asked whether he had 'any thoughts on the office of poet laureate? Does it serve a valid function?' (Gourevitch 2007: 235) Larkin's answer might surprise one who associates his work with the contemporary and everyday. 'Poetry and sovereignty', Larkin declares, 'are very primitive things. I like to think of their being united in this way, in England.' (Gourevitch 2007: 235) 'Poetry and sovereignty', Larkin declares, 'are very primitive things. I like to think of their being united in this way, in England.' (Gourevitch 2007: 235) Larkin's use of 'England' rather than Britain highlights a common ambiguity: before the creation of separate offices for poets laureate of Wales and Scotland, the office ostensibly represented the whole of the United Kingdom; but Larkin either sees

the post as a specifically English institution, or elides the terms so as to make English synonymous with British. More interesting is Larkin's identification of poetry and sovereignty as being 'primitive things', seeming to place their origins before the forms of modern culture, the '[c]heap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies' (Larkin 2012: 49) that furnish his poems. Although they are 'united' in the laureateship, they are not confused or conflated, remaining separate and distinct; but the connotations of 'primitive' raises the question of whether they might share more than just antiquity.

Larkin goes on to say that 'it's not clear what the laureate is, or does. Deliberately so, in a way: it isn't a job, there are no duties, no salary, and yet it isn't quite an honor, either, or not just an honor' (Gourevitch 2007: 235). The laureateship is presented as an indefinite, even mysterious post. There are two facets to this: the laureateship 'isn't a job,' and involves 'no duties, no salary' – it does not fit into the economy of work. Secondly, the laureateship 'isn't quite an honor, or not just an honor.' Furthermore, 'the publicity that anything to do with the Palace gets these days is so fierce, it must be really more of an ordeal than an honor' (Gourevitch 2007: 235) But though he deprecates the honour of laureation, Larkin still seeks to define the appointment in terms of honour.

Two years later, on the death of John Betjeman, Larkin would be offered (and refuse) the laureateship; yet a decade earlier, Donald Davie (1973: 64) could write that 'there has been the widest possible agreement [...] that Philip Larkin is for good or ill the effective unofficial laureate of post-1945 England'. This statement is typical in that it notes the ubiquity of the judgement, as does the introduction to his *Paris Review* interview, which states that 'he has been called the other English poet laureate ("even more loved and needed than the official one, John Betjeman," according to Calvin Bedient in *The New York Times Book Review*)' (Gourevitch 2007: 207). The idea of an unofficial laureate expands the concept of laureation beyond state affiliation, to mean something like a representative poet. But if the office of the official laureate unites poetry to the 'primitive' power of sovereignty, Larkin's representative status appears to be the result of how un-primitive his poetry is, and the world it reflects. When asked whether he believes 'economic security' is 'an advantage to the writer', he replies that '[t]he whole of British postwar society is based on the assumption that



economic security is an advantage to everyone. Certainly I like to be economically secure' (Gourevitch 2007: 215). As for the writer specifically, while acknowledging that one can no longer live 'by being a "man of letters" as easily as a hundred or seventy-five years ago, when there were so many magazines and newspapers all having to be filled', he states that it is possible to do so 'by "being a writer," or "being a poet," if you're prepared to join the cultural entertainment industry, and take handouts from the Arts Council (not that there are as many of them as there used to be)' (ibid.: 215).

Larkin's responses in this interview raise vital questions concerning the position of the poet, and especially the poet laureate. If poetry and sovereignty are indeed 'primitive things', their unification in laureateship can be fully understood only if we have some understanding of what their primitiveness consists in, and what happens to them when they persist into the modern world of democracy, government patronage, and mass media. To do so, it will be necessary to uncover the very foundational structure of politics.

### The Structure of Sovereignty

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben begins his investigation of modern biopolitics by analysing the fundamental structure of Western politics, starting from the two Greek terms for life used by Aristotle: *zoē* and *bios*. The two are not synonymous: *zoē* 'expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods),' while *bios* 'indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group' (HS: 1). Aristotle sought to define the good life – whether as contemplative life, political life, the life of pleasure – but in each case a kind of *bios* was in question: a contemplative or political *zoē* would make no sense. *Zoē*, in this scheme, 'is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined – as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of the *oikos*, "home"' (HS: 2). This is because 'the end of the city is life according to the good' (HS: 2); that is to say, a qualified sort of life, a *bios*. The two are contradistinguished and opposed: for Aristotle, human beings are 'born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life' (HS: 2). However, for political beings to live the good life there must first be simple living bodies to enter the *polis*. 'The opposition is, in fact, at

the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life' (HS: 7). Thus Aristotle defined man as a political animal – in Foucault's exegesis, 'a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence' (HS: 3). Agamben defines this additional capacity as 'a supplement of politicity [*politicità*] tied to language' (HS: 3), again drawing on Aristotle:

[a]mong living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings [...] But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city. (HS: 7-8; cf. Aristotle 1944: 10-1)

Crucially for Agamben, as a result of this 'the proper place of the *polis*' is 'in the transition from voice to language' (HS: 7):

[t]he question 'In what way does the living being have language?' corresponds exactly to the question 'In what way does bare life dwell in the *polis*?' The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving his own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the *logos* is realized. (HS: 8)

Agamben means that the living being enters the *polis* by adopting the interpersonal values (e.g. goodness, virtue, etc.) that language makes possible. The individual's voice (*phone*) is from then on the vehicle of the language that s/he shares with others: for the individual to speak, to engage with the community and its values, s/he cannot simply grunt in pleasure or pain, but must use the impersonal medium of language. For example, to become a political agent one must say 'I' – but 'I' does not denominate any particular person; it is an empty 'shifter' (Agamben 2011a: 71) through which one claims an individual voice by paradoxically accepting the impersonality of the pronoun. Moreover, though the individual cannot physically

leave their body in the *oikos*, in the *polis* the values upon which community is founded take priority, and bare life is merely suffered to dwell there. Agamben concludes that '[t]here is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion' (HS: 8). The individual enters politics by making his life subject to death: not a random demise but politically determined death. Thus simple natural life becomes politicized as bare life, and according to Agamben, 'the inclusion of bare life in the political realm is the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power' (HS: 6).

Some clarification is required, however. Although in the above extract, as on other occasions, Agamben uses 'bare life' to indicate *zoë*, the development of his argument in *Homo Sacer* leads to the definition of 'bare life' not as 'simple natural life' (HS: 1) or 'the simple fact of living' (HS: 2), but as 'life that may be killed but not sacrificed' (HS: 8) – *zoë* not as a natural fact but contradistinguished from *bios* as an excremental remainder. The examples of this kind of bare life Agamben provides include the outlaw (HS: 183-4), the concentration camp inmate (184-5), and the body sustained only by life-support systems, whose continuing life is subject to a judicial decision (HS: 186). But the role of language in politics gives rise to further complexities in a multilingual state such as the United Kingdom. Where some people also – or indeed only – speak a minority language such as Welsh, Gaelic or Scots, their ability to enter and participate in the *polis* may be hindered by the hegemony of English, leaving them excluded as *de facto* 'bare life'. Although minority languages also evidence the transition from *phone* to *logos*, their speakers' relations with the sovereign power to which they are subject will be qualitatively different from majority language speakers. The elision of England and Britain that Philip Larkin makes may be linguistic as well as geographical, lending another sense in which the medium of poetry may be politically overdetermined.

The function of the sovereign, in this scheme, is to establish the normal juridical order. Agamben quotes Carl Schmitt:

[t]here is no rule that is applicable to chaos. Order must be established for juridical order to make sense. A regular situation must be created, and

sovereign is he who definitely decides if this situation is actually effective. [...] The sovereign creates and guarantees the situation as a whole in its totality. (HS: 16)

This power of decision is based, however, on the sovereign's exceptional status: 'the sovereign, having legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law'; he is thus, 'at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order' (HS: 15). Agamben explain this with reference to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*:

the state of nature survives in the person of the sovereign, who is the only one to preserve its natural *ius contra omnes*. Sovereignty thus presents itself as an incorporation of the state of nature in society, or, if one prefers, as a state of indistinction between nature and culture, between violence and law, and this very indistinction constitutes specifically sovereign violence. (HS: 35)

This sovereign violence is the power of life and death over the citizens of the *polis*; thus '[t]he fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoë* and *bios*' (HS: 181).

Moreover, for Agamben as for Hobbes, 'the state of nature is not a real epoch chronologically prior to the City but a principle internal to the City, which appears at the moment the City is considered *tanquam dissoluta*, "as if it were dissolved"' (HS: 105). It is in this sense, therefore, that Larkin's description of sovereignty as 'primitive' acquires its fullest significance: the sovereign is a fragment of the state of nature within the law, and embodies the force that constitutes the law.

### Poetics and Politics

In what sense is poetry 'primitive'? One could point to texts such as the *Iliad* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to prove the genre's antiquity. But just as the primitiveness of sovereignty is not confined to chronology, but is structurally integral to it at all times, we should seek a complementary sense in which poetry, too, remains a primitive thing in different historical manifestations.

It is here that Sisson's criticism and poetics become pertinent. In a statement about his own poetry, Sisson (in Vinson 1980: 1405) states that 'the man that was the same in Neolithic and Roman times, as now, is of more interest than the freak of circumstances. This truth lies at the bottom of a well of rhythm'. Sisson identifies his own search for the common element in primitive and contemporary human nature, perhaps surprisingly, with rhythm. Regarding this 'astonishing statement', poet and linguist C.B. McCully (*PNR*: 48) notes that rhythm and 'the nature of man' are both 'inviolably bound with the *faculté de langage*', and points out that 'the linguist and biologist E.H. Lenneberg in his influential *The Biological Foundations of Language* (1967) looked for "some organising principle that underlies the perception of speech and language" and found "the rhythm"'. In fact, the term recurs compulsively in Sisson's statements of poetics, and has a prominent place in the 'Foreword' to his first *Collected Poems*:

[t]he claim of a collection like this is in the continuity of statement which underlies the historical recording, analysis or imitation and is recognisable in the development of rhythm rather than in overt logical connections. The proof of a poem – any poem – is in its rhythm[.] (*ITD*: 13)

This prioritising of rhythm over content is consistent with Sisson's claim, over twenty years earlier in a review of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, that '[i]n Mr Pound's mature verse the rhythm has such vitality that I could read him with pleasure if I understood him no more than I do the Chinese ideographs with which his pages are embellished' (*AL*: 77). The key term here is 'vitality', and its connection with life: rhythm is the life of poetry. In another formulation, rhythm is both life-force and living tissue:

rhythm is the ligament that binds together the body of a poem; without vitality of rhythm, vivid images, pretty sounds and fine thoughts look as if they were sewn up in a bit of old sacking instead of a skin. (*AL*: 70)

Here, Sisson pushes the biological metaphor further, describing the poem as a body analogous to a human one, bound together organically by rhythm (which is also its vital, life-giving principle) – and suggests that a poem assembled without such rhythm is a kind of Frankenstein's monster. Corresponding to this conception of the poem as

a body bound and animated by rhythm is Sisson's sense of how rhythm affects the reader. Sisson recalls that the 'most prominent element in the immediate response' to his first reading *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* was 'the excitement induced by the rhythm of the verse: it was as if a kettle-drum were being played somewhere near the base of the thorax, left side' (*AL*: 77). Rhythmic vitality in the body of the poem produces in the reader a heightened sense of their own body – their own vitality, even.

Poetic rhythm is, however, almost impossible to define: as McCully (*PNR*: 48) points out, rhythm 'eludes even the most persistent enquirer. The further one digs for it, the further it retreats into the body of language.' Bearing in mind McCully's (*PNR*: 48) admonition that '[t]he metaphor is carefully chosen', we may suggest that poetic rhythm arises from the arrangement of sounds: the number and position of stressed and unstressed syllables, the duration of vowels, the repetitions of alliteration and rhyme. These phonetic elements of language are the markers of the physical voice – the *phone*, which, with *logos*, corresponds to the pair *zoë* and *bios*. (This is not to say that poetry must be read aloud: rhythm is still perceptible when reading silently. Other, non-phonetic elements of language also affect the perception of rhythm, notably syntax, and typography when considering the poem as a material text. Yet these are supplementary rather than counter-examples.) Sisson is therefore astute in his use of bodily imagery to describe the role of rhythm in poetry: just as Agamben aligns *phone* with the creaturely *zoë* of human beings, as opposed to the political *bios* made possible by *logos*, Sisson identifies in rhythm the bodily, carnal aspect of poetic language. And just as the human body is subsumed – albeit never quite without remainder – into the qualified life of *bios*, so verse rhythms are subsumed into the semantic discourse of the poem and the wider cultural context from which its meaning derives. But never entirely, never in a way that can be wholly rationalised – hence the frustration of trying to discuss rhythm analytically. In poetic rhythm we can catch an audible trace of bare life.

This raises the question of whose bare life we can hear in poetic rhythm. The obvious answer would be the poet's. This is given an extreme formulation by Robert Wells (*PNR*: 39), who argues that, for Sisson, a poet's rhythms are generated:

in accordance with the distinctive rhythm – different in each person – that informs every activity of ours, the way we walk and speak, the way that the thoughts fall in our heads. Rhythm is a matter of flesh and blood as well as of words.

In this interpretation, poetic rhythm is organically related to the poet's physiological rhythms, and conveys something of them: 'apprehension of rhythm enables us to meet and to know the poets whom we read. It means that if they suddenly appeared in the room with us, we would recognize their voices and even the way they moved' (*PNR*: 39-40). However, Sisson himself argues that mediocre poets 'can only give you a rhythm made originally for another poem, or worn by scores so that one doesn't know to whom it belongs', a homogeneity from which Pound's 'personal voice had disengaged itself' (*AL*: 77) from one collection to the next. In light of the identification of rhythm with bare life, one should remember that one's own bare life is not transparent to oneself, because subject-formation occurs within language: bare life is 'undifferentiated, and stripped of both the generality and the specificity that language makes possible' (Norris 2005: 4). Commenting on the lines from 'The Usk', 'Nothing is in my own voice because I have not | Any', Calvin Bedient (1975: 61) comments that '[i]t is, indeed, all but true that he lacks a voice of his own [...] Yet his very doubt of this gives him a voice'. The bare life heard in poetic rhythm, even that of a poet with a distinctive 'voice' like Pound, is necessarily alienated and depersonalized.

It may be dangerous to over-generalise about poetry when so many different forms of it are practised; but to speak of the kind written by C.H. Sisson, it appears that poetry, by emphasizing the phonetic, somatic elements of language, is structurally analogous to the fundamental structure of politics presided over by sovereign power. As politics 'entails the constant negotiation of the threshold between itself and the bare life that is included within and excluded from its body', as Norris (2005: 8) elucidates Agamben's scheme, every poem is a re-articulation of the threshold between *phone* and *logos*, *zoë* and *bios*. This insight should re-orientate discussion of the political dimensions of poetry. Argument about a poem's presentation of political events, the nuances of particularly loaded words, everything that occurs at the level of semantics, already takes politics for granted, and overlooks the dynamic by which politics comes

into being through the imperfect sublation of *zoë* into *bios*. Poetry goes to the very foundation of politics.

As with sovereignty, therefore, we may most fruitfully understand Larkin's description of poetry as 'primitive' not diachronically but synchronically: poetry, in the relationship between its rhythms and semantics, negotiates the threshold of *phone* and *logos*, which is bound up with the movement from *zoë* to *bios* that inaugurates political association. The poet and the sovereign are both concerned, in their different ways, with this same dynamic. It is little surprise, therefore, that poetry has so frequently been seen to have a political aspect, even a political function or duty. In light of Larkin's comment, then, we must investigate the ways in which these analogous 'primitive things' have been officially united.

#### The Laureateship: Theory

One recent attempt to theorise the laureateship by analogy with the sovereign whom the laureate serves has come from Laurel Peacock in 'Ted Hughes as Poet Laureate: the Beast and the Sovereign' (2010: 43-53). Drawing on the insight (which she derives from Jacques Derrida, although it is comparable with the Agambenian scheme I have elaborated) that 'the sovereign and the beast seem to have in common their being-outside-the-law' (2010: 49-50), Peacock constructs a reading of Ted Hughes's poetry according to which the poet laureate is 'sovereign in relation to the rules of poetry, crowned by the state and by critics as the one licensed to break rules and change them' (ibid.: 47). Furthermore, Peacock reads his poems as fables of sovereignty, like the 'Hawk Roosting' who 'articulates the pure sovereignty of a predator at the top of the food chain' (ibid.: 43) in his declaration 'I kill where I please because it is all mine', 'mirroring a king exerting *la droit du plus fort*' (ibid.: 50).

There are problems, however, with her reading of Hughes and her construction of the laureateship. Although Peacock (2010: 44) asserts that '[f]or Hughes [...] poetic sovereignty took the form of a certain modernist view of poetic convention as a breaking of the rules, an individualistic refusal of convention', the same is not true of laureates in general: the majority of British poets laureate have tended towards



convention rather than innovation. In fact, Hughes' laureate poems such as 'The Unicorn' (Hughes 1992: 43-7) are, as Roger Rees (2009: 139) notes, more 'akin to the neo-classicizing tendency of earlier British laureate verse' in the way they 'promote the image of a latter-day imperial cult'. Moreover, although Peacock (2010: 44) aims to connect her theory of laureateship to 'the history of the post in its granting by and connection to the Sovereign of England', she does not analyse the material benefits that both the sovereign and the laureate hope to enjoy from their contract, or their obligations and constraints, but focuses on the post's 'own kind of symbolic sovereignty' (ibid.: 44).

A more nuanced discussion of this relationship is provided by Robert J. Meyer-Lee in *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (2007). Meyer-Lee returns to the founding instance of laureation, Petrarch's coronation as poet laureate on the Roman Capitol in 1341, and reads his oration as an attempt to reconcile 'conceptions of the laureate as *vates* and as self-interested servant' (2007: 17). Petrarch (1955: 304) claims divine inspiration as a poet; he states openly that 'the charm of personal glory' led him to seek the laureateship, but also claims to have been motivated by 'the honor of the Republic'. Meyer-Lee (2007.: 18) argues, however, that Petrarch's (1955: 304) hope to 'renew in the now aged Republic a beauteous custom of its flourishing youth' is another way of augmenting his own glory. In all this, Petrarch works to assert his autonomy from political power. In fact, Petrarch himself claims for poets an analogical sovereignty like that developed by Peacock, in which 'poets are not subjects of Caesars but equivalents of them within their specific domain of authority' (Meyer-Lee 2007: 19). But Petrarch also acknowledges that the immortality of the laureate's name is bound up with that of the sovereign whom he celebrates, and goes on to describe how sovereigns have kept poets to maintain their good repute. Indeed, Petrarch has to advertise this practical benefit poets can provide, because otherwise kings would have no reason to go to the trouble of awarding laurels. Furthermore, despite his appeals to immortality and the spiritual nature of poetry, Petrarch (1955: 309) hints that as well as the laurel crown, '[o]ther rewards, also, come to poets' – i.e. some form of remuneration for his services. A poet laureate is therefore involved with his sovereign in a relationship of mutual glorification, but also contracted in an economic relationship that threatens to undermine his poetic autonomy and authority.

Returning to Petrarch's laureate address is also useful in reminding us that he based his idea of laureation upon a misapprehension of the Latin poets. Petrarch (1955: 304) believed, as he told his audience, that 'in this very Roman Capital where we are now gathered, so many and such great poets, having attained to the highest and most illustrious mastery of their art, have received the laurel crown'. He makes special mention of Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, identifying the Augustan period as a golden age of patronage. But as Joseph Trapp (1990: 104) points out, 'no Roman poet was ever crowned with bay on the Capitol': Petrarch was reviving a tradition that had never till then existed. Classical poets had, however, done much to instil this belief. Maecenas, a close advisor to the Emperor Augustus, was a patron of many poets, most famously Virgil and Horace: both came to enjoy the friendship of the Emperor himself, and benefited materially from his patronage. Augustus commissioned Horace to write a poem – the 'Carmen Saeculare' – to be recited publicly as part of the Secular Games, which he reinstated in 17 B.C., and demanded that Horace compose a fourth book of odes; while Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*, connected the reign of Augustus to the legendary founder of Rome, Aeneas. These proto-laureates also describe laureation in their poems: Horace solicits the laurel crown for his poetic achievement in Ode III.xxx, while Virgil describes himself in *Georgics* III.21-2 (Virgil 2000 vol.1: 178-9) with his head wreathed in olive-leaves as a symbol of glory. It is important to realise, therefore, that laureation begins as much in poetic self-representation as institutional practice, and develops through reimagining poetic forebears: Petrarch presents his oration as a discourse upon Virgil's lines 'Sed me Parnasi deserta per ardua dulcis | Raptat amor', and, as Meyer-Lee (2007:18) argues, presents himself throughout as 'a new Virgil'. Thus Sisson's appropriation of a laureate stance in 'To the Queen', and his allusions to John Skelton and Ben Jonson are well within the traditions of laureateship, and particularly those 'self-crowned laureates' (such as Jonson) analysed by Helgerson (1983). The difference between what I am calling pseudo-laureateship and those self-crowned laureates is that Helgerson (1983: 1) looks at poets' whole careers: they are 'poets whose ambition preceded and determined their work, [...] who strove to achieve a major literary career and who said so'. Pseudo-laureateship need not define a career or an oeuvre, but can be adopted tactically in individual poems.

The connection between Petrarch's laureation and that which he imagined for the Latin poets also highlights the contrast between their religious context, which was pagan, and his at the end of the Christian middle ages. At the beginning of his laureation address, Petrarch (1955: 300) 'offer[s] salutation to the glorious Virgin' to 'invoke the divine favour', much as Virgil – his model for the laureate poet – invokes the Muse at the beginning of the *Aeneid*. After the ceremony's completion, the assembly processed to the Vatican where 'the profane wreath was suspended before the shrine of St. Peter' (Trapp 1990: 96). Petrarch's apparent revival of the pagan tradition also involved its Christianisation. Furthermore, this raises the question of the relationship between Church and State, and in what relation to them poets laureate stand.

However, insofar as Peacock does not account for the concrete interactions of political and poetic sovereignty, and Meyer-Lee does not raise the issue of tensions between monarchy and democracy (as we have seen them manifested in poems by Sisson and Day Lewis), neither provides an adequate framework through which to analyse laureation in the twentieth century. To do so, we require a clearer understanding of how the laureateship has developed within the wider context of British constitutional history.

### The Laureateship (II): History

When Petrarch became poet laureate, he was made a Roman citizen and awarded the rights and immunities of a university graduate. In Britain (at least before the terms of the post were changed with the appointment of Andrew Motion in 1997, which falls outside the scope of this study) the Poet Laureate was a court official, 'an officer of Her Majesty's Household in the Department of the Lord Chamberlain' and thus 'entitled to wear the Fourth Class of the Household civil uniform' (Trapp 1990: 93). Before this, comparable but uncodified arrangements existed between poets and the monarchy. Ben Jonson received a pension from James I, an arrangement that continued under Charles I, although he did not hold the laureate title; William Davenant enjoyed a similar arrangement (Russell 1981: 2). Charles did, however, create other official posts that exist to this day: in 1626 Nicholas Lanier became the first Master of the King's Musick; the Surveyor of the King's Pictures, although not

necessarily an artist himself, is charged with the care of the royal picture collection; Trapp (1990: 93) also notes the existence of an office for the 'Marine Painter'. These appointments reflect the fact that the court was a centre for the arts.

Yet power was the foundation of the Stuart court. During Charles I's reign, Britain experienced direct rule, when he governed without a parliament between 1629 and 1640. Under this arrangement, the king's business was conducted by royally appointed ministers; Sisson's statement in 'A Note on the Monarchy' that '[i]t would be perfectly possible to govern England without Parliament or elections' (*AL*: 129) was certainly true then. Sisson qualifies this, however, acknowledging that '[w]hat a government loses when it ceases to be regulated or modified by an electoral procedure is not the power to govern but a certain advisory force which tells it what the people will stand' (*AL*: 128). Charles discovered that his subjects would not stand for being governed without representation. Civil war broke out; Charles was tried and executed, and the United Kingdom became a republic. Although the Stuart dynasty was restored under his son Charles II, the possibility of a British sovereign ruling as an absolute monarch died on 16 January 1649, and its coffin was decisively nailed shut when James II, who had ruled without Parliament for three years after 1685, was replaced by William of Orange and James's daughter Mary in the revolution of 1688. Whether the subsequent history of the British constitution is narrated as a story of royal power's gradual circumscription, or of the monarch releasing powers to his or her subjects, the fact is that the British monarch no longer wields unlimited executive power.

The Restoration of the monarchy and the 1688 revolution are decisive events in the history of the laureateship. After Charles II returned to the throne in 1660, John Dryden was made the first official poet laureate in 1668 (Russell 1981: 1) – three hundred years before the appointment of C. Day Lewis, giving his (and C.H. Sisson's) laureate poems a tercentennial appositeness. Dryden then became the first (and so far the only) incumbent to be stripped of his laurels when, as a fellow Catholic loyal to James II, he refused to pledge allegiance to William and Mary (Russell 1981: 2-3). From then on, the laureateship declined along with the institution it was meant to support. J.A. Burrow (2008: 153) argues that 'by sacrificing the claim of the Stuart monarchy to a divine hereditary right,' the revolution of 1688 'greatly weakened the

royal charisma of William of Orange and his successors [...] Kings were no longer “mirrors of grace and majesty divine”. After the ensuing appointment of Thomas Shadwell, whom Dryden had satirised in ‘Mac Flecknoe’ as crown prince of the poetic kingdom of dullness, the official laureateship became, as Helgerson (1983: 7) argues, a poisoned chalice, a sign that one was not a great and important poet – while conversely, ‘a man who aspired, as Pope did, to stand in the line of true greatness might in this new age make opposition to the official Laureate a powerful sign of his own authorial integrity’. It appears, therefore, that an understanding of the laureateship can only be gained with a theoretical model of modern sovereignty.

### Sovereignty and Government

The theory of sovereignty elaborated in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* assumes that sovereign power is held by one person: the emperor, the king, the Führer, or some other head of state. But in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as we have seen, the King lost the allegiance of his subjects, who put him to death; and though his dynasty was restored, the role of the British monarch has increasingly been that of a figurehead. A theory of sovereignty will therefore have to account for this form of constitutional monarchy.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory: for a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Agamben offers an interpretation of philosophy and politics that gives central place to a constitutive split within sovereignty. Evidence that this precedes the development of the modern constitutional monarchy can be found in the legend of the *roi mehaignié*, the ‘Fisher King’ of Grail mythology, incapacitated and unable to rule his kingdom. Agamben interprets this mytheme as representing ‘the inoperative and separated character of the mutilated king’, who is ‘excluded from any concrete activity of government at least until he is healed by the touch of the magic spear [the Spear of Destiny]’ (KG: 69). Agamben concludes that ‘[t]he *roi mehaignié* thus contains a kind of anticipation of the modern sovereign who “reigns but does not govern”’ (KG:69). This suggests that the events of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were not an unprecedented reconfiguration of politics, but the formalisation of a dynamic implicit in the nature of sovereignty. Provisionally accepting Carl Schmitt’s thesis that ‘[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological

concepts' (*KG*: 2),<sup>2</sup> Agamben traces the split between reigning and governing through Christian thought, crystalizing around how ideas of 'economy' – in the radical sense of the management of the household – have been employed.

The first stage in this development occurred when Patristic theologians established Christian dogma as part of their polemics against Gnosticism. In opposing the Gnostic belief in a good but withdrawn god complemented by an active but flawed demiurge, Tertullian inverts St Paul's locution (in Ephesians 3. 9) 'the economy of the mystery' – understood simply as the task of revealing God's hidden plan for human salvation – in order to elaborate Trinitarian theology as 'the mystery of the economy'. In this scheme, God's nature is one, but His redemptive action is articulated through the three persons of the Trinity, on the model of a royal household: God's rule is monarchical, but his government is economic (*KG*: 42-3). This, according to Agamben, introduces 'a fracture between God and his action, between ontology and praxis' (*KG*: 53). Later, Thomas Aquinas imported Aristotelian metaphysics into Christian theology in his discussion of whether the universe includes the good as a transcendent principle or in its immanent order. Aquinas concludes that it does in both ways, on the model of a household in which the good order of the whole is predicated on the goodness of the paterfamilias. This repeats the gesture of splitting nature from action, and enshrines a disjunction between God's transcendence and His practical involvement in the world – a disjunction that must be continually bridged. Christian thought therefore develops a distinction between what theologians call the "economic trinity" (or trinity of revelation) and "immanent trinity" (or trinity of substance)', where '[t]he former defines God in his praxis of salvation through which he reveals himself to men', which will be completed at the end of days, and the latter defines 'God as he is in himself' (*KG*: 207). Both are unities constituted by triadic internal relations, and the two are ceaselessly contradistinguished and reintegrated in Christian thought, like sets of cogs in a clockwork machine.

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<sup>2</sup> Anticipating the obvious riposte to this thesis, Agamben cites the work of Jan Assmann, who inverts it so as to conclude that 'the significant concepts of theology are theologized political concepts' (*KG*: 193); but Agamben comments that "[e]very inversion of a thesis remains, however, in some sense in agreement with the original" (*KG*: 193).

The connection between God's sovereignty and that of kings, suggested by Tertullian's metaphor of a royal household, was actualised when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, from which time worldly sovereignty was justified by reference to divine appointment. This created tension, however, between monarchs and the papacy in its office as Vicar of Christ and Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, as when Pope Zachary deposed the Merovingian king Childeric III, releasing his subjects from their oath of fealty and replacing him with Pippin, father of Charlemagne (KG: 98). Childeric, who had been incompetent to rule, became the type of the '*rex ignavus et inutilis*' and 'the paradigm of the distinction between *dignitas* and *administratio*, the office and the activity in which it expressed itself' (KG: 98). These distinct aspects of sovereignty, corresponding to God's unified being and the manifestations of his *oikonomia*, could exist in separate people, as when Innocent IV assigned royal authority to Sancho II of Portugal, and the government of the realm to his brother Afonso of Boulogne (KG: 98-9). Thus the modern separation of the monarch from the activities of government is modelled on 'the theological paradigm that distinguishes between the *arce* and *dynamis* of God' (KG: 73). Agamben draws the conclusion that '[s]overeign power is structurally articulated according to two different levels, aspects, or polarities':

it is, at the same time, *dignitas* and *administratio*, Kingdom and Government. The sovereign is structurally *mehaigné*, in the sense that his dignity is measured against the possibility of its uselessness and inefficacy, in a correlation in which the *rex inutilis* legitimates the actual administration that he has always already cut off from himself and that, however, formally continues to belong to him. (KG: 99)

The kingdom 'justifies and founds' (KG: 208) the activities of government; but because transcendence and immanence can only be thought through their contradistinction, they turn out to be mutually dependent:

the Kingdom is the remainder that poses itself as the whole that infinitely subtracts itself from itself. Just as, in the divine *gubernatio* of the world, transcendence and immanence [...] must be unceasingly distinguished for providential action to unceasingly join them, so the Kingdom and the

Government constitute a double machine which is the place of a continuous separation and articulation. The *potestas* is *plena* only to the extent that it can be divided. (KG: 99)

In light of this, the history of the British monarchy since the 17<sup>th</sup> century makes perfect sense. Sovereignty in the United Kingdom lies with the monarch, but the Government conducts the day-to-day business of the executive. A perfect example of this is the royal prerogative, which the Prime Minister uses in the monarch's name, and for which s/he is accountable to Parliament. In lieu of all effectual powers of government, the monarchy retains the kingdom and all that goes with it – the remainder that poses itself as the whole.

Although Sisson does not spell out the origins of this model, it can clearly be seen at work in his constitutional thinking. Sisson's assertion of '[t]he monarchic principle' that the monarch 'is the legitimate source of all power' (AL: 126), and that although he has 'released to his subjects' the powers of government, '[i]f we start with an unlimited power, whatever is given away something will remain' (AL: 126), corresponds exactly to the model reconstructed by Agamben – the difference being that Agamben intends to critique the model; Sisson, by contrast, remains faithful to this Christian politico-theological paradigm.

This is best illustrated through Sisson's long-running argument with Walter Bagehot. Bagehot distinguished between the 'dignified' and 'efficient' parts of the constitution: the former, of which the monarch is head, serves to 'excite and preserve the reverence of the population' through its 'historical, complex, august, theatrical' appearance; the latter, headed by the Cabinet, is the part of the state 'by which it, in fact, works and rules' (AL: 387). Bagehot's distinction thus follows the division of *dignitas* and *administratio* – the difference being that, to him, royal authority is a sham. Bagehot argues that the population of Victorian Britain was comprised of several strata: there were 'people scarcely more civilized than the majority of two thousand years ago' and 'others, even more numerous, such as the best people were a thousand years since' (AL: 388), over whom a small, educated elite presided. The majority are too simple and ill-educated to understand the workings of government, and thus require a monarch around whom their illusions can cluster. In Bagehot's conception, the



monarch is so *inutilis* that the queen ‘must sign her own death-warrant if the two Houses unanimously send it up to her’ (*AL*: 393).

Sisson’s method of defence, in *The Case of Walter Bagehot* (1972), is to propose scenarios that would vindicate the monarch’s authority – for example, the situation that could have arisen during the Second World War, ‘in which rival “governments” are established’; in which case ‘[t]here could be no doubt that the legitimate government would be the one whose advice the Queen took’ (*AL*: 393). Furthermore, ‘so-called Acts of Parliament made without her consent would have no more force than opinion cared to attribute to them. They would certainly not be the law of the land.’ (*AL*: 393) Sisson’s monarchical principles also lead him to deny ‘Bagehot’s statement that it is a “fiction that ministers are, in any political sense, the Queen’s servants”’ (*AL*: 125-6). Sisson asserts instead that ‘the Queen rules through her Ministers, and [...] she does not rule any the less for that, just as Ministers are not the less Ministers because they exercise their functions in the main through officials’ (*AL*: 127). The consonance between this and Tertullian’s statement, that ‘no kingdom is in such a sense one man’s own’ – i.e. a monarchy – ‘as not to be administered also through those other closely related persons whom it has provided for itself as officers’ (*KG*: 42), by which analogy he argues for a divine *oikonomia*, shows the extent to which Sisson keeps faith with the theological model of monarchy/economy. Likewise, his assertion that in a modern democratic state the monarch’s ‘quiescence is the very principle of order’ (*AL*: 127) is consistent with the Thomist notion that good order, whether in a household or creation as a whole, is predicated on the transcendence of its ruler. Bagehot and Sisson are therefore closer than the latter’s animadversions might lead one to expect, insofar as they are both heirs to a tradition of thinking of sovereignty in terms of a constitutive split. The difference lies in that Bagehot wishes to downplay royal authority to the point at which it can be dispensed with, while Sisson aims to maintain a sense of the positive role played by the monarchy even when characterised by passivity.

Naturally, Sisson’s upholding of this paradigm of sovereignty goes along with his antidisestablishmentarianism. In a historical context in which Sisson found himself surrounded by intellectuals ‘sneering at the suggestion that the Coronation “would be in some way rendered inefficacious if it were not exclusively solemnized by an

Archbishop” (AL: 132), Sisson responded that “[s]uch people should distinguish between their own incredulity and the nature of the thing” – that is to say, “[t]he ultimately religious character of the monarchy” (AL: 132). Furthermore, Sisson’s account of the constitution involves a critique of its democratic elements, which operate primarily through the House of Commons and the Cabinet. As we have already seen with regard to Charles I’s direct rule, for Sisson “[t]he Cabinet is a government not because it is an outcome of certain electoral procedures but because it governs. It is government not in so far as it obeys the people but in so far as it constrains them.” (AL: 128) Sisson does not wholly reject party politics, accepting that parties can ‘influence and inform’ the state ‘to render it more tolerable’ (AL: 130), but he denies that a popular mandate is the source of the state’s authority: without the sanction of royal authority, ‘the lay state of modern times’, Sisson argues, ‘rests on the equality of all opinions and consequently can offer no ultimate justification for itself beyond the force that it is able to exercise’ (AL: 144). He also sees political parties as liable to ‘present their policies, which are merely aspects of things, as the thing itself’ (AL: 127-8) and tending ‘to denigrate the State which exists independently of the politician’s role’ (AL: 131), usurping sovereign authority. Thus although the rhetoric of ‘To the Queen’ is exaggerated, the statements in the poem (especially in lines seven to thirteen) do represent to some extent Sisson’s real position.

Corresponding to the division of authority and efficacy between the poles of kingdom and government, glory (Agamben argues) is ‘an attribute, not of Government but of the Kingdom, not of the ministers but of the sovereign’ (KG: 211). Such glory as ministers have is a reflection of the sovereign’s whom they serve. But just as God’s transcendence and the immanent government of the world are understood through their contradistinction, so the glory of the sovereign is not independent of the government, because the greater his ministers are in number, the greater they magnify his glory. Thus ‘each of these two aspects glorifies the other and stems from the other’ (KG: 211), just as in John’s gospel the Son is glorified by the Father, and glorifies the Father through his salvific action (KG: 201-2).<sup>3</sup> Their interrelation forms

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<sup>3</sup> ‘These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee [...] I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou

an economy, in the sense of a circulation, but also with the radical sense of a household.

The attribution and circulation of glory is crucial, because glory is the concept that links authority and power to aesthetics. Although the glory of God, as in the theology of Karl Barth, refers to ‘His competence to make use of his omnipotence [...] and to exercise His lordship’ (*KG*: 212), it also includes his splendour and beauty. But this aestheticization of sovereignty, Agamben argues, involves the ‘neutralization of the idea that the glory and sovereignty of God are reducible to the *brutum factum* of his omnipotence and his force’ (*KG*: 212). Sovereignty, therefore, insofar as it claims legitimacy ‘beyond the force that it is able to exercise’ (*AL*: 144), relies upon aesthetics. But although aesthetics is, with glory, nominally the preserve of kingdom rather than government, the circularity of their contradistinction implies an unstable division between the polarities constitutive of sovereignty.

This attribution of glory, which combines authority and aesthetics, to the kingdom rather than the government highlights the fact that official appointments pertaining to the arts have, historically, been the business of the former. This distinction is twofold. Firstly, the monarchy has always been a patron of the arts: the poet laureate, as with his equivalents for the arts of music and painting, is a court official, and an officer in Her Majesty’s Household (Trapp 1990: 93). By contrast, the watchword of successive British governments has been Lord Melbourne’s exclamation, ‘God help the government that meddles with art!’ (Harris 1970: 13) Secondly, the monarch has always been the subject of the laureate’s praises; when poets laureate have addressed the government, as with Tennyson’s ‘The Fleet’, it has not been to praise but to caution or criticise. Sisson also notes that, although the characters one finds in government departments are often ‘vivid’, this is not because of their virtues but ‘the gamut of the classical moralist – ambition, fear, dissimulation’ (*AL*: 160). When the administrator stands out for aesthetic treatment, it is because his inglorious qualities make him fit for satire.

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me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.’ John 17. 1, 4-5.

Sisson's attempts to maintain authority – and with it, glory and aesthetics – in the polarity of kingdom and away from that of government, is consistent with his argument for the anaesthetic nature of government. 'The administrator', he asserts, 'is [...] essentially an inartistic person' (*SBA*: 121). This is a result not of personal shortcomings – Sisson 'does not mean that officials are, as a class, less sensitive in their private tastes than men of other professions' (*SBA*: 121) – but of the nature of their work:

the administrator cannot be content with the partial and individual view of the world which, whatever the general truths that may be hidden in the work, are the starting points of the artist. [...] The artist makes his work out of *his* world, a world he has invented or formerly observed. The official, on the other hand, looks as if he is claiming an impartial and general view of the world. [...] If the artist imitates nature, the official averts his eyes and makes his picture out of bits of other people's. (*SBA*: 121)

We are now in a position to set out a theory of laureateship in the United Kingdom. We may call this an economic theory, bearing in mind the accumulation of meanings attached to that term. A laureate is a poet retained by the sovereign, specifically with reference to what we have theorised as the polarity of kingdom, as opposed to government; hence the laureate's position within the royal household. Insofar as monarchy claims a religious basis, this contract confers a religious dimension upon the office of the laureate. (This has further political implications: where the Poet Laureate is a member of a national church such as the Church of England, s/he will presumably speak with less authority on behalf of subjects in another communion, such as the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, or none.) The necessity for this kind of contract arises out of the sovereign's need for the aesthetic "supplementary element" that enables one to think glory beyond the *factum* of sovereignty' (*KG*: 212). The laureate provides this primarily through his poems, although the simple fact of association can be glorifying even when (as in the case of William Wordsworth (Russell 1981: 128)) the poet writes nothing in the role. In turn, the laureate reflects and partakes in the glory of the sovereign, a dynamic more significant than the 'spectre of economic exchange' (in the financial sense) that Meyer-Lee (2007: 20) claims 'underwrites' the contract and threatens to discredit the poet. (The traditional

£100 is little more than pocket-money in today's terms – but that is just what it is: pocket-money for a member of the household.) This economy of glory, circulating between the sovereign and the laureate, is clearly observable in Petrarch's laureation speech, where the glory of laureation conferred by the sovereign secures the immortality of the poet's name – and with it, that of his patron. Thus the poet and the sovereign share the laurel crown, which symbolises 'the fragrance of good fame and of glory' (Petrarch 1955: 309). This reflected glory accounts for the 'symbolic sovereignty' Peacock attributes to the laureate, and which Petrarch cultivates in arguing that poets and sovereigns 'move towards the same goal, though by different paths' (ibid.: 309). We may supplement this conception of an identity between poets and sovereigns, which Petrarch theorises in terms of striving for excellence of the spirit and body, by recalling our earlier observation that the business of both concerns the movement from *phone* to *logos* – though for poets, within narrower limits.

Much of what this model of sovereignty proposes coincides, as we have noted, with C.H. Sisson's positions on the British constitution and the relationship between sovereignty and aesthetics, which would ostensibly support Patrick McGuinness's (*Age*: 71) suggestion that Sisson 'alone among his contemporaries really *believed* (spiritually, institutionally, culturally) in the post'. It is perhaps surprising, then, that Sisson's references to the laureateship are largely derogatory. He describes Robert Bridges, for instance, as 'the scholarly poet laureate whose works show an impeccable lack of vitality' (*AL*: 411), and downplays the lines of Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' that 'smell like the official praises of a laureate' (*AL*: 110). As for Day Lewis, Sisson saw him in the 1930s as part of 'a band which fights a harmless and often imaginary battle against our rulers' (*AL*: 93), and gives no time to his poetry. An explanation for the discrepancy between these instances and the plausibility of McGuinness's suggestion may lie in the history of the laureateship after 1688, and its involvement in the religious politics of the United Kingdom. When Dryden was stripped of his laurels following the replacement of James II by William III, the post was given to Thomas Shadwell: 'a Protestant Whig replacing a Catholic Tory' (Russell 1981: 3). These terms had evolved in the mid-seventeenth century to denote opposing political groups. Whigs were Protestants, dissenters or Low Church Anglicans, who opposed James II's accession on the grounds of his Catholicism; some of them supported the Monmouth rebellion of 1685, in which Charles II's

illegitimate son attempted to overthrow James; and they later supported William III. The Tories supported James's claim, although they were not all Catholics – indeed, among his most steadfast supporters were the Anglican bishops who at first opposed his Declaration of Indulgence, which would have given full rights to non-conformists of both Catholic and Protestant stripes, and who later refused to swear allegiance to William and Mary, for which they became known as 'Non-Jurors'. The history of these groups is told or alluded to throughout Sisson's essays, and it is with the Tories that Sisson aligns himself. In an essay from 1977, 'A Four Letter Word', Sisson attempts to articulate and defend this 'obscure ill-understood opposition' (*AL*: 534) to the political ideologies of the late twentieth century – when 'Tory' indicates 'a political party which has no conception at all of its meaning' (*AL*: 530) – preferring Samuel Johnson's definition: '[o]ne who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state, and the apostolic hierarchy of the church of England' (*AL*: 533). Johnson, as Sisson liked to point out, defined Whig as simply '[t]he name of a faction' (*AL*: 533). For Sisson, Whig ideology comprised of a 'combination of revolution and privileged self-interest' (*EP*: 208), which he felt had been the dominant force in British politics at least since the beginning of the Hanoverian dynasty ('Queen Anne died in 1714 and the country has been more or less given over to Whiggery ever since' (*AL*: 221)). The laureateship is tied up with these events because, beginning with Shadwell, poets laureate had to be Whigs in order to support the monarchy against the claims of the exiled Catholic Stuarts, with whom Tories were commonly associated (until the term Tory had so far changed its meaning that it became possible to have a Tory laureate). For example, Colley Cibber, who became Poet Laureate in 1730, claimed to have won the appointment with his anti-Catholic play, *The Non-Juror* (Russell 1981: 67). It may be, therefore, that the British laureateship was too tainted by its Whig history to command Sisson's respect (which would be consistent with his address to Elizabeth I in 'To the Queen', whose rule predated these divisions).

Reviewing C. Day Lewis's inaugural laureate poem in light of this theory of laureation, we can see that in shifting attention from the monarchy to the activities of '[b]oiler-room, board-room, backroom boys' (l.13), he focuses upon the economy – that is, on the polarity of government over that of kingdom. When he mentions glory in the poem's final line, it is held out as a 'dream' the British people 'could | Make real' (ll.23-4), rather than an attribute of the sovereign. The populist response would

be to applaud this, as bringing the laureateship up to date with the realities of life in mid-twentieth century Britain. Sisson might argue instead that this arises, like Bagehot's account of the constitution, out of 'a Whiggish or Progressive horror for the supreme though not for the penultimate heights' and 'an inability to admit a principle of government to which the most exalted advices on our day-to-day affairs would be subordinate' (*AL*: 128). Either way, the fact that the poet laureate could take such a stance indicates the distance between Sisson's viewpoint and that to be found in a position of cultural centrality.

### Poetry and the Body Politic

Whom does the poet laureate speak for, or to? In 'Then and Now', Day Lewis twice addresses his audience as 'islanders' (ll.9, 21), suggesting a sense of unity based on inhabiting the same landmass. Sisson, by contrast, appears to speak in 'To the Queen' against the notion of an overarching British identity uniting English, Scottish and Welsh subjects – not to mention the complexities of the situation in Northern Ireland. While the voice Sisson adopts in the poem is chauvinistically English, his acknowledgement of national differences may be thought less imperialistic than Philip Larkin's elision of Britain and England in his *Paris Review* interview. This is consistent with Sisson's suggestion, in an essay from the previous year, that '[o]thers should not be discouraged from shedding the burden of loyalty. It may well be that the Crown will end, as it began, as the Crown of England' (*AL*: 207) – a possibility that must have seemed more plausible in the context of the growing nationalist politics already noted. But Day Lewis also describes his public as '[m]embers one of another' (l.22), implying a sense of corporate identity more fundamental than the need to work together that the poem urges. This may even be thought to allude to an idea already mentioned with reference to the final stanza of 'To the Queen': the body politic.

Sisson's remarks about 'shedding the burden of loyalty' conclude an essay in which he argues for the continuing relevance of the monarchy:

a King or Queen can stand for us as policies and the ministers who promote them can not. Already in the Cabinet, with its score of ministers, whose policies are the subject of analytical discourse, the human mind – which is the

same as the human body – has begun to disintegrate; but it is one in the crown, which is as mysterious and unknowable as we are ourselves. It is by virtue of that that we are one. (*AL*: 207)

We have seen how sovereignty is polarised into the aspects of kingdom and government, and how on top of these a system of oppositions has been built up: monarchy against democracy; royal authority against governmental efficacy; regal glory against administrative anaesthesia. We now find, in Sisson's thinking, a third duality: bodily disintegration in the government, contrasting with the bodily integrity of the monarch. Yet this passage does not explain why the body – and whose body? – is disintegrating in the Cabinet yet intact in the crown, or how this unites the English nation as 'one'. The superficial objection to this statement is that the body of the monarch is just as corruptible as that of any Cabinet minister. Kings and queens age, grow sick, sometimes even lose their sanity, and die. But as in the last stanza of 'To the Queen', Sisson's discourse here is haunted by the doctrine of the monarch's two bodies:

the royal personage had two bodies, one natural and subject to the fate of all mortal flesh and one supernatural, whose representational or official corporeality gave quasi-divine legitimacy, presence, and enduring substance to governmental authority – to *Herrschaft* – across the succession of generations. (Santner 2011: 34-5)

This body politic, as the latter is known, 'is utterly devoid of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to,' (Santner 2011: 35) and thus gives rise to what Michel Foucault (1979: 208) calls the 'strange material and physical presence' of the king. As the lynchpin of the political order, in which human bodies as *zoë* are subsumed into a *bios*, the sovereign's status as guarantor of the values underpinning that form of life is figured as a supplementary, eternal life. This clarifies Sisson's statement that the human body 'is one in the Crown': not in the actual crown, or in the mere physical body of the monarch, but in her body politic. This sense of bodily integrity is therefore supernatural, or (one might prefer to say) conceptual – hence Sisson's assertion that the mind and body are the same.



At stake in Sisson's formulation is not only the bodily unity of the sovereign – which is in fact based upon its duality – but the unity of the wider population: 'a King or Queen can stand for *us* [...] It is by virtue of that that we are one.' The monarch's body politic is the principle of coherence in the body politic in the broader sense, forming the apex of a pyramid made up of all the individual bodies in the nation, as in the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. The formation of a political society, of which the sovereign is the guarantor, entails the metaphysical movement from singular bodies to a body of people incorporating many members. This is made possible through the doctrine of royal gemination. According to Eric Santner (2011: 35), under monarchical rule 'the king was to function as the general equivalent of subjects in his realm – and thereby help to sustain the realm in its symbolic efficiency as a locus of subject-formation'. The monarch's second body is a symbolic manifestation enabling him or her to stand for many others, anchoring the chain of signifiers.

The idea of the king's two bodies is fundamentally Christian, based as it is on the doctrine of Incarnation. In Christian dogma, Jesus had two natures within one body, both divine and human; thereafter, the same goes for the sovereign:

[t]he two natures of Christ are transferred to the king, who is thus seen to have not only his own mortal body but to enjoy by grace – made manifest and effective in the liturgical practices of consecration – a sublime body in and through which he appears as the 'type and image of the Anointed in heaven and therewith of God'. (Santner 2011: 36)

Furthermore, as the King represents Christ, so the wider body politic is based upon the Pauline notion of the Church as the mystical body of Christ:

just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and were all made to drink of one spirit. (I Corinthians 12. 12-3)

Paul emphasises that the head of this body is Christ, ‘from whom the whole body, by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love’ (Ephesians 4. 16). In the same way, the king heads the wider body politic, as when Henry VIII made himself Supreme Head of the Church of England on breaking with the Roman Catholic Church.

Ernst Kantorowicz’s argument (in Santner 2011: 36) that ‘the vision of the king as a *persona geminata* is [...] an effluence of a sacramental and liturgical action performed at the altar’ also explains how individuals are to be incorporated into the wider body politic: through liturgical communication, in particular the consumption of Christ’s body and blood in the sacraments. But this cannot be through just any liturgy; Sisson’s insistence on the monarch as head of the body politic underpins his antidisestablishmentarianist position, whereby ‘to be a subject of the Crown is to be a member of the national church’ (*AL*: 146). For Sisson, individuals can only be fully incorporated into the nation as part of the Anglican Church. It follows from this that, insofar as ‘[t]he progress of democracy [...] has been a process of laicisation’ (*AL*: 205), the democratic elements of the constitution – through which ‘the Cabinet, with its score of ministers’ are elected – tend towards the fragmentation of the wider body politic. For Sisson, democracy, lacking this metaphysical dimension, is unable to guarantee the integration of individual bodies into a single body.

The breakdown of the individual body Sisson sees in the Cabinet is a result not only of its democratic formation, but also of the kinds of business it is responsible for. Concerning the historical transition into modern governmentality, Michel Foucault (1979: 208) opposes the monarch’s ‘strange material and physical presence’ and ‘the force that he himself deploys or transmits to some few others’ to ‘a physics of relational and multiple power, which has its maximum intensity not in the person of the king, but in the bodies that can be individualized by these relations’. In contrast with the traditional sovereign power of monarchy, characterised by ‘a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately of life itself’ (Foucault 1990: 136), power in modern democratic states comprises multiple forms ‘working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it’ (*ibid.*: 136). Ultimately, ‘[t]he old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’

(ibid.: 139-40), through institutions such as the prison system and public healthcare, including the National Health Service. Such forms of medical and disciplinary expertise, however, are only able to manipulate bodies, treating them as reified units. ‘The sick man’, Sisson argues, ‘is taken into hospital and modified as one might modify an engine’, while the ‘social sciences [...] aim at a similarly high-handed treatment of the social group’ (*AL*: 182). The creation of the welfare state was a democratically mandated act of government policy, intended to cultivate the health of the British population; but while these ‘devices for treating people as things’ (*AL*: 182) may make for healthier bodies, they ignore the experience of being an embodied subject, and (Sisson implies) diminish the subject’s experience of embodiment.

All of this goes to explain why monarchism is attractive to Sisson as a poet. In a monarchy, ‘the centre of our terms of reference’, Sisson argues, is ‘a person and not some theoretical entity or declaration of rights’ (*SBA*: 159). As kingdom is the polarity of aesthetics as well as embodiment, it holds out the possibility of experiencing one’s embodied subjectivity through art – which is the basis of Sisson’s poetics, where rhythmic vitality in the body of the poem brings about a corresponding experience in the body of the reader. Furthermore, through poetry it becomes possible to experience others’ embodiedness as a member of a wider body, much as partaking in the sacraments does. We could schematise this Anglican, monarchist, Tory poetics of embodiment as a triad: at one point stands the monarch’s body politic; at another, the body of the poem; at the third, the reader’s individual body as a member of the wider body politic. Reading and writing poetry, in this scheme, would be an intrinsically political activity in which one’s own body is linked with those of others; an activity indissolubly connected to sovereign power. Such an approach to poetry might be described, even dismissed, as mystical, and it would be impossible to prove concretely the spectral presence of the sovereign’s second body at a reading of a poem. It also emphasises the demographic faultlines – national, linguistic and ecclesiastical – in a state as complex as the United Kingdom, wherein several languages are spoken and creeds proliferate. Yet this triadic structure may afford us new ways in which to think about the political dimensions of poetry.

## II. 'On the Fringes of the Town': C.H. Sisson between the Country and the City

The first poem in C.H. Sisson's first collection, to which it gives its name, is 'The London Zoo' (*CP*: 37-41), a satire on the life of the modern city and the activities of government. This prominence immediately announces the centrality of what we may call the poetry of government in Sisson's oeuvre. The poem begins in a situation that will recur in his early poems, the commute to work:

From one of the cages on the periphery  
He is brought to London, but only for duty.  
As if radio-controlled he comes without a keeper,  
Without any resistance, five times in the week. (ll.1-4)

The zoological conceit foregrounds the fact that, in Aristotle's definition, man is a *zoon politikon*, a political animal. But if politics, as Agamben argues, is the continual yet never wholly successful project of converting *zoe* into a human *bios*, Sisson's satire works by putting the incompletely assimilated animal part on show. This bestialization is counterpointed by another satirical comparison, with machines, as suggested in the opening lines where the office-worker comes '[a]s if radio-controlled', and stated explicitly in the closing lines:

It is rather as a somewhat extravagant machine  
That the managerial classes should be seen,  
Whose only animal activity is when  
Mr Cog returns at the end of the day to his hen. (ll.157-60)

These seemingly contradictory tropes, of bestialization and mechanization, form two poles of dehumanisation between which the characters in the poem oscillate. The poet details the residual physicality of the commuters – Mr Cog, '[r]eliable as an ant, meticulous as an owl' (l.8) – who literally enter the city:

Some striding blithely who were never athletic,  
Others, who were, now encased in Cadillacs,  
Snug and still belching from their breakfast bacon[.] (ll.15-17)

Upon arrival, the travellers 'faithfully produce the card by which the authorities | Regulate the movement of animals in great cities' (ll.55-6) suggesting that the running

of the modern city, and politics as a whole, is more about managing the circulation of bodies than the values which Aristotle saw as the principle of the *polis*. This is played out in Sisson's presentation of how language functions in this city. Sisson describes the commuters' 'carapaces' (l.21), including their clothes and newspapers:

most resistant of all is the layer of language  
Swathed around their senses like a mile of bandage;  
Almost nothing gets in through that, but when something does,  
The answering thought squelches out like pus. (ll.27-30)

Here, language prevents rather than facilitates perception, and thought has broken down. Subjected to the 'analytic discourse' of governmentality, 'the human mind – which is the same as the human body – has begun to disintegrate' (*AL*: 207); hence the imagery of putrescence. Likewise, students at the London School of Economics read journals in which 'those who think thoughts | For a living' ironically 'lay out their unappetising corpses' (ll.87-8). Throughout, language and thought are perverted in all kinds of ways, though censorship ('[e]very man may speak according to his conscience | If he has had it regulated in advance', (ll.73-4)), hypocrisy (a lawyer argues for universal legal aid '[t]o be paid for by the public out of those taxes | The evasion of which is the object of his main practice', (ll.115-26)) and misuse (as when each person collects his wages 'unobtrusively | As a physician taking a tip or a waiter a fee', (ll.117-8)).

Sisson contrasts the corrupted *logos* of the city with the pure *phone* of the occupants of the actual London Zoo:

the family of apes, hyenas and bustards  
Who have no difficulty in speaking with their own voice  
And do not look to be respected for their price. (ll.154-6)

This privileging of animals over the 'managerial classes' is an extreme formulation of Sisson's poetics, which prioritise the physical aspect of rhythm over the 'overt logical connections' (*ITD*: 13). The verse-form of 'The London Zoo' is based on heroic couplets, the classic vehicle of Augustan urban satire such as Johnson's 'London', Swift's 'A Description of a City Shower' and Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock'. Sisson, however, dispenses with Augustan polish. The poem's irregular rhythms and awkward rhymes squirm and writhe within the schematic form, so that the physical,

phonetic aspect of the language cannot be overlooked in an abstracted perception of the logical argument – just as Sisson focuses on the physicality of the commuters and office workers.

The anaesthetic nature of government appears in another of Sisson's early poems, 'At an International Conference' (*CP*: 27-8):

These are not words  
In which a heart is expressed  
You cannot catch in their rhythm  
Which way the nerves twist. (ll.1-4)

The irregular ballad form is strongly reminiscent of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, which provoked in Sisson an 'immediate response [...] near the base of the thorax, left side' (*AL*: 76). Here, though, there is a tension between the poem's rhythms, which emphasise the physical, and the denunciation of a discourse divorced from the body. In succeeding stanzas, the speaker is negatively contrasted with 'the lean orator | With palm touching the sky' (ll.5-6) and 'the beggar | Defining what is due' (ll.7-8); then with 'the actor | With tragic or comic mask' (9-10) and 'the astringent Terpsichore | With whips for muscles' (ll.11-12). The first pair symbolise a healthy polity in which statesmen and indigents both have access to effectual speech; the second pair represent the arts, especially media in which the body is an integral part, and which were performed (like Greek tragedy) in public, for the public good. The subject of the poem, who represents the negation of all these values, is revealed in the final stanza:

This is the pot-bellied bankrupt  
Naked upon the stage  
With a porridge of news-talk  
Obscuring his grimace. (ll.13-16)

The speaker is a diplomat such as those Sisson encountered at international conferences in Geneva (*OLO*: 24-7): the words in which no heart is expressed or nerves twist are his, and he tries to use this 'news-talk' to hide his broken-down body. Poetic language, which maintains a vital connection with the body, is thus contrasted with the disembodied language of modern politics. In the essay 'Natural History' (*AL*:

157-64), published in 1961, Sisson further develops this contrast between the language of poetry and that of '[t]he ordinary document of business' (*AL*: 161):

[t]he words of most of the communications which pass between people cannot be seen, smelt, or tasted; they can barely be heard. They are (what is called) understood, by which is meant that they have certain practical effects, as the turning of switches or the movement of gear levers. It is this skeleton language which is used, almost exclusively, in the conduct of business[.] (*AL*: 160-1)

'The poem', by contrast, 'exists less contingently'; Sisson argues that it exists 'as a natural object exists, so that you can look at it, hear it, smell it, as you can wind, waves or trees, without asking why you are doing so' (*AL*: 161). The linguistic poverty of business affects those who communicate in it:

you have the absurd spectacle of people – fine figures of men, perhaps, well dressed and otherwise covered – talking to one another as if they were constructions of wire, watching for answers on a number of dials and occasionally blowing one another's fuses. (*AL*: 161)

Crucially, this failure of embodiment is not simply an individual affliction, but arises from these people's interrelations. It is thus symptomatic of a breakdown in their corporate (in both senses) identity, their ability to be incorporated into a wider body politic.

The anaesthetic nature of government as discussed so far has meant that the business of governing has no artistic dimension; but 'The London Zoo' suggests that it is anaesthetic in the other, more general sense of reducing feeling, especially feelings of pain. Commuting to work, Mr Cog reflects:

his intelligence has shrunk and his income grown  
– A not unsatisfactory bit of co-ordination  
Which comforts him as his train enters the terminal station. (ll.48-50)

He then continues to his office, 'where everything is arranged | To enlarge his importance and deaden his senses' (ll.59-60), and finds there that '[a]nxieties enough

to blot out consciousness | Are waiting satisfactorily upon his desk' (ll.63-4). Reasons for why the commuters seek this anaesthesia are hinted at in other poems from *The London Zoo*, as in the second stanza of 'Sparrows Seen from an Office Window' (CP: 9):

Around your table three or four who beg  
Bully or trade because those are the passions  
Strong enough in them to hide all other lack  
Sent to corrupt your heart or try your patience. (ll.5-8)

The people in this business meeting are all driven by the desire to hide – from each other, or from themselves – some kind of 'lack'; it is for this, Sisson suggests, that 'you and your smart enemies both seek | Ratiocination without love or reason' (ll.11-2). Given Sisson's implacable critique, one might expect this lack to be an effect of modern governmentality. But a sense of lack appears in a different context in another poem, 'In Honour of J.H. Fabre' (ITD: 142):<sup>4</sup>

My first trick was to clutch  
At my mother and suck  
Soon there was nothing to catch  
But darkness and a lack. (ll.1-4)

Here, lack is constitutive of the subject as it moves (in psychoanalytic terminology) from pre-Oedipal identification with the mother to a sense of itself as an individual. Through 'darkness and a lack', the subject reaches the next developmental stages:

My next trick was to know  
Dividing the visible  
Into shapes which now  
Are no longer definable.

My third trick was to love  
With the pretence of identity  
Accepting without proof  
The objects 'her' and 'me'. (ll.5-12)

All knowledge, in this scheme, is fallacious, including self-knowledge. This scepticism about the self – his 'difficulty', as he says himself, 'in believing in the

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<sup>4</sup> The *Collected Poems* of 1984 and 2003 reprint a typographic error from the first edition of *The London Zoo*, in which the poem's final line reads 'Join the mantis its prayers'.



existence of human personality' (*OLO*: 11) – is perhaps the most radical aspect of what Calvin Bedient (1975: 52) calls Sisson's 'dismissive view of existence'. 'In Honour of J.H. Fabre' is important in arguing that the sense of lack pervasive in Sisson's poetry is a constitutive part of the individual subject. Elsewhere, for example, in 'The Aeroplane' (*CP*: 19), Sisson concludes that people are merely 'emptinesses with a taste for precedence' (l.11). It is the consciousness of this lack that the people in 'Sparrows Seen from an Office Window' and 'The London Zoo' attempt to blot out. But Sisson suggests in 'The Shape of Life' (*CP*: 20-1) that this is never quite effective, and people remain plagued by a sense of unfulfillment:

What aspiration  
The old men have, sitting toothless at their meetings  
Is recollection (ll.3-5)

Death appears to be the final solace: '[t]he body waits to stiffen | Into a waxen log' (ll.7-8); but as they go about '[g]overning the world | Doing its businesses and arrangements' (ll.12-3), their discomfort increases:

The residual feelers  
Not yet stilled  
Wave and exacerbate themselves[.] (ll.9-11)

Office workers, it is implied, embrace mechanisation to numb the pain of consciousness tied to their stubbornly organic existence. Sisson puts this explicitly in *On the Look-Out*:

People do not love the technological world. They are rapacious for it because it mitigates the pains and itches of life, or would do if the irritability of the human system did not find new causes for unease as soon as one is removed.  
(*OLO*: 38)

This explains the apparent contradiction between the mechanical and bestial forms of dehumanization Sisson presents: the office-workers seek the mechanical, at the same time Sisson uses the bestial to satirise their failure.

If Sisson is sceptical about the personality and self-knowledge, the reader may legitimately ask where the poet fits into 'The London Zoo'. Sisson anticipates the question:

who am I, you may ask, thus to belly-ache  
At my betters? I tell you, I am one of the same lot  
–Without lobster and limousine, but, like the rest,  
Expending my best energies on the second-best. (ll.141-4)

The poet identifies himself as another increasing his income at a cost to his consciousness, as he might well appear to other commuters and office-workers. But Sisson acknowledges that some alternative does seem possible: the poet looks from the office window to see sparrows, while those busy with '[g]overning the world | Doing its businesses and arrangements' may also be found 'praying' ('The Shape of Life', ll.14). Thus within *The London Zoo* as a collection, Sisson positions himself outside of the metropolis, finding a contrast to the corruption of the city in another world of experience.

'There is no meaning except in terms of a time and a place' (*AL*: 204), Sisson would write in 1967. This formulation stresses specificity, of place rather than neutral space, and it is in specific times and places that Sisson's poems and prose (especially in his 'partial autobiography', *On the Look-Out*) search for meaning and solace in the face of the dehumanising forces of modernity and his own scepticism about selfhood. These places are often in the South West of England, and the time-scale is that of the childhood he spent there, as well as the history of his extended family and the wider history of England. These poems thus set up a dichotomy between the city and the countryside, in which the latter provides Sisson with an Archimedean point from which to critique the former. Raymond Williams has analysed, in *The Country and the City* (2011), the ways in which these areas have been made to represent contrasting ideas, and how this has altered through history in response to shifting social and economic relationships. Williams's whole investigation is intended to explode the idea that there was ever 'an earlier and happier rural England' (2011: 35) innocent of the exploitative social relations that dominate the city, or a traditional, rural way of life now vanished or quickly vanishing; but his analyses of particular texts aim to articulate the 'structure of feeling' (*ibid.*: 35) that governs the

construction of a contrast between country and city. It is in this spirit that I shall analyse Sisson's representation of their relationship, examining how he develops this antithesis and how it functions within his creation of a poetic persona in his debut collection.

'Ellick Farm' (*CP*: 34-5) – the poem and the place – is set in the Mendip Hills of North Somerset, a short distance from Burrington Combe where, incidentally, Rev. Augustus Montague Toplady was inspired to write the hymn 'Rock of Ages'. The poem's opening couplets describe the area and the farm itself as the poet remembers them:

The larks flew up like jack-in-the-boxes  
From my moors, and the fields were edged with foxgloves.

The farm lay neatly within the hollow  
The gables climbing, the barn beside the doorway. (ll.1-4)

By calling them 'my moors', the poet identifies himself with the location; this is a familiar, homely environment to him. This impression appears to be confirmed by Sisson's account in *On the Look-Out*, where he records that he and his family travelled from Bristol for holidays on the farm:

[w]e went by train to Blagdon, at the foot of the Mendips, or it may be to Burrington Station, and we were met by the pony and trap from Ellick Farm. [...] we went up the Combe, between the bracken and heather-covered moors of Blackdown and the Ham. [...] At one end on the house was the dairy, at the other the hay-loft. Foxgloves were massed in the hedge that could be seen from the window. It was a beautiful land. (*OLO*: 220)

The prose autobiography gives an apparently unproblematic account of Sisson's childhood holidays, and the poem's first two couplets appear to do likewise; but from this point forward, the temporal perspective becomes complicated: '[i]f I had climbed into the loft', he hypothesises, 'I should have found a boy | Forty years back, among the bales of hay' (ll.5-6). Two past events are superimposed upon one another: a recent visit when he did not explore the loft, and an earlier occasion when he climbed up there as a child. The poet now imagines a meeting between himself as he was four

decades ago and himself in middle age. Through this, he reflects on his development in the meantime, which seems to amount to little: his younger self ‘would have known certainly all that I know | Seeing it in the muck-strewn cobbles below’ (ll.7-8). In one sense, the adult poet dismisses the knowledge and experience he has acquired in the world of ‘The London Zoo’ as worth little more than dirt. But the lines also attribute a kind of foresight to the boy, as if his future was inevitable. In the next (bracketed-off) couplet, this ineluctable fate is seen massing itself for discovery ‘[u]nder the dark rim of the near wood’ where ‘[t]he tears gathered as under an eyelid’ (ll.9, 10). The tears may be the adult’s as the memories came back to him on the recent visit; but in the double chronology of the poem, they are also a projection of the grief that lay in store for the boy.

Thus far, ‘Ellick Farm’ seems typical of poems about the loss of innocence, the rural setting apparently emphasising the contrast between innocence and experience<sup>5</sup> – comparable with ‘Fern Hill’ by Dylan Thomas (1971: 195-6), in which the poet remembers how he ‘was green and carefree, famous among the barns | About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home’ (ll.10-1), in the time ‘Before the children green and golden | Follow him out of grace’ (ll.44-5), before the poet would eventually ‘wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land’ (l.51). The argument, in simple terms, is ‘I used to be that; now I am this.’ In Thomas’s poem and Sisson’s prose, the change is acknowledged but the essential identity of the subject goes unquestioned. The closing couplets of ‘Ellick Farm’, however, take the poem in a different direction, concluding the imagined meeting from the boy’s perspective:

It would have surprised him to see a tall man  
Who had travelled far, pretending to be him.

But that he should have been turning verses, half dumb  
After half a lifetime, would least have surprised him. (ll.11-14)

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<sup>5</sup> ‘[O]ften an idea of the country is an idea of childhood: not only the local memories, or the ideally shared communal memory, but the feel of childhood: of delighted absorption in our own world, from which, eventually, in the course of growing up, we are distanced and separated, so that it and the world become things we observe.’ (Williams 2011: 297)

The man ‘pretending to be him’ is the adult poet, brought to a crisis of identity: imagining himself from two time-frames at once, divided by forty years, his sense of identity is undermined as he recognises his earlier incarnation as both self and other. Yet this is partially allayed in the closing couplet, where surprise at this disjunction is displaced by the recognition, projected onto the boy, that they must be the same person because they share the habit of writing poetry. Although he reproaches himself for being ‘half dumb’, still not an accomplished writer, it is through this practice that he is able to establish a continuous personal identity. The poem thus takes on a self-reflexive dimension: part of Sisson’s poetic project is to reconnect his adult self with his childhood self. Crucially, this is made possible through the continued existence of the farm, which can lend its greater stability to the mutable human subject. The logical outcome of this is a commitment to a conservative politics that resists changes to the human and natural environment.

Ellick Farm represents historical as well as personal continuity: Sisson records in *On the Look-Out* that ‘the date 1689 is chipped above the door’ (*OLO*: 220) of the farmhouse, connecting it to the year when William and Mary were crowned in place of James II. Although this goes unmentioned in the poem, in others from his debut collection Sisson connects his family history with national history, building upon this in constructing his poetic identity. ‘Family Fortunes’ (*CP*: 21-2) extends his imaginative territory across the South West and further afield, sketching his antecedents and drawing on family memories. The first section, describing his childhood in Bristol, paints the city as sterile and oppressive:

it is possible  
To live harshly in that city  
  
Quiet voices possess it, but the boy  
Torn from the womb, cowers  
  
Under a ceiling of cloud. Tramcars  
Crash by or enter the mind  
  
A barred room bore him, the backyard  
Smooth as a snake-skin, yielded nothing[.] (ll.1-8)

‘On the fringes of the town’, however, ‘parsley and honey-suckle | Drenched the hedges’ (ll.9-10), bringing refreshment that recalls how ‘the fields were edged with

fox-gloves' in 'Ellick Farm'. This lushness segues into the second part of the poem, dealing with his extended family on the side of his mother, who 'was born in West Kington' (l.11), Wiltshire. Sisson also tells us that 'John Worlock farmed there, my grandfather' (l.13), identifying his heritage with the by-then marginal farming culture of nineteenth-century England. In his contemporaneous essay on the nineteenth century Dorset poet and philologist William Barnes, Sisson claims that Barnes 'came of the best blood in England, being the son of a small farmer in the West Country' (*AL*: 192). When he goes on to state that, although 'distinctions of origin are on the way to being effaced, [...] there are still those who understand the intense pride of such birth' (*AL*: 192), it is clear that Sisson speaks as one who feels just such pride in his own background, albeit at a further remove. This remove is indicated in the poem when, remembering how his mother 'lies in the north now where the hills | Are pale green' (ll.17-8), the poet reflects that he '[w]hose hand never steadied a plough | Wish I had finished my long journey' (ll.19-20), implying that the traditional, rural way of life figures like his grandfather and William Barnes represent would have ameliorated his sense of fatalism.

The city man's dream of a happier life in the country is found in Sisson's second novel, *Christopher Homm (CH)*, and the episode in which it occurs is so packed with symbolism that it deserves analysis for the light it casts on the theme in Sisson's poetry. *Christopher Homm* tells the life story of a luckless working-class man who in some respects resembles C.H. Sisson: Richard Poole notes that 'Christopher Homm's initials are those of Sisson's forenames', but also observes that Homm's surname generalises the character beyond merely personal reference; thus 'if this wretched Christian traveller is Sisson, he is everyman' (*PNR*: 61). The story is told in reverse, from Homm's death to his birth, imbuing the narrative with a sense of inevitability also hinted at in 'Ellick Farm'. Sisson would repeat the novel's reverse chronology in his first *Collected Poems (ITD)* and *On the Look-Out*, and although Sisson would assert that the novel 'is not at all autobiographical in the sense that the persons and incidents are drawn from my own past' (*PNR*: 58), he reveals in his autobiography that Milk Street in Bristol, near where he grew up, 'was the birthplace of Christopher Homm; at least that was the street which came into my mind as I wrote the final chapters' (*OLO*: 219). Furthermore, Christopher Homm, like Sisson himself, goes aboard a troop-ship as part of his military service, which sets up a dream sequence

that introduces the rural theme. Homm is thrown overboard in an explosion, and the narrative, reflecting his traumatised state, becomes surreal:

everything on one side of him grew dark and as he turned he saw that he was on the flank of an enormous whale. Its dry leather grazed him as the creature turned. He was opposite inviting jaws and he struck out towards them as if towards safety. (*CH*: 149)

This alludes to Jonah being swallowed by the whale, which in turn typologically prefigures Christ's death and resurrection: '[f]or as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Matthew 12. 40). This descent into the underworld is known as the Harrowing of Hell; and just as harrowing is an agricultural term, so Homm discovers that '[i]t was an agricultural whale and presently he found himself descending as if from encircling mountains into a land of green fields. Here he was to live and plough' (*CH*: 149). Here, in contrast with his job in a shoe warehouse, Homm engages in a pastoral ideal of rewarding, unalienated labour:

There was more than a day's work in that field. Each time he came up to one of the two hedges he was working between he drew a long breath that was partly satisfaction at the straightness of what he had ploughed and partly admiration for the work still to do. Each time he turned there was a musical shaking of the whole harness as if to mark up his score. (*CH*: 150)

The intrinsic value of this work radiates through the language: 'score' means not only the tally of furrows ploughed, but in the context of the 'musical shaking' of the harness it becomes a musical notation. And whereas in the rest of the novel Homm's personal relationships are jarringly dysfunctional, here his relationship with his mother is full of 'humour and tolerance' (*CH*: 151). But this idyll vanishes after Homm goes to bed, when '[t]he light that woke him was yellower than the gold of the sun, and the west-country voice he heard was that of a short, dark, R.A.M.C. orderly standing beside his bed' (*CH*: 152). The 'west-country voice' that Homm now hears suggests the voices he had heard in his sleep were likewise West Country ones, placing the episode within the same region as the poems of the South West. The

chapter ends when Homm becomes ‘aware of the deep throb of the engine. He was deep down in the ship, and far away aloft a bugle was sounding reveillé’ (*CH*: 152).

If this dream is supposed to represent Homm’s own idealisation of rural life, one might expect to find reference to it elsewhere in the novel; but although the young Christopher boasts of having relations in the countryside to impress his future wife, as the novel proceeds into his childhood it reveals that he found the countryside alien and threatening. Alternatively, the dream might be an atavistic memory from a kind of collective unconscious, in which Homm descends into the world of his dead forebears – as in ‘Family Fortunes’ Sisson describes how ‘[t]he rounded cart-horses shone like metal | My mother remembered their fine ribbons’ (ll.15-6). This ambiguity generates much of the episode’s power within the novel, which is otherwise unremittingly bleak. The serenity comes not only from the idealised pastoral, but the episode’s Christian symbolism (Sisson states that he wrote the novel in the same period in which he joined the Church of England (*OLO*: 54)). Sisson describes William Barnes’s ‘contentment within the order of nature, an order of nature capped by grace, for the church is as much a part of his countryside as the “wide-horned cattle”’ (*AL*: 199); similarly, in ‘Family Fortunes’ Sisson’s grandfather farmed ‘[w]ithin sight of the square church-tower’ (l.14). Thus in his poetry as well as his creative and critical prose, Sisson constructs an idea of the countryside as a Christian landscape, which his family (like Barnes’s) is ‘grown into [...] like a tree-root’ (*AL*: 192). In writing this poem about his family history, therefore, Sisson constructs his own poetic identity as one who comes from this rural, Christian background, while acknowledging his distance from it.

The memory of his mother’s death in the second section leads into the third, which concerns his father: ‘[s]outh of the march parts’ – i.e. of the Scottish border – ‘my father | Lies also’ (ll.21-2). His father’s burial differs, however, from that of his mother:

the fell town

That cradles him now sheltered also  
His first unconsciousness[.] (ll.22-4)



His father, then, was native to the north of England: to Kendal in Westmorland (*OLO*: 35), as it was before the historic county was absorbed into Cumbria – a fact that would later take on greater significance for Sisson. The North of England is less imaginatively important to Sisson than the South West, and he writes of it with an awareness of its foreignness: ‘[w]ith the grey stone and slate of the houses, and the pale wet grass of the valley itself, one was at once in a country that was not the south’ (*OLO*: 35). Nevertheless it is another area into which his imagination extends, as a place away from the city: Sisson writes of walking from the train station to his parents’ house ‘in rain or mist, though no doubt it was not always like that, the sheep on the hills and the refreshing sound of the river’, and of how his mother ‘watched the late hay-making of those parts with critical interest’ (*OLO*: 35). Again, Sisson looks in this provincial town for historical continuities:

[t]he Kendal into which my father was born in 1876 cannot have been so different, in its main features, from the one he died in. There were new houses on the periphery; there had been, no doubt, much tarding up of shop-fronts and the like, as the progress of commerce demands. But much of the old stone building was the same; and there were the same hills and declivities. (*OLO*: 36)

The fourth section records the lives of Sisson’s two sisters, both of whom had by then already died; and in its final couplet he explains, ‘I have a brother who, being alive | Does not need to be put in a poem’ (ll.35-6). If the dead ‘need to be put in a poem’, one function of Sisson’s poetry is to record and elegise: not just to mourn the dead, but to preserve and maintain contact with the world they experienced, especially the rural ‘country that persists – ever more faintly – under the technological England’ (*OLO*: 23). This invocation of a disappearing England consolidates his position as one writing from beyond the metropolis, the better to criticise it.

National history, approached through family history, becomes more explicit in ‘Cranmer’ (*CP*: 30). The poem is set in West Kington, and begins with the claim:

Cranmer was parson of this parish  
And said Our Father beside barns  
Where my grandfather worked without praying. (ll.1-3)

But Sisson is mistaken: although Henry VIII placed Cranmer in the house of the Earl of Wiltshire, Thomas (father of Anne) Boleyn, there is ‘no evidence that Cranmer was ever chaplain to Anne Boleyn or her father’ (Pollard 1904: 42); nor was he sequestered with Boleyn in Wiltshire: the Earl’s residence was at Durham Place, the Strand. Possibly, this connection with the Earl of Wiltshire led to Sisson’s mistake. A more likely explanation is that Sisson confused Cranmer with Hugh Latimer: Latimer was rector of St Mary the Virgin, West Kington, from 1531 till 1535, and was burnt at the stake in 1555, becoming one of the Oxford Martyrs (Cranmer was burnt separately the year after). But the reasons for Sisson’s misapprehension are less important than the use he puts it to.

Sisson also seems to commit an anachronism in the first stanza, where it appears to mean that Cranmer prayed at the same time that John Worlock worked on the farm in the nineteenth century, rather than having died over three hundred years before. But this temporal elision, based on spatial proximity,<sup>6</sup> implies continuity between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries in this corner of the English countryside. Paradoxically, the country is thus seen as more historical, being connected with the past, but simultaneously as outside of history, as if nothing has changed there in three centuries. This continues in the second stanza:

From the valley came the ring of metal  
And the horses clopped down the track by the stream  
As my mother saw them. (ll.4-6)

The sights and sounds can be understood as continuing from Cranmer’s time to that of Sisson’s mother. This stanza picks up images of the horses and the river from the second section of ‘Family Fortunes’; but whereas Sisson was concerned there with his family history, ‘Cranmer’ takes an epochal change in English national history as its subject.

The Wiltshire voices floated up to him  
How should they not overcome his proud Latin

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<sup>6</sup> When first printed in his pamphlet *Twenty-One Poems* (Sevenoaks: Westerham Press 1960) the poem was entitled ‘The Village’, emphasising the spatial contiguity that underpins Sisson’s construction of its temporal relations.

With We depart answering his *Nunc Dimittis*? (ll.7-9)

Cranmer wrote the first authorised liturgy in English, as well as being the editor and a major contributor to the Book of Common Prayer. Vernacular liturgy was introduced after the Church of England's split from the Roman Catholic Church, in which Cranmer played an important part: he was placed in the household of Thomas Boleyn not as a chaplain, but effectively under house arrest, tasked with legitimating Henry VIII's intended divorce from Catherine of Aragon (before his second marriage to Anne Boleyn, the Earl of Wiltshire's daughter). Sisson's poem depicts him just before this crucial historical juncture, when he was still a Catholic priest conducting the Mass in Latin – just before the activities that would lead to his martyrdom under Mary I, which the final stanza anticipates:

One evening he came over the hillock  
To the edge of the church-yard already filled with bones  
And saw in the smithy his own fire burning. (ll.10-2)

The Wiltshire countryside that Sisson constructs as a Christian landscape in 'Family Fortunes' is therefore associated specifically with Anglicanism; and the continuity 'Cranmer' projects between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries is a continuity of this Anglican culture – although this is not to say that English history only begins for Sisson in the mid-sixteenth century. By depicting Cranmer just prior to the break with Rome, Sisson picks up on older continuities – with 'the older England which had its roots in the Middle Ages' (*AL*: 191).

This association of the countryside with Anglicanism has relevance beyond ecclesiastical politics. When the Church of England broke from Rome, Henry VIII became Supreme Head of the Church; thereafter, the king's political power upheld the legitimacy of the Anglican Church, while the Church in turn supported the legitimacy of monarch's reign after Henry and his successors were excommunicated by the Pope, who thus claimed to release English Catholics from their duty of obedience. In light of this, Sisson consistently argues that the Book of Common Prayer enjoins 'a simple loyalty to the Crown' (*AL*: 154), while the Roman Catholic Missal still enjoins Catholics 'to count the restoration of the [Holy Roman] Empire among their political aspirations' (*AL*: 153). Thus in projecting onto the countryside of South West England

an Anglicanism continuous with the sixteenth century, Sisson also constructs it as a monarchist landscape. When Sisson asserts that an Englishman ‘can hardly be more faithful to his country than when he uses, in one of those parish churches where it has been used for so long, the magnificent Prayer for the King’s Majesty or the Queen’s’ (*AL*: 146-7) found in the Prayer Book, the sub-clause about historical continuity within parish churches should not be read as decorative, but rather as indicative of Sisson’s particular High Tory view of rural England.

Like ‘Ellick Farm’, ‘Cranmer’ has a meta-poetic dimension in which Sisson establishes his poetic identity. By describing the horses ‘[a]s my mother saw them’ (just as he does in ‘Family Fortunes’), Sisson presents himself as the bearer of memories through which he identifies himself with a rural, historical, Anglican, monarchist culture; his background makes him the poet he is. Yet his poetry gives his background this significance: besides placing Cranmer in Wiltshire, Sisson elides the three centuries between the later Archbishop and his farming family, projecting the continuity of a rural Anglican cultural identity for himself to inherit. Thus in Sisson’s early poetry the work of perpetuating memories of national and family history turns out to be identical with his self-vindication as a poet. Furthermore, through this association Sisson acquires for himself some of the importance of the historically dominant Anglican, monarchist culture – a dominance supported for centuries by the force of the law, and ultimately by sovereign violence. Thus, although ‘Cranmer’ is not a pseudo-laureate poem as is ‘To the Queen’ (because it does not employ laureate tropes or engage with the idea of glory), it is implicitly a monarchical poem, concerned with the exercise and legitimacy of sovereign power.

When we compare Sisson’s historical, Anglican, monarchist view of the countryside with his presentation of the city in ‘The London Zoo’, we find that the latter shows little trace of history, the Church, or the monarchy. This may be surprising given the influence of T.S. Eliot on Sisson’s early writing: ‘In London’ (*CP*: 8), for example, is reminiscent of Eliot’s poems of 1920:

I turn beside the shining black canal  
And tree-tops close like lids upon my eyes  
A milk-maid laughs beside a coffee-stall  
I pray to heaven, favour my enterprise. (ll.5-8)

‘But whether there is answer to my prayer’ (l.9), the poet is forced to admit, ‘I do not know the answer in the end’ (l.12) – in the city, God seems absent, unintelligible. Other poems such as ‘In Sloan Square’ (*CP*: 16-7), ‘On the Way Home’ (*CP*: 18), and ‘Victoria Station’ (*CP*: 23) do not even have this doubtful religious aspect, still less any sense of the capital as a seat of power or of its historical strata. If in *The Waste Land* Eliot presents inter-war London in relation to its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century past, so that the Thames that runs through the modern city is still the one that carried ‘Elizabeth and Leicester’ (Eliot 1974: 73) and which Edmund Spenser invoked to ‘run softly, till I end my song’ (Eliot 1974: 70), then the only poem of which one could say that Sisson’s London is Eliotic is ‘The London Zoo’, in which Sisson alludes to Christopher Wren (l.131) and John Hampden (l.121), the seventeenth-century statesman whose statue stands in the Palace of Westminster. But Hampden was a Parliamentarian leader in the Civil War, and Sisson identifies himself with the Royalists. It is therefore with a double irony that Sisson describes one lawyer:

[he] advertises himself as a kind of John Hampden  
 As, without risk to himself, he becomes eloquent  
 On the alterable right of the poorest he  
 That is in England to have an advocate, for a fee  
 To be paid for by the public out of those taxes  
 The evasion of which is the object of his main practice. (ll.121-6)

The lawyer does not deserve Hampden’s reputation for integrity, which Sisson would hold in contempt anyway. And whereas in *The Waste Land* ‘the walls | Of Magnus Martyr’ (Eliot 1974: 73) – for Eliot ‘one of the finest among Wren’s interiors’ (ibid.: 83) – ‘hold | Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold’ (ibid.: 73), providing a rare moment of transcendence, in ‘The London Zoo’ businessmen can be found ‘[h]awking among Wren’s churches’ (l.131), and ‘[o]ne can barely imagine what scandal would be caused | If they were to be found on their knees in Saint Paul’s’ (ll.133-4). This is part of a wider corruption of religious values in the metropolis, where businessmen, ‘if they say their prayers, | Say them, without a doubt, to stocks and shares’ (ll.131-2), playing on words from the Old Testament in which Israel is said to have ‘committed adultery with stones and with stocks’ (Jeremiah 3. 9) – the

abstractions of modern capitalism now replacing pagan idols. Elsewhere in the poem, Sisson describes how ‘Mr Axeter's office is designed theologically’:

Upstairs there is one greater than he;  
Downstairs there are several he must keep in submission  
Who smoothly profess they are doing what should be done. (ll.65-8)

Sisson’s irony is directed against a world that, although modelled on ‘the ecclesiastical power [...] which is, after all, the pattern of bureaucratic power in modern Europe’ (*SBA*: 52), has secularised and diminished the idea of a higher power so as only to mean one’s employers. As for the legitimate source of sovereign power, it appears to have been relegated to the status of a non-issue.

When Sisson does write of London as a place in history it is, perhaps ironically, in relation to the French royalist intellectual and demagogue, Charles Maurras. ‘Maurras, Young and Old’ (*CP*: 14-5) is structured around images of clarity and obscurity, the former attaching to the Latin culture of France, the latter to Britain. Thus in the poem’s first section, describing Maurras’s visit to London in 1898, ‘[t]he fog settled | Chokingly around the Latin head’ (ll.9-10) of the young Maurras, who stood ‘[u]nder the shadow of the British Museum’ (l.5). This is contrasted with a French scene:

The Latin light  
Showed on the Mediterranean hills  
A frugal culture of wine and oil[.] (ll.16-8)

The young Maurras, in love with classical culture to the exclusion of all else, was in London to see the Elgin marbles, which he did ‘without being distracted for a moment’, as Sisson would write in an essay from 1976, ‘by the living city which, after all, has and must have had a certain human interest’ (*AL*: 537). But Sisson displays a similar blinkeredness towards Victorian London, which was then the capital of the largest and most technologically advanced empire in world history. Sisson has little to say of this:

Unobserved in their fog the British  
*toto divisos orbe*  
Propounded a mystery of steam[.] (ll.19-21)

Rather than seeing London as the centre of a global empire, Sisson adopts Maurras's deliberately classicising stance, describing Britain as '[c]ut off from all the world', (*CT*: 195) as he would himself later translate the phrase from Virgil's *Eclogues* (I.66; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 28-9). In this poem, written in Languedoc while researching *The Spirit of British Administration* (*OLO*: 32), Sisson's eyes are turned, like Maurras's, towards the cultural empire of classical antiquity; and for Maurras, Paris rather than London was 'the unique surviving and the third in historical order of the capitals of the civilized world' (*AL*: 102), after Athens and Rome. Rural France, too, is presented in the poem's second section as embodying a traditional way of life:

In their autochthonous boats  
The fishermen put out  
And came back to the linear village  
Among the vineyards and the olive groves (ll.29-32)

This is contrasted with the alienation Maurras felt in the French capital, which for him had fallen away from its Classical heritage:

*Place de la République*  
*Rue Zola*  
In which names the enemy celebrated his triumphs. (ll.33-5)

This emblazoning of republicanism in the city would be the apogee of the antithesis set up in *The London Zoo* between the monarchical countryside and the republican city – except that in his essays Sisson consistently draws attention to the difference between France's situation and that of Britain: 'Maurras is not the man to set all to rights for us', Sisson wrote in 1950; '[h]e is a Frenchman speaking for France' (*AL*: 108). Moreover, even within France Maurras's position was an awkward one: he opposed the ideals of the French Revolution, but Sisson criticises this in an essay from 1954:

[t]he Revolution of 1789, as event and as myth, had entered into the blood of the people and had become part of France. It was not enough merely to react against it. A man concerned about the government of France must take account of it in a more comprehensive way. (*AL*: 143)

The English context differs in that ‘the Great Rebellion took place in the seventeenth century and not at the end of the eighteenth when it would have been a revolution’ (*AL*: 143). Sisson also suggests that ‘[t]he work of Hooker’, in devising a broad national church comprised of Catholic as well as reformed elements, ‘perhaps contributed to our being spared a similar disaster’ (*AL*: 108). ‘No Englishman, consequently, can be driven into the sort of opposition in which Maurras found himself’ (*AL*: 143). As a further correlative, the opposition between the country and the city within *The London Zoo* is not so sharp as it might be. Yet the advance represented by his second collection, *Numbers*, is often to be seen in those poems in which Sisson brings the urban and rural worlds, and all that they represent, into confrontation.

The significance of William Barnes for Sisson lies partly in that, growing up in the ‘remote pastoral valley’ that was the Vale of Blackmore in the early nineteenth century, he embodies a connection with a way of life ‘nearer to that which the Elizabethans knew’ (*AL*: 192); Sisson sees him as ‘a figure of the sixteenth century rather than the nineteenth’ (*AL*: 195). Likewise, Barnes’s friend Thomas Hardy grew up in nineteenth-century Dorset, which (Sisson argues) laid the groundwork for his mature imagination:

[t]he fact that Hardy’s memories went back to a time and place which retained many ways from a much older date is important, not for its antiquarian interest, but because it gives his view of humanity a certain depth in time. (*EP*: 26)

Sisson contrasts this with the modern ‘technological world’ where ‘change is simultaneous and world-wide, so that the lessons of earlier epochs are expunged before they are understood’ (*EP*: 26). In reading Sisson’s own Dorset poems, therefore, we should look for the lessons he draws from depths of time.

‘A and B’ (*CP*: 48-9), from *Numbers*, manifests depth in time through its form. The poem is a pastoral dialogue, of a kind often used by Barnes and originally brought into English verse by Renaissance court poets such as Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney – poets of the Elizabethan world Sisson sees Barnes as still existing in – and



originating in classical bucolic poetry. Through this, Sisson reaches back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and to pre-Christian classical culture. Following the conventions of the genre, two speakers debate various countryside occurrences; but rather than idealised shepherds or realistic labourers, Sisson's speakers are detached observers arguing about the significance of what they see. The first instance is a passing car, driven by a young man with a girl beside him. A remembers making eye-contact with the girl, at which moment '[s]he communicated in perfect freedom to me | The candour with which she would undress when they reached the wood' (ll.7-8). When B asks, 'what has their pleasure to do with us?' (l.10), A responds defensively:

You think a philosopher should stick to his port.  
That is not my opinion.  
What is enacted in these hills  
Is a sacrifice as certainly as any propounded  
Under the shadow of the Giant of Cerne  
And sacrifice is not for the actors. (ll.13-6)

The reference to the Giant of Cerne places the poem in Dorset, and looks back beyond the arrival of Christianity to a time of pagan sacrifices associated with the epiphallic chalk figure of the Cerne Giant. In one sense, Sisson is here continuing a much more recent phenomenon: the Modernist tendency, evident in *The Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos*, to see contemporary events as repetitions of pre-modern rituals and myths, particularly ones concerned with fertility. Thus the young couple are re-enacting a timeless rite, perhaps for the continuing fertility and prosperity of the country, even the nation. In this way, Sisson suggests through A that the desires and actions of individual bodies ramify through the wider body politic – a suggestion immediately rejected by B, who reasserts that '[t]his is what two people did, and that is all' (l.18). But Sisson is on unstable ground here: although the origin of the Giant is unknown, no record of it exists from before the late 17th century, suggesting that it is of much more recent antiquity than the pagan past he takes it to date from. If that is the case, the historical continuity Sisson seeks to trace is factitious, and his argument may easily be dismissed as 'nonsense' (l.17), as B calls it. This misapprehension may not be a deliberate falsification on his part, but it shows the danger to which Sisson leaves himself vulnerable, of being driven by a desire for meaning discovered in history into a misconception of that history, and consequently of modernity.

Nonetheless, the reality of sovereign power elaborated in the previous chapter is that the state will always claim a final authority over the bodies of individual members, and over their interrelations that make up the body politic in the wider sense. The relevance of such ideas is likely to be greater rather than less in an era when state power is directed towards ‘the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’ (Foucault 1990: 140). In the decade during which Sisson’s poetry first began to appear, oral contraception came into widespread use in Britain, made available through the National Health Service. In these circumstances, the liberal attitude represented by B is blind to the fact that what two people may do in private has been taken into the calculations of government, and is therefore in some sense a public issue. A’s notion of a sacrificial fertility rite, though based on dubious primitivism, at least registers the wider importance of the discreet event; and one may infer that it attributes some importance to whether (as in Philip Larkin’s ‘High Windows’ (2012: 80)) ‘she’s | Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm’ (ll.2-3).

At this point, A switches to another incident:

I met an old man on a tall horse  
He had ridden for thirty years. It was his intention  
When he had seen the last of it, to bury it  
Out in that field beside his dead mare.  
Do you think he had planned that harmony?  
Did not a spirit seize him by the throat  
And tell him what to do: there, under the old church  
Rising there on that mound above the groin? (ll.24-31)

This anecdote is thrown into relief by its appearance in *On the Look-Out*:

I met today, in a village I hold too dear to mention but which looks out on the Vale of Blackmore, a man who in fact was the English residue. Seventy at least, he was astride an old horse – thirty years old, he told me – bareback, with a bit of rope for a bridle. (*OLO*: 22)

The re-occurrence of this episode in Sisson’s autobiographical prose identifies the voice of ‘A’ – if it was ever in doubt – with Sisson. There are, however, differences between the poetic and prose accounts. Whereas in the poem ‘a spirit’ told the old man to bury his horse, the prose account is more factual:

[h]e did not like to see an animal suffer that had worked for him. He had had one or two like that. There was a mare he had buried up in that field there. [...] He had seen the last of her. To see the last of an animal that had served him seemed to be a duty he had put upon himself. No doubt he would bury that old horse in the meadow too, if he outlived him. (*OLO*: 22)

The voice of A cannot be identified with Sisson without qualification; rather, Sisson exploits the poetic suspension of disbelief to construct a persona through which he presents a less literal interpretation of the incident.

In *On the Look-Out*, Sisson discusses the local church with the old man, who tells him of ‘a recent arrival in the village – “A Roman Catholic, I had wished he had been Church of England”’ (*OLO*: 22). Sisson agrees with ‘this regret for a man who could never be more than a foreigner, in English terms’ (*OLO*: 23). This raises the issue of national identity and incorporation: in Sisson’s view, the new newcomer’s loyalties as a Catholic are not to the Crown, and he stands outside the national church. Though the poem does not raise this issue, it does cast light on another aspect of Sisson’s beliefs. The spirit emanates from ‘under the old church | Rising there on that mound above the groin’. Sisson would later declare himself to be ‘of a religion in which – to adapt Coleridge’s phrase – Christianity is an accident; the religion of our fathers, or the *mère patrie*, of the spirits buried in the ground, of the religion of England’ (*AL*: 553). Tom Lubbock (1993) argues that this comes close to undermining Sisson’s Christianity: ‘Coleridge’s phrase is “a blessed accident”, but he hastens to assure the reader that he means a Godsend. As Sisson adapts it, it sounds more like a mere circumstance. [...] It might even be thought heretical’. Clive Wilmer (*Age*: 44) suggests on the basis of this that ‘far from being a Christian, Sisson believes in a universe governed by chance, though occupied by tutelary spirits’. As it appears in ‘A and B’, though, the ‘spirits buried in the ground’ in the Dorset countryside exist alongside the orthodox Church, both of them traditional local pieties, just as they do in Sisson’s instinctive beliefs. The old man on the horse, too, is an Anglican, but having been born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a decade or less after Barnes’s death, and living in Dorset in the last 30 years of Hardy’s lifetime, he is himself a living link with the past of rural England.

Following from the anecdote of the man and his horse in the same passage of *On the Look-Out*, Sisson contrasts '[t]his small, discreet England of particular events' with 'the technological England which is the centre of my daily calculations' (*OLO*: 23). Sisson sees this as a 'battle between ourselves and the rest of nature' which, catastrophically, 'we are about to win' (*OLO*: 24). 'The fury of destruction is immense,' Sisson states:

it is held to be outrageous not to believe – not least for one who earns his living as I do – that economic good resides in the destruction of our assets. There is little to be done about this except not to believe what one is supposed to. (*OLO*: 23)

In this context, the old man's ritualistic burial of his horses – whether prompted by a spirit or a self-imposed duty – appears as a form of resistance to the 'fury of destruction', treating the animals and their relationships with their human masters as of intrinsic worth. But the expanding 'reign of technological processes' (*OLO*: 23) threatens this residual England, and with it the tutelary spirits, as B warns A:

I am afraid, A, you are not a philosopher.  
You are merely an inconsiderate fool who loves his country  
At the very moment when love has become vain. (ll.32-4)

A responds to this obliquely, ending the poem on a note that might almost be optimism:

See there where a party of picnickers  
Trace their way over the springy turf  
And the world proceeds without understanding.  
Perhaps all will be well. (ll.35-8)

If people still enjoy visiting the countryside, and the earth still has some resistance – symbolised by the 'springy turf' – then perhaps things will go on as they have done, lovers will tryst in the countryside '[t]hough dynasties pass' (Hardy 1984: 295), and A's patriotism will not have been in vain.

Sisson does not present the world of the city directly in 'A and B' as he does in other Dorset poems such as 'On the Coast' (CP: 109-10) (from *Metamorphoses*), in which Sisson contrasts himself 'walking close to the foam's edge [...] wandering happily as an unidentified image' (ll.10, 12) with his working life:

the mind will be applied in far-away London,  
Bent over my files, residue of my spirit  
The coming and going of thousands: it is a market-place. (ll.13-5)

But whereas in the passage from *On the Look-Out* Sisson alludes to the contradiction between his life in the country and that in the city (which corresponds to the distinction in *The Spirit of British Administration* between the artist and the administrator), in 'A and B' Sisson dramatizes the antagonism. Through B, he ventriloquizes the voice of what he sees as the city's outlook: liberal, sceptical, cynical. Geoffrey Hill (2008: 94) has argued that the author must include 'the antiphonal voice of the heckler', and describes 'the cross-rhythms and counterpointings which ought, for the sake of proper strategy and good faith, be part of the structure of such writing' – a role that B fulfils in the poem. In this way, it would appear, Sisson subjects his own argument to scrutiny and demonstrates his own ingenuousness. Yet Hill's formulation itself seems contradictory: how is 'proper strategy' to be reconciled with 'good faith'? And should the voice of the heckler be not antiphonal, with its orchestrated, liturgical connotations, but simply dissonant? The reverse of this show of ingenuousness may be a rhetorical device, building a straw man. Sisson's own use of this betrays a similar ambivalence, attributing to B equivocal language ('I should think they might have been partially successful', l.23), and impassioned speech to A. But Sisson does not present A as categorically refuting B, or vice versa; rather, B appears assured of his own rightness and superiority, while A quietly undercuts this. A appears uncertain, anguished, while B is collected and detached; but the implication is that A has the moral advantage by virtue of his greater concern.

During the 1950s and '60s, Sisson lived in Kent, first in the village of Dunston Green, and later in nearby Sevenoaks. The poems from *The London Zoo* set in Kent present it in terms of the rural, historical, Anglican England we have observed elsewhere. The

poems are revealing of Sisson's spiritual as well as geographical position at the time – for instance, 'In Kent' (*CP*: 9):

Although there may be treacherous men  
Who in the churchyard swing their mattocks  
Within they sing the *Nunc Dimittis*

And villagers who find that building  
A place to go to of a Sunday  
May accidentally be absolved

For on a hill, upon a gibbet...  
And this is Saint Augustine's county.

The first two lines are appended to a passage in *On the Look-Out* in which Sisson remembers the routine for cutting the grass at Saint John the Divine, Dunston Green (*OLO*: 34-5). It was there, Sisson records in the same passage, that he joined the Church. The poem's second stanza, however, seems doubtful about the process of conversion: the congregants seem to have little reason for being there, and their absolution occurs 'accidentally'. This involuntary action is consistent with Sisson's account of his own conversion:

[t]he approach to these mysteries was something like giving oneself up to the police. I mean that I had committed the crime – if it is one – of yielding to the temptations of the Creed, some time before, gradually, I am not sure when.  
(*OLO*: 52)

More strongly still, after asserting that entering the Church 'means joining people not of your choosing, but who in some sort have chosen what you have chosen', Sisson corrects himself to say that '[t]he theology of it is that you have not chosen but been chosen' (*OLO*: 54). The poem does not use the first-person pronoun, but the poet intrudes upon his otherwise impersonal discourse at line seven, when the syntax is left to trail off into an ellipsis. 'For on a hill, upon a gibbet' refers to the Crucifixion, which in Christian dogma is, along with the Incarnation and Resurrection, the basis for human salvation; but the poet appears to fall shy of stating so explicitly, as if it were a matter of doubt or embarrassment. The poet covers his hesitation with a definite assertion, that 'this is Saint Augustine's county', referring to the sixth-century missionary who first brought Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons, landing in Kent and

becoming the first Archbishop of Canterbury in A.D. 597. The closing line of the poem, however, invokes Augustine as a presiding spirit of the county in the present-day, much as Sisson establishes continuity between sixteenth and nineteenth century Wiltshire in 'Cranmer' (which also references the *Nunc Dimittis*, connecting the two poems). If Christ's death is treated glancingly, and the spiritual state of the village congregation is doubtful, then the historical fact of Christianity in England compels the poet's assent; that, more than the truth of Christianity, seems to be the poet's faith.

Sisson invokes another presiding genius in 'Knole' (*CP*: 31):

The whole hill-side is prickled with antlers  
And the deer wade to me through the snow.  
From John Donne's church the muffled and galoshed  
Patiently to their holy dinners go. (ll.1-4)

The church is Saint Nicholas, Sevenoaks, which became Sisson's parish church after moving from Dunston Green, and where John Donne was rector in the early seventeenth century. Knole itself is the country house with expansive grounds in which deer are kept, situated across the High Street from Saint Nicholas. The poem is set at Christmas; having established a parallelism between the deer in the first two lines and the parishioners in the third and fourth, the poet develops this through the succeeding stanzas, comparing two forms of unconsciousness. The animals 'never [...] reflect | On the gentle flanks where in autumn they put their seed' (l.5-6), being unconscious of sex as anything more than a natural function. By implication, human beings are different, sex having for them certain extra dimensions; but this is not the comparison the poet pursues. He goes on to say that Christians never reflect 'on the word which, that very hour, | Their upturned faces or their hearts received' (ll.7-8). Marital metaphors for the relationship between Christ and his Church are common in the Bible, but the comparison of the word with seed recalls the parable of the sower, suggesting that those who receive in their heart are those who 'brought forth fruit' (Matthew 13. 8), while those who only do so with 'their upturned faces' are those who hear but do not understand. In the final stanza, the poet foresees that 'spring will bring the heavy doe to bed; | The fawn will wobble and soon after leap' (ll.9-10) Correlative to this new life, the churchgoers 'will die at this or the next year's turn | And find the resurrection encased in sleep' (ll.11-2), when they will wake to eternal

life. Thus, through the implicit metaphor of death as a period of gestation before the resurrection, Sisson makes the cycle of birth and death within creation part of the movement of eschatological time, emulating William Barnes's 'contentment within the order of nature, an order of nature capped by grace' (*AL*: 199). And just as for Barnes 'the church is as much a part of his countryside as the "wide-horned cattle"' (*AL*: 199), Saint Nicholas, with its connection to Donne and the whole world of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, is as much a part of the scene as the wide-antlered deer. Sisson thereby projects an image of Sevenoaks and Kent as a place where Christianity, the natural world, and continuity with history lay out the grounds for celebration rather than elegy or satire.

If in 'Knole' Sisson figures Donne as the presiding genius of Sevenoaks, by the 1960s it had changed from the seventeenth-century town into a commuter-belt suburb, from which Sisson and those he satirises in 'The London Zoo' travelled into the city. But whereas in his first collection Sisson had kept the rural, historical, Anglican England separate from the secular, modern city, he brings these into confrontation in 'A Letter to John Donne' (*CP*: 50-1). Sisson addresses Donne directly throughout the poem, initially characterising him as 'a man of ability | Eaten by lust and by the love of God' (ll.2-3), referring to the duality of his sacred and profane love poetry as well as his career as a preacher. Sisson then describes how he 'crossed the Sevenoaks High Street | As rector of Saint Nicholas' (ll.4-5) – at which point the poet identifies himself: 'I am of that parish' (l.6). Using the epistolary mode in this way, Sisson positions himself as a concerned parishioner as much as a fellow poet, appealing to Donne as an ecclesiastical authority. His tone, however, is not respectful, and in the second stanza he denigrates his earlier praise:

To be a man of ability is not much  
You may see them on the Sevenoaks platform any day  
Eager men with despatch cases[.] (ll.7-9)

The scene is the same one as at the start of 'The London Zoo': Donne is compared to the commuters at the train station a few minutes' walk from the church, who are (Sisson implies) his modern equivalents. Yet unlike Donne, '[e]aten by lust and by the love of God', Sisson describes them as men '[w]hom ambition drives as they drive the machine' and '[w]hom the pleasure of meticulous operation | Pleasures as a morbid



sex a heart of stone' (ll.10, 11-12). Donne's talents and desire for worldly success made him a brilliant coterie poet, courtier, and Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral. These men, by comparison, 'drive the machine' of modern business and government (as indicated by their despatch cases). But as they themselves are driven by their ambition, they (like those in 'The London Zoo') appear subhuman, mechanical men. This dehumanisation is furthered in the next two lines, which draw a contrast between Donne's lust and the pleasure they take in the 'meticulous operation' of their work, comparable to a necrophiliac act of 'morbid sex'. This monstrosity is linked to irreligiousness by the 'heart of stone', the hardheartedness Ezekiel promised the Israelites God would replace for them with a 'heart of flesh' (Ezekiel 11. 19; 36. 26). Having turned away from God, these men have been perverted – not through sexual immorality, but through the dehumanising forces of the modern workplace.

This is put into historical context in the next stanza, where Sisson ostensibly asserts Donne's contemporary irrelevance: Sisson tells him, '[t]hat you should have spent your time in the corruption of courts | As these in that of cities, gives you no place among us' (ll.13-4). The 'corruption of courts' may be seen personified in Richard Sackville, 'one of the seventeenth century's most accomplished gamblers and wastrels' (Cooper 1998: 77), whose many infidelities produced several illegitimate children, and whose gambling and general extravagance led him into massive debt. The poem implies that these faults of lust and prodigality are different in kind from the corruptions of cities; in the modern world, '[a]bility is not even the game of a fool | But the click of a computer operating in a waste' (ll.15-6). In comparison to 'the click of a computer operating' – which retains a morbid sexual connotation from the previous stanza – 'in a waste', Sackville's gambling and affairs seem to Sisson preferable vices, because they emphasise physicality and pleasure over utility. Furthermore, Sackville was a personal acquaintance of Donne (as Sisson notes in the epigraph to the poem: '[o]n 27 July 1617, Donne preached at the parish church at Sevenoaks, of which he was rector, and was entertained at Knole, then the country residence of Richard Sackville, third Earl of Dorset' (*CP*: 50)). Sackville also 'befriended a number of writers, among them Ben Jonson, Michael Drayton, and John Fletcher, and from time to time had them as houseguests' (Cooper 1998: 77). Sackville may have been dissolute, but he was part of a culture that kept poets like Jonson – identified earlier as a proto-laureate – close to the heart of the state, now

replaced by anaesthetic modes of governmentality. Sisson sums this up by telling Donne, '[y]our cleverness is dismissed from the suit' (l.17). If to pay suit was to attend one's lord or king at court, then these modern-day 'suits' at the train station are going from their country residences not to the court but their offices, where the full scope of Donne's intelligence is not valued. As Sisson puts it in a contemporaneous essay, the modern workplace:

has no need of that human mind which has laboriously crept out of pre-history, with the help of cave drawings and stone circles, and achieved itself fully in Dante or Shakespeare. A very mean instrument, comparatively speaking, will provide the consciousness needed to set the production targets[.] (*AL*: 180)

In the sixth line of the third stanza, Sisson tauntingly exhorts Donne to '[b]ring out your genitals and your theology' (l.18). John Peck reads this as a 'challenge [...] to talk theology only after hauling out his genitals' (*Age*: 29). But in the argument of the poem, the real challenge is to demonstrate the connection between Donne's eroticism and his piety. Sisson's argument is that these are facets of a 'dual obsession' (l.19) which he explains in terms of the biblical story of the Fall, developing the distinction implicit in the second stanza of 'Knoles' between the parishioners' and the deer's understanding of sex:

Lust is not what the rutting stag knows  
It is to take Eve's apple and to lose  
The stag's paradisaic look:  
The love of God comes readily  
To those who have most need (ll.20-4)

In the myth, the fall into sin came about because the first humans ate fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil – that is, they first became aware of values, which are made possible through language. The 'rutting stag' cannot be said to experience *lust*, because this term connotes certain valuations, especially negative ones such as an illicit desire so strong it threatens to overpower one's self-control and decency. 'The stag's paradisaic look' is a manifestation of its ignorance of values. The myth of the Fall, then, allegorizes the foundation of politics: it is the moment at which the

human animal enters language ‘by taking away and conserving his own voice’ (*HS*: 8) in it, from which point his bare life enters the *polis* as an exclusive inclusion.

The crux of politics, though, is how policies should be arranged in accordance with values. Sisson writes in the ‘Introduction’ to his 1967 *Essays*:

[t]he conduct of government rests upon the same foundations and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons: that is, as to its object and justification, for as to its methods, or technical part, there is all the difference which separates the person from the group, the man acting on his own behalf from the man acting on behalf of many. The technical part, in government as in private conduct, is now the only one which is publicly or at any rate generally recognized, as if by this evasion the more difficult part of the subject, which relates to ends, could be avoided. (*AL*: 202)

If the objects and justifications of the state are the values for which Aristotle said that men exist ‘essentially with regard to the good life’ (*HS*: 2), then the difficulties that pertain to this consist in how to define ideals (such as freedom, justice, glory, and equality), while the difficulties that pertain to the technical part of government – the creation and implementation of policies – are those of what policies will best effect this ideal; the corresponding difficulties of private persons are ethical questions of how one should act. The implementation of policies amounts to the exercise of the sovereign power to regulate values and bodies (as well as finances and material resources), declaring some arrangements legitimate and others illegitimate. But this very regulation of values and bodies turns natural desire into human, value-laden ‘lust’ – desire that potentially threatens the regulated order of bodies. Lust, therefore, or love, or any human term for attraction, is an inherently political force.

The problem Sisson has with his contemporary ‘men of ability’ is this: they refuse to acknowledge the fundamental problem of values – what values should the polity strive to embody, and how should it do so? – focusing exclusively on the mechanics of government instead. ‘We will debate in parliament about the things’, Sisson argues, parodying this attitude, that ‘we can really agree about – what we all want, food, keeping the enemy away, never mind about who we are or what form we give to the

food we eat' (*AL*: 205). In terms of the allegory sketched above, they are in bad faith, pretending not to have eaten the fruit and remaining ignorant of values. But as the problem of values is 'a difficulty which is no less ours that it was our ancestors', they are no less caught up in the dynamic whereby natural desire becomes value-laden human desire. Hence the perversion Sisson sees in them: if lust originates with the imposition of language and values upon the human animal, in them it is mechanised by their fixation on means over ends. As a result, the functionality evident in the 'skeleton language' of business leads to a failure of embodiedness. Furthermore, because modern government is 'planned as a system of doing things to people (which, so far as it ignores consciousness, is the same as doing things to things)' (*AL*: 205), these technocrats treat others in the same way, manipulating bodies without apprehension of embodiedness.

The last lines of the fourth stanza suggest that people like Donne, who experience the imperatives of desire and of values with equal urgency, will turn to Christianity for solace, although the poem does not explain why. But if the men of ability represent one failure of embodiedness, familiar from 'The London Zoo' though not so well developed in the earlier poem, a different kind is represented in the following stanza by the current incumbent of Saint Nicholas. After invoking Donne, who 'brought body and soul to this church | Walking there through the park alive with deer' (ll.25-6), Sisson goes on:

But now what animal has climbed into your pulpit?  
One whose pretension is that the fear  
Of God has heated him into a spirit  
An evaporated man no physical ill can hurt (ll.27-30)

Calling him an 'animal' is clearly ironic, when what frustrates Sisson is precisely the new vicar's belief that he has transcended his body, identifying himself wholly with his 'spirit' – what Sisson calls a '[d]iscarnation' in his long poem, subtitled 'or, How the Flesh became Word and dwelt among us' (*CP*: 135). In contrast with the 'men of ability', this man refuses to recognise his own embodiedness, seeing himself only in terms of the values he expounds in his sermons. In an essay from 1967, Sisson argues that there is 'a trick in the abstraction of language that could deceive us either way':

[b]ecause there is nothing of us but our bodies and their manifestations, the language which reminds us least of them seems most promising of a truth beyond them. But in fact what we say is said in words which have their start in the operations of the body. (*AL*: 204)

The vicar of Saint Nicholas has evidently fallen for this ‘trick’; Sisson’s poetry, by contrast, aims to be a form of discourse that remains true to ‘the operations of the body’, and on the other hand evades the manipulations of governmentality.

The fifth stanza marks a variation in the poem’s prosody. After four stanzas of unrhymed verse, we find a full rhyme of ‘deer’ with ‘fear’ and a feminine half-rhyme on ‘pulpit’ and ‘spirit’, bookended by an assonantal rhyme of ‘church’ with ‘hurt’. This persists in the following stanza in a different pattern, where slant-rhymes (‘gate’ with ‘saint’, ‘God’ with ‘shroud’, ‘folly’ with ‘angry’) form an alternately rhyming quatrain with a closing couplet. The variation in line-lengths and positions of caesurae, as well as the counterpointing of syntax and line-break (most noticeable at ‘the fear | Of God’ (ll.36-7)), also creates powerful rhythms within the stanza. These phonetic features emphasise the physical aspect of language, and thus the ‘operations of the body’ which generate them, rather than disregarding it in favour of the words’ meanings. In this, the stanza rebukes the clergyman it satirizes.

At the same time, the poem offers a riposte to the ‘men of ability’ simply by being a poem, a text whose use of language contrasts with that of the ‘ordinary document of business’ (*AL*: 161). But though in his essay from 1961 Sisson argued that the poem exists ‘as a natural object exists, so that you can look at it, hear it, smell it, as you can wind, waves or trees, without asking why you are doing so’ (*AL*: 161), this argument is flawed by the analogy with nature. The allegory of the Fall in ‘A Letter to John Donne’ presents a more sophisticated argument, whereby language separates humans from nature. Rather, a poem like this posits ideas about language, nature, history and politics, without formulating a policy and insisting (as the ‘ordinary document of business’ does) that it direct people’s actions, instead giving play to ‘that human mind which has laboriously crept out of pre-history [...] and achieved itself in Dante or Shakespeare’ (*AL*: 180) – or Shakespeare’s contemporary, Donne. This can be seen in Sisson’s use of language and wordplay. Sisson satirises the contemporary vicar who

believes his piety ‘has heated him into a spirit’ by calling him ‘[a]n evaporated man’, undercutting the ostensible meaning of ‘spirit’ with another, i.e. distilled alcohol. The transcendent emotion is reduced to physical processes, particularly the embarrassing loss of self-awareness that comes with inebriation; the vicar is brought back to the operations of the body. Spirits may be an object of government policy, as when laws are passed to regulate the sale of alcohol; but such use is based upon restricting the meanings of the word to just one. The person whose work requires them to ignore possible and possibly contradictory meanings experiences some measure of this functionalization and attendant narrowing of mind.

This could be done equally well in prose as in verse, but the poem goes further in resisting functionalization through its form. ‘Medicine and surgery’, ‘the techniques of humanist management’ (*AL*: 209) as Sisson calls them, which aim at keeping the population healthy, are in Foucault’s (2004: 242) analysis ‘addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form [...] a global mass’; they are ‘directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species’ (*ibid.*: 242). Against this, Sisson claims for the poet ‘a benign and conservative role’:

[i]f he produces new work which shocks and startles, it is precisely because he is not being destructive as the surgeon or publicity man aim at being destructive. It is because he is opening up a new area of consciousness, indicating a point to which you may go from the point you now occupy. While the technologist puts something over on you, the poet offers to take you with him, if you feel able to go, which admittedly most people do not. (*AL*: 182)

As we have argued previously, poetic form thrives on effects of rhythm, alliteration and assonance – the traces of *phone*, the voice of the embodied creature, within *logos*. But poetic form marshals these for no utilitarian purpose. Instead, it affords an individualising apprehension of embodiedness (as with Sisson’s first experience of reading Ezra Pound) without coercing them into normative patterns of behaviour.

Against these two negative examples epitomising failures of embodiment, Sisson holds up as a positive one John Donne, who ‘brought body and soul to this church |

Walking there through the park alive with deer' (ll.25-6). This commendation may be thought to refer simply to his sacred and sexual poetry; by writing both, Donne maintained an equilibrium, as one might eat a balanced diet, or say that 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.' But this would be to miss the importance of Sisson's addressing him as a clergyman as much as a poet. The current vicar dissatisfies Sisson because he ignores the fact that Christianity is a religion of incarnation, of the Word made flesh. By contrast, Sisson idealises Donne as the perfect Anglican, for whom Christianity is an affirmation of embodiment – hence why '[t]he love of God comes readily | To those who have most need', because it promises to reconcile these seemingly contradictory imperatives. Sisson's emphasis on incarnation leads him to place a premium not on the sermon (which is primarily linguistic, and thus susceptible to the 'trick in the abstraction of language' (*AL*: 204)) but the sacraments. Criticising arrangements in non-conformist churches, Sisson complains that '[n]othing demonstrates more egregiously the vices of the Reformation than this putting the preacher where the altar should be' (*OLO*: 212). Praising the incumbent of St John the Divine, Dunston Green, Sisson writes that having taken his children to church, 'the vicar did not mind if we took them out before the sermon. He did not regard that as the important part' (*OLO*: 53). Without the sacraments, Sisson argues,

one would wander unassured in a sort of limbo which is, no doubt, the impersonal world of the mechanism with no subjective part. This may be hell. It is what the religionists of the technological world are trying to imitate[.] (*OLO*: 53-4)

Thus when Sisson writes that Donne 'brought body and soul to this church', it is as much to say by his administration of the Eucharist as by his presence – the latter being strengthened by the former.

The purpose of the sacraments is not only to affirm one's own embodied subjectivity, but according to the Book of Common Prayer to assure the communicants that they 'are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people' (*Book of Common Prayer*, 'The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion'). That is to say, individual members are incorporated through the Eucharist into the body of the Church, of

which Christ is the head. But the poem raises the issue of incorporation as a problem in the next stanza, where Sisson alludes to Donne's early uncertainty about joining the Anglican church: he sympathises, '[w]ell might you hesitate at the Latin gate | Seeing such apes denying the church of God' (ll.31-2). Again, the ironic insult: 'apes' such as the church's enemy within, now preaching from the Saint Nicholas pulpit, as well as the technocrats at the station, are dehumanised, in Sisson's view, by their denial of the church, which is as much as to say their refusal of incorporation. But finding this attitude within the church, more than flagrant irreligion outside it, leads Sisson to wonder about the merits of entering, via 'the Latin gate', into the Roman Catholic Church.

One might not think such a choice would matter all that much: if religion is a question of individual conscience, it makes little difference if Sisson or anyone else changes not even their religion, but merely their denomination. Sisson attacks this attitude, with its key democratic premise that religion is a private affair, in his prose. Sisson argues that this liberal notion:

has succeeded in driving religion into the recesses of a thing called the individual conscience, which has to be less than the *consciousness* people have of their physical environment, including themselves, so that it bothers nobody. Then, it is said, we can ignore people's beliefs, indeed the proprieties of our politics demand that we should do so. (*AL*: 205)

One's religion cannot be insulated from public life without the risk of losing the sense of embodiment that he has consistently argued is the basis of Christianity. Furthermore, this cannot be done without politics being reduced to technocratic management.

Denomination was not merely a matter of individual conscience for the poem's addressee. Donne grew up in a Catholic family, and as a young man could not take a degree because of his faith; worse, his brother Henry died in Newgate Prison for harbouring a Jesuit. These personal tragedies resulted from Henry VIII's schism from the Roman Catholic Church, the re-imposition of Catholicism under Mary I, and, with Elizabeth I, the reversion to Protestantism and the creation of the Church of England



that lasted until the end of the Civil Wars – despite which, many still remained in and even entered the Roman communion, such as another of Sackville and Donne’s circle, Ben Jonson. In an essay from the previous decade, Sisson argues that ‘under Elizabeth the problem of comprehending all Englishmen within the national church took precedence over the problem of the reunion with the Roman Church which political as much as theological considerations had now rendered for an incalculable future impossible’ (*AL*: 144). (While at this point Sisson discusses this in terms of comprehension, by the 1960s Sisson was thinking in terms of incorporation, arguing for ‘the identity of the church and the commonwealth, as aspects of the same body’ (*AL*: 206).) It is evidence of Sisson’s underlying Catholicism that reunion with Rome is seen as an ultimate end; but in the meantime, national unity must take precedence. The vehicle for this was to be the Anglican Church:

England was given what might be termed, borrowing words from Barrès who regretted that France had never had any such thing, a ‘national Catholicism’. Anglicanism, it has been said, is a loyalty not a doctrine, and it was a Catholicism coloured with this loyalty which formed so many of the best minds of the seventeenth century. (*AL*: 144)

For Sisson, Anglicanism differs from Catholicism primarily in point of allegiance: it existed to ensure the unity of the nation – we may say, of the body politic. Yet Sisson is aware that ‘[t]his effort of comprehension did not entirely succeed, for the English liturgy was not palatable to extreme Protestants’ (*AL*: 144), and it was ‘the extreme Puritans, who had not been contained within this tradition, who in time grew strong enough to overthrow both Crown and Church’ (*AL*: 144). This becomes part of a narrative of how multiplicities of opinions and factions weakened the country:

multiplication of sects under the Commonwealth had been such that the notion, very strong on all sides a hundred years earlier, that there could only be one Church, had been weakened, and when the Church was restored with the monarchy, it once again failed to contain the whole nation. (*AL*: 144-5)

This formulation contains the admission that the nation is not coextensive with the Church of England, and thus that there must always be some who are part of the

nation but hold a liminal position within it, being incorporated within another communion. There is therefore a troubling dubiety when Sisson exhorts Donne in the final stanza:

Come down and speak to the men of ability  
On the Sevenoaks platform and tell them  
That at your Saint Nicholas the faith  
Is not exclusive in the fools it chooses (ll.37-40)

Although Sisson writes that the Church of England failed to incorporate all Englishmen within the national church, the historical record shows that it was in fact actively exclusionary in delimiting the body politic. The use of this as the organising and legitimating trope for religious persecution goes back to Thomas Aquinas:

obstinate heretics deserved to be shut off from the Church and worldly society not merely symbolically by means of excommunication but also literally in the shape of bodily extermination. Those who wilfully defied and departed from the faith in which they had been baptised not only committed a heinous personal crime: they also presented a serious risk to the society in which they resided. Like decaying flesh, they had to be amputated to preserve the health of the community at large. (Walsham 2006: 41)

This viewpoint was indeed ‘very strong on all sides’: Edmund Bonner, who had helped Henry VIII to break from Rome but reconverted to Catholicism and enforced the Marian persecutions, preached that governors should act as a ‘good surgeon who cutteth away a putryfied and festred member, for the love he hath to the hole body’ (Walsham 2006: 42). These were not simply metaphorical figures: the health and unity of the wider body politic was to be safeguarded by the literal wounding or extermination of those (such as Cranmer, and Donne’s relative Thomas More) who would not submit to the rule of *cuius regio, eius religio*. Michael Schmidt argues that ‘[w]hen Sisson calls for “a central authority armed with strong powers for limited purposes” he expresses a tenable and inclusive politics. The phrase “for limited purposes” is the validating clause, containing the entire tact of his politics, as indeed of his literary criticism’ (*AL*: 5). But, as we have seen, such inclusivity must be understood as strictly circumscribed, and the ‘limited powers’ of the state may indeed encompass the sovereign violence that always remains the prerogative of the state.

This history of religious persecution ramifies through Sisson's poetics. Reading 'A Letter to John Donne' while bearing in mind Sisson's notion of 'the body of the poem', into which members (individual verses) are incorporated through rhythm, we can see that the counterpointing of syntax against line-breaks and end-stopped stanzas, as well as the early absence of rhyme building up to the near-rhymes of stanzas five and six, create rhythms that run through the whole poem. However, the stanzas parcel out stages in a complex argument that culminates at the poem's conclusion, which gathers up the thematic threads of ambition, folly, sexuality, and incorporation. It is therefore as much the argument that holds the poem together as its rhythm. In a manner analogous to that by which communicants receive the sacraments and are thereby incorporated into the wider body of the Church and, in the Anglican case, the nation, so the pre-semantic aspect of language (the stuff of *phone*) is incorporated into the body of the poem through its sublation into the *logos*. The poem as body is defined not by a pre-semantic integrity but by the delimitation and ordering of the discourse, while an amorphous and potentially limitless extent of language remains excluded from it. The poem-as-body is policed like the body of the nation. The implication of reading this poem through the High Tory model elaborated in the previous chapter is that Sisson's poetics follows the same logic by which religious dissidents were excluded, sometimes violently, from civil society.

Yet as we have seen, Sisson asserts that joining a communion 'means joining people not of your choosing', and that 'you have not chosen but been chosen' (*OLO*: 54). In light of this, 'the love of God' which 'comes readily | To those who have most need' should be read as a subjective rather than objective genitive: God's love seizes upon the passive individual, as Sisson seems to confirm in the poem's final couplet, where he declares that 'the vain, the ambitious and the highly sexed | Are the natural prey of the incarnate Christ' (ll.41-2). This being so, there seems to be a quandary as to the justice of victimising people on grounds that Sisson himself regards as beyond individual volition. In fact, Sisson appears shockingly sanguine about the necessity of religious conformity. 'It was not very nice that people should burn one another for their faith', he wryly concedes, 'but these things were done because, at the time when they were done, there was not the present facility in extracting from theological conceptions all trace of practical meaning' (*AL*: 205). Sisson might appear to be

arguing over nothing, three and a half centuries since the last heretic was burnt at the stake, and after the last impediments to non-conformists in public life were removed. But the contemporary significance of what Barrès called ‘national Catholicism’ becomes clear when we recall that he and Charles Maurras were leaders of the anti-Dreyfusard faction, and that Maurras, for all his contempt of German barbarism, found enough common ground between the Nazi’s anti-Semitism and his own to collaborate with the Vichy regime, publishing the names of those protecting Jews in his newspaper, the *Action Française*. As Sisson summarises Maurras’s position:

[w]hatever weakens a man’s loyalty and subordination to Latin traditions makes him a less reliable Frenchman. The criticism of ideas is at one with the hostility to those foreigners, often Jews, who drift in and out of the country at the call of interests and conveniences which have nothing to do with the welfare of France; who enjoy civic rights, but exercise them with regard to sectional interests. For them, Maurras employed the designation ‘métèques’; we might say, after Blackstone, ‘denizens’. (*AL*: 102)

The final clause might be taken to suggest that the British case is just like the French one, and ergo that Sisson advocates a Maurrasian racial politics. But nothing in Sisson’s writings betrays the kind of anti-Semitism to be found in T.S. Eliot’s *After Strange Gods* or ‘Gerontion’, where ‘the Jew squats on the window-sill’ (Eliot 1974: 39). Instead, Roman Catholics such as the new villager in *On the Look-Out* are for Sisson the most egregious ‘denizens’. In his 1972 study *The Case of Walter Bagehot*, Sisson would write that the status of Roman Catholics ‘is a question so deeply implicated in our history that it does not die and has not become insignificant, merely changed its form’ (*AL*: 373). Even so sympathetic a critic as Donald Davie (1976: 89) expressed ‘astonishment’ at this; but Davie had perhaps not grasped what kind of changes the question had undergone. Between the 1559 settlement and Sisson’s time, Great Britain had won itself a global empire, bringing people of many different faiths under its rule. At the same time, the British Empire exported Anglicanism across the world, threatening to turn it into what Sisson calls, in an essay from 1977, an ‘international gang of opinion’ with ‘a shadowy international meeting-place in Canterbury’ (*AL*: 553). The consequences of these changes for Sisson’s relationship with the Church of England would play out over the course of his writing career.

There is another danger attendant upon Sisson's devotion to the historical legacy of Anglicanism. Rémy de Gourmont (in Pound 1970: 374) once joked that 'for the English, the most important part of their religion is that it is Anglican':

[m]ost young Englishmen would without much difficulty renounce their part in paradise if they knew that one does not speak English in Heaven, that one does not play tennis, that bull-dogs are not admitted, and that one does not have tea with little cakes daily at 5pm.

The list of English stereotypes is meant satirically, yet Sisson was aware of the point it makes: that the Church of England threatens to displace the wider Church, and even God Himself, as the object of the communicant's devotion – particularly for one such as Sisson, with special interest in the aesthetic heritage of the Church. As he wrote in 1956, 'anyone with an ear for prose may well have to ask himself, from time to time, whether he is not too much an Anglican to be a Christian' (*ICE*: 14). Sisson appears to consider foregoing the life everlasting if the saints are to use any liturgy other than Thomas Cranmer's. This, too, would eventually bring Sisson's relationship with the Church of England – already fraught in this poem – into crisis.

In the mid-1960s, though, Sisson could write that 'the *ecclesia Anglicana* is the vehicle of meaning for me, it is the centre of England, however little it seems to be regarded' (*AL*: 204). As we have observed, England for Sisson is not an abstraction but made up of particular places and landscapes in which the Church is a focal point. Moreover, its historical position within the constitution, quite as much as the aesthetic traits of its liturgy, architecture, music and poetry, finds an analogue in Sisson's early poetics. He would conclude his *Essays* of 1967 by stating that 'Toryism as defined by Johnson' – that is, adherence 'to the ancient constitution of the state, and the apostolic hierarchy of the church of England' – 'has almost always been a doctrine of opposition, and so it will remain' (*AL*: 220). 'A Letter to John Donne' demonstrates how Sisson mounted such opposition, not only through explicit critique but in the very structure of his verse. Against the technocratisation of modern governmentality, Sisson reasserts the importance of ends beyond the 'temporal good and outward prosperity' which Locke argued were 'the sole reason of man's entering into society,

and the only thing they seek and aim at' (*ICE*: 13), as well as demonstrating the vitality of aesthetics and the experience of place as modes of resistance to the dehumanisation inflicted upon man-as-species.

If the constitutional position of the Church of England had, as Sisson argues, been fundamentally altered by Catholic emancipation, and politics increasingly come to be 'planned as a system of doing things [...] to things', one might expect artistic patronage as enjoyed by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and others, which Sisson implicitly endorses, to have dwindled concurrently. Yet in 'The London Zoo', Sisson attacks the people he sees as 'the scabs of culture for whom any talk of the arts | Brings money to their purses and a throb to their silly hearts' (ll.147-8), indicating that state patronage has grown and taken on new roles that would present Sisson and other poets – of whatever party – concerned about their relationship to the state with an unprecedented set of problems, requiring and provoking new responses.

### III. 'The State of the Arts': Modern Laureateship

We have seen in preceding chapters how, at least since the Stuart dynasty, official relations between sovereignty and the arts in Britain have centred on the polarity of monarchy, in the institutions of royal appointments, rather than that of government. As John Harris (1970: 13) argues, Lord Melbourne's warning, 'God help the government that meddles with art', became the watchword of 'successive governments during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. British governments of the eighteenth century, too, had played it safe, keeping aloof from the arts, especially when funds were needed'. This was because during that time '[g]overnment programs had to be justified almost entirely on economic grounds': '[b]eginning in 1700, the attention of successive governments and the energies of the British people were concentrated, almost exclusively, upon political and economic problems [...] Scant attention was given to the need for governmental aid to the arts' (ibid.: 13). In this narrative, governmental non-involvement in the arts is seen as a mere oversight; the account I have offered, by contrast, suggests that it is a result of the historical development of the metaphysical paradigm separating kingdom from government.

Harris is typical in presenting the Second World War as the turning point at which the British government remedied its past neglect of the arts by funding the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). The Council was first appointed and funded by a charitable organisation, the Pilgrim Trust, whose Chairman, Lord Macmillan, was also the Minister of Information. It was brought further under the aegis of government when 'it was given an office and a secretary by the Board of Education' and '[i]n April 1940, Parliament recognized the long-neglected need for arts subsidy by authorizing appropriation of funds to underwrite committee programs' (ibid.: 27). The arrangement changed again in 1941:

the Pilgrim Trust concluded that CEMA was sufficiently well established to get along on its own, financial responsibility being vested in the Treasury. The council was reorganized in 1 April 1942; John Maynard Keynes became its new chairman, while the Pilgrim Trust representatives, Lord Macmillan and

Thomas Jones, withdrew. The council remained small – a body of nine or ten persons appointed by the president of the Board of Education. (Ibid.: 31)

This arrangement would form the basis for CEMA's transition into a permanent peacetime organisation, when in June 1945 'Sir John Anderson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, [...] announced the decision of the coalition government to continue the existence of CEMA, with a redefined mandate from Parliament, as the Arts Council of Great Britain' (ibid.: 39). The Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) was 'placed directly under the Treasury [...] The Chancellor of the Exchequer was to answer all questions which might be raised in the House of Commons concerning the council's work.' This meant it was not a government department: under this arrangement the ACGB 'stood in the same relationship to the Commons as the University Grants Committee. This move was devised to keep future government interference to a minimum' (ibid.: 48). The ACGB was to be answerable to Parliament, but run at arm's length. In July 1945, Keynes (in Pick 1991: 106) made a radio broadcast in which he celebrated the fact that 'the public exchequer has recognized the support and encouragement of the civilizing arts of life as a part of their duty', yet explained the result of this development in understated terms:

State patronage of the arts has crept in. It has happened in a very English, informal, unostentatious way – half baked if you like. A semi-independent body is provided with modest funds to stimulate, comfort and support any societies or bodies brought together on private or local initiative which are striving with serious purpose and a reasonable prospect of success to present for public enjoyment the arts of drama, music and painting.

The Arts Council's remit was not to dictate what artists should do and create; only to support those who were already engaged in creative projects, and to facilitate new ones. Keynes (ibid.: 106) then went on to make it clear that the Arts Council did not intend 'to socialize this side of social endeavour.' This awkward phrase refers to the socialist nationalisation of industries after the Labour party's recent election victory. Keynes claimed bipartisan support for his view of the arts: 'whatever views may be held by the lately warring parties [...] about socializing industry, everyone, I fancy, recognizes that the work of the artist in all its aspects is, of its nature, individual and



free, undisciplined, unregimented, uncontrolled' (ibid.: 106). Nonetheless, concern that the Arts Council of Great Britain meant the nationalisation of the arts, and that this in turn meant state control of culture, was not completely allayed by Keynes's reassurances. Introducing *Poems 1951: The Prize-Winning Entries for the Festival of Britain Competition*, John Hayward (1951: 7) acknowledged that the competition was 'an experiment that might do much to further the cause of English poetry', but also expressed reservations:

although the modern 'Welfare State' might accept the direct responsibility for subsidizing poets, it would not do so without incurring suspicion and misgiving. The State that pays the piper has a way of calling the tune, and the tune, as we have learnt in recent years, is not that of the poet's native wood-notes wild. Even the best of such patronage is liable, by playing for safety with the Philistines, to have a stultifying instead of a stimulating effect and to lead to a sterile academicism. (Ibid.: 8)

Overall, though, Hayward was optimistic:

the success of the Arts Council's initial attempt to recognize and in some measure to satisfy the poet's current need suggests that the use of public money for this purpose is justifiable. [...] as long as it is allowed to retain its independence of judgement and action in propagating the gospel of the arts, it is likely to be accepted as the successor to the defunct private patron. (Ibid.: 8)

From the end of WWII on, therefore, the ACGB would be the main channel through which the British government dispensed funding for the arts. Thereafter, 'opposition to state subsidy was voiced occasionally and criticisms were levelled against the Arts Council and the trustees of galleries and museums. By the mid-1950s, however, artistic patronage had become an accepted function of government' (Harris 1970: 3).

Such bland assumptions of consensus are belied by the circumstances in which C.H. Sisson's poetry (including 'Sparrows Seen from an Office Window' and 'Family Fortunes') was first published. *X: A Quarterly Review*, edited by the poet David Wright and painter Patrick Swift, ran for only seven issues between 1959 and 1962;

but in that short time it featured work by Samuel Beckett, Hugh MacDiarmid, Ezra Pound, Yves Bonnefoy, and Geoffrey Hill, among others. Although '[n]either manifesto or editorial introduced the first number' (Wright 1988: xi), the editors attached a foreword to the volume collecting the first four editions, in which they explicitly addressed the relationship between artists and society:

Many people deplore the lack of public interest in the arts. Yet the most dangerous thing for the arts is in fact the interest taken by the public. For there is never any lack of talented mediocrity ready and willing to satisfy the demand for what the public is prepared to regard as a work of art, and it is the productions of those who serve the mass that deflect attention from the real thing, the products of the individual vision.

Nobody expects that society under whatever persuasion is going to turn around and single out with accuracy the genuine artists, praise them and support them for their works. Nobody is likely to pretend even that it would be a great social blessing if something of the kind were to happen. For there is a paradoxical aspect to the situation of the artist: by definition it does not accommodate this sort of thing. And yet, again paradoxically, it is for these very reasons that there must exist an outlet for those productions of the individual vision which, because of the social bias and necessary conservatism of any State, are most likely to suffer neglect or be suppressed altogether. (Ibid.: xi)

This statement initially focuses on 'the public' rather than the state or the Arts Council specifically. The editors' position is clear: they take the Romantic view of the artist as a singular person with a unique 'individual vision' incommensurate to the 'the mass' of society; yet though the artist must remain distinct from society, s/he requires at least some minimal recognition, if only from an elite of likeminded cognoscenti – and society in turn needs the artist's exceptional perception. The danger they perceive in mass culture, where 'there is never any lack of talented mediocrity', is cognate with Wordsworth's excoriation of 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse' (1992: 747). The difference here, although registered subtly, is the role of the state in the circulation of art. In arguing that 'there must exist an outlet for those productions [...]

which, because of the social bias and necessary conservatism of any State, are most likely to suffer neglect' (Wright 1988: xi), the editors implicitly acknowledge that the state now plays an active role in promoting art – its role being, in their view, to promote mediocrity. This is clearly an attack on the Arts Council's stated aim of providing 'the best for the most', and by extension, all bureaucratic management of art and artists.

Patrick Swift develops this attack into a critique of the way in which bureaucracies are organised and function, based on the recent experience of one *X* contributor. Brian Higgins 'was Yorkshire-Irish working-class ("only I don't work"); a mathematician, and a one-time Rugby League full-back' (Wright 1988: xvii); he published three collections of poetry, the third posthumously, having died aged 35. The first of these, *The Only Need*, was selected to be a Poetry Book Society Choice; but its selection was then rejected by the Arts Council 'for fear of being involved in a possible action for libel – a fear which the publisher of the book, who would have been the first target of such action, either didn't share, or managed to overcome' (ibid.: xvi-ii). For the editors of *X*, this anecdote demonstrates the pitfalls of patronage by bureaucracies:

the moment help for artists passes into the hands of bureaucrats the character of the patronage becomes mean and vitiated. In our day when taxation and other difficulties make it hard for individuals to act as once the great patrons of Europe did it is a most unfortunate affair that the efforts of the State to replace such patronage should be so futile. (Ibid.: 175)

Swift accepts that 'patronage IS an essential social factor if there is to be a living continuous tradition of letters, painting, etc.'; but his argument concerns 'how this patronage can be organised, if organised it must be, so that the best men are not the victims instead of the beneficiaries of the system' (ibid.: 175). Harking back to a culture of great patrons, Swift suggests that '[i]t may well be that there is no substitute for enlightened private patronage', which can foster '[t]he sort of easy relationship – easy that is when compared with the form filling roundabouts of the committees – that is set up between a man who gives help to an individual because he likes and believes in his work' (ibid.: 175). Swift no doubt idealises this relationship: after all, a private patron may be equally manipulative of the artists he retains as any committee – hence

why Samuel Johnson (in Harris 1970: 3) defined the patron as ‘commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery’, and listed him among the ills that avail the scholar’s life. But Swift’s argument is not based solely on the comparative efficacy of the two systems, but on the kind of relationship involved: private patronage, Swift argues, is (at least ideally) ‘a form of friendship which the committee by its nature is incapable of’ (Wright 1988: 175). Even though the members of a committee may sometimes reach unanimity, it is still, for Swift, unsuited to the task of facilitating radical artists:

the inability of a committee to make an exception, because it must work to rule – no one man being finally responsible – and its incapacity to accommodate the individual dilemma (there being no individual responsibilities) almost totally rules out its usefulness to those who really make art and need help, for these are invariably the exceptional and individual. (Ibid.: 176)

The committee, in this scheme, is only held together by the rules that determine its remit and conduct, and thus cannot respond to unique talent in exceptional circumstances with the initiative and daring of a private patron with no one to answer to but himself. The difference is a qualitative one, between an individual person and a hidebound body of people.

C.H. Sisson was never on the editorial board of *X*, but the editors’ position in this respect is germane to the one he had developed in the course of his own writing. Swift’s attack on arts funding committees echoes Sisson’s critique (from 1949) of Lord Beveridge’s *Voluntary Action: a Report on Methods of Social Advance*. Sisson comments on the subtitle that ‘[t]he word “report” is helpful, for it tells us what literary *genre* we have to do with’ (*AL*: 67-8), before defining this genre: in a report ‘we do not expect, generally speaking, to find an individual expression of opinion, or the organic work of one man’s thought or imagination’; rather, [t]he characteristic report is the work of a number of people’ (*AL*: 68) – that is to say, a committee. It is as a civil servant as well as a writer that Sisson observes that a report’s ‘multiple origins are betrayed by vagueness of language hard to avoid when many are trying to speak as one’ (*AL*: 68). The image of many speaking as one recalls the liturgy, which

for Sisson is a paradigm of meaningful speech. In one essay from 1967, Sisson asserts the linguistic importance of the Anglican Church:

[t]here is no speech which is not of a here and now and it is nothing except in terms of other times and elsewhere. That is why the historical church is so apt to our needs and meaning. It is a congregation of meaning and there is no meaning without congregation. (*AL*: 204)

Against this archetype of liturgical speech, by means of which a congregation speaks as one and the sacraments are administered, we may compare Sisson's account of the workings of committees and report-writers:

[t]he author of a committee's report does not keep both eyes on his subject and use words in an attempt to give precision to his thoughts about it. He keeps one eye on his subject and one on the committee-men and on the organizations that are milling around behind him, each trying to make his or its own point of view felt by pricking the author with it. The result is that the report-writer's words are not the words of an individual man; they are what manages to get itself most clearly heard of a babel of voices. The trained committee-man learns to speak, as the trained report-maker to write, as if he himself were a babel, and I believe that some of the best of these people are quite unaware of their proficiency in this trick. (*AL*: 68)

The committee thus appears as a nefarious parody of a congregation. Instead of a 'congregation of meaning' that speaks through a historical liturgy, the committee produces a report, in which the trick of writing as a babel 'shows itself when the writer or speaker has to refer to the assumptions about the values which underlie every discussion about action "for a public purpose"' (*AL*: 68).

Swift's preference for the single patron over the group of bureaucrats is therefore consonant with Sisson's critique of committees, and the failure to incorporate individual bodies into an integrated body of people exemplified by 'the Cabinet, with its score of ministers,' in which 'the human mind – which is the same as the human body – has begun to disintegrate' (*AL*: 207). This has further implications for Sisson's

attitude towards arts patronage. If kingdom is the polarity of aesthetics and embodiment, the ‘skeleton language’ (*AL*: 161) of business and the associated failures of embodiment and incorporation mean that the polarity of government is intrinsically unsuited to the role of patron of the arts, and an arts funding committee will only be able to respond to poetry in the ‘mean and vitiated’ way Swift describes. But the epistemic shift that occurred at the end of the Second World War takes in more than just a new financial relationship between government and the arts as a policy sector: in this period, government and aesthetics begin to interrelate in unprecedented ways.

In 1973, C.H. Sisson described the recently deceased Day Lewis as ‘Poet Laureate and laurel-bearer of the Arts Council’ (*AL*: 460). This appears to mean that the Arts Council had crowned Day Lewis; but it may be read as meaning that Day Lewis conferred the Arts Council’s laurels upon other poets. Day Lewis was a prominent figure in the arts establishment, even before becoming Laureate in 1968. Although the ACGB’s original remit did not cover patronage of literature, it entered this area in 1950 with the creation of a Poetry Panel (Harris 1970: 251). In 1961, Day Lewis took over as its chairperson; and when in 1965 this was expanded into the Literature Panel, he was appointed its first chairperson (Russell 1981: 187). He was thus intimately involved in the business of governmental arts funding, and publicly advocated support of this (Harris 1970: 262-3). His career as Poet Laureate, however, would develop upon this relationship in another mode.

Day Lewis’s inaugural laureate poem of 1968 was commissioned by a newspaper, and celebrates not royal glory but the people’s fortitude, with the aim of encouraging them to support a campaign to revive the flagging economy. His second was to go even further: an encomium on an administrative reorganisation. Commissioned by the *Evening Gazette* and published on 1 April 1968, ‘Hail Teesside!’ (Day Lewis 1992: 720) celebrates the amalgamation of six towns into the new county borough of Teesside. The poem begins by describing the area’s industrial origins:

Old ironmasters and their iron men  
With northern fire, grit, enterprise began it  
A hundred years ago. (ll.1-3)

Day Lewis then describes what has arisen from this:

Desolate homesteads welded into one,  
Hamlets grown up to towns, deep anchorages  
Gouged out of sand, wastes blossoming with the fierce  
White rose of foundries. So the pioneers  
Printed their work on nature's open page. (ll.4-8)

This passage mixing organic tropes ('grown up', 'blossoming') with urban, maritime and industrial images builds up to a violent tone (the 'anchorages | *Gouged* out of sand', 'the *fierce* | White rose of foundries'), yet ends by asserting that nature is an unresisting *tabula rasa* that humans can manipulate as they wish. Day Lewis praises the area's industrial eminence, drawing this back to the poem's occasion:

Their steel made bridges from Sydney to Menai;  
Their ships networked the sea. Gain was in view  
But inch by inch out of the gain there grew  
A greater thing – sense of community. (ll.9-12)

In the last passage, the poet addresses the people of the new borough:

You are bridge-builders still. Only, today  
You draw six towns into a visioned O,  
Spanning from town to town the ebb and flow  
Of destiny. A dream is realised. May  
The northern kindliness and northern pride  
See, as your forebears would, the future in it.  
Here, a new span – our lives shall underpin it  
And earn fresh honours for our own Teesside. (ll.17-24)

The poem is a well-tooled job, using appropriate tropes, and expressing the sort of sentiments – praise for past and present, optimism for the future – one would expect for such an occasion. Yet viewed in Sisson's terms, the poem is extremely suspect: it aestheticizes a bureaucratic decision – the work of committees and reports – placing hope for unity and continuity in this, rather than the crown and the whole nexus of religio-political institutions of which it is the head. Sisson's own poetry of government is consistently ironic and satirical, emphasising bodily decay and the exacerbation of existential unease. Day Lewis's poem, by contrast, only refers to the body in its opening line, where 'ironmasters and their iron men' – apparently meant as sincere praise – takes an ironic coloration in light of Sisson's presentation of people mechanised by bureaucracy. 'Hail Teesside!' is in rhymed iambic pentameters, and

therefore necessarily bears some trace of *phone* and the body; but again, from Sisson's perspective, it is suspect. Thomas Hardy's poems are full of 'awkwardnesses of expression', but Sisson does not mean this as censure:

[h]e neither kept such things for defiant show nor seems to have wished to get rid of them. In the end they seem to be less awkwardnesses than aspects of his speaking mind, like a particular lurch or other movement which is habitual to some bodies. (*EP*: 39)

'Hail Teesside!' is, according to Sisson's criteria, mechanically regular, appropriate to the connection he makes between bureaucracy and disembodiment.

C. Day Lewis died of cancer in 1972. In the same year, his friend Philip Larkin published a poem that would later become known as 'Going Going' (Larkin 2012: 82-3) in his collection *High Windows*, but originally appeared in a perhaps surprising context. Ahead of a United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, the Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Walker, commissioned a report, published as *How do you want to live?* (Department of the Environment 1972), which features Larkin's poem by way of a 'Prologue' (ibid.: x-xi). As Larkin (1992: 452) explained in a letter to Charles Monteith, 'it was Robert Jackson that got me into this: he is sitting on the Countess of Dartmouth's committee, the report of which the poem is supposed to preface'. Larkin deprecates his efforts, describing the poem as 'thin ranting conventional gruel', and concludes, 'I don't think I should ever make a Laureate' (ibid.: 452). This dismissal implies, however, that Larkin regards the work of writing a poem to order for a government department to be comparable to laureateship, although not equal to it. We may call a relation of this kind 'sub-laureateship' – as if the sovereign delegation of duties and power to ministers and government is mirrored in the area of aesthetics, with the patronage that was formerly exclusive to the Poet Laureate now extended to many writers, albeit somewhat diluted.

Day Lewis's second laureate poem celebrates how the Teesside workers' 'steel made bridges from Sydney to Menai' and '[t]heir ships networked the sea'. Larkin's, by contrast, ventriloquizes confidence in industrialism just as it begins to falter:



Chuck filth in the sea if you must,  
The tides will be clean beyond  
– But what do I feel now? Doubt? (ll.16-8)

Larkin suggests that his reservations are only the misgivings of ‘age, simply’ (l.19), but this is used as a pivot upon which he turns to focus on the manners of people younger than himself:

The crowd  
Is young in the M1 café;  
Their kids are screaming for more –  
More houses, more parking allowed,  
More caravan sites, more pay. (ll.19-23)

The poet fears that as a result of their rapacity:

before I snuff it the whole  
Boiling will be bricked in  
Except for the tourist parts –  
First slum of a Europe, a role  
It won’t be so hard to win,  
With a cast of crooks and tarts. (ll.31-6)

The state of the countryside is figured here as an index of the moral state of the nation. To sell off land for houses and caravan sites is equal, he implies, to women selling their own bodies. The poet contrasts this with his version of the historical England: ‘[t]he shadows, the meadows, the lanes, | The guildhalls, the carved choirs’ (ll.38-9) which will soon be gone, replaced by ‘concrete and tyres’ (l.42). Its synecdoches may appear similar to those from Sisson’s poetry, being rural (meadows and lanes), pre-industrial (guildhalls) and religious (carved choirs). The difference, however, is that Sisson’s poems are highly specific: the countryside in ‘Cranmer’ is that of West Kington; the church in ‘Knole’ is Saint Nicholas. This is an important distinction, because in Sisson’s poetry these are seen as part of history – for instance, the break with Rome is crucial to both those poems – whereas in Larkin’s poem, the meadows and choirs are generalised out of specific contexts and isolated from history, and elevated into a timeless, depoliticised England. Against this, one might point to paragraph 3.21 of the report, a quotation from Brian Batsford MP addressing the Royal Society of the Arts:

[t]he mess of modern Britain, its dreary architecture, its litter, its jumble of street signs and advertisements, is regrettably as much a part of our heritage as any historic building or stretch of downland. (Dept. of the Environment 1972: 40)

Batsford goes on to blame this on ‘a steady deterioration in our standards’, against which ‘the voices of reason – of Ruskin or Morris or Clough Williams-Ellis or Betjeman or Sandys’, ‘the initiative of national or local societies’ and ‘the powers of government or local authorities’ (ibid.: 40) – have been helpless. Larkin’s poem, as it appears in the report, appears to blame the populace, the screaming kids and the ‘cast of crooks and tarts.’ But when the poem was republished in *High Windows*, it contained another stanza after the scene in the M1 café:

On the business page, a score

Of spectacled grins approve  
Some takeover bid that entails  
Five per cent profit (and ten  
In the estuaries): move  
Your works to the unspoilt dales  
(Grey area grants!) (ll.24-30)

As Larkin (1992: 459) wrote to Robert Conquest, the Countess of Dartmouth ‘made me cut out a verse attacking big business’. If John Hayward had voiced the suspicion that ‘the State that pays the piper’ indirectly through the ACGB ‘has a way of calling the tune,’ then it can be no surprise to find that art, when it offers its services to government, should find itself made tongue-tied by authority. But the lines also attack big government as well as big business: the imperative to ‘move | Your works to the unspoilt dales’ with the promise of dubious ‘grey area grants’; the ‘split-level shopping’, ‘bleak high-risers’ and ‘concrete’ (ll.8, 11, 42), which the poet feels have made England the ‘first slum of Europe’; all are in different ways the responsibility of ‘the powers of government and local authorities’ that Batsford enlists as ‘voices of reason’. Paragraph 2.35 of the report enumerates the many governmental Planning Acts that facilitated Britain’s inter- and post-war development and set out ‘broad objectives [...] aimed at the intelligent conservation of our architecture, our countryside and our natural resources’, yet concludes that ‘[n]evertheless, planners

are unpopular at the present time', and recognises the need to 'find out what has gone wrong, and whether there is a case to alter or improve our present planning system' (Dept. of the Environment 1972: 24). The fact that Larkin was made to omit the verses may be taken as circumstantial evidence that the Countess of Dartmouth was sensible of the government's culpability in abetting industry and commerce, as well as of the need to maintain a business-friendly image.

The poem may also be read as a critique of the Laureateship in the same period. In the lines written to smooth over the excision of the originals, the pollution of the environment irreversibly encroaching on what used to be beautiful and healthy is evoked through an ominous ellipsis:

The pylons are walking; the shore,  
When you try to get near the sea  
In summer... (ll.24-26)

These lines are lent visible corroboration by the photograph over which the poem is printed: an enormous industrial works with multiple cooling towers, made to look even more unnatural by the harsh monochrome photography, abuts onto a stretch of coastline, leaving the reader to imagine the factory 'chuck[ing] filth in the sea'. This, the pictorial index reveals, is 'Imperial Chemical Industries, Wilton Works, Teesside.' Although this is a chemical works rather than a foundry, here 'the fierce | White rose' of an industrial plant, its foundations 'gouged out of sand', has made the coast a waste, and blotted 'nature's open page'. Day Lewis's praise for the pioneering spirit of the North-East, occasioned by the governmental creation of a new local authority, belies a cavalier attitude to the environmental cost of modern industry.

With this development, we see how much the relationship between kingship, government, and aesthetics altered in the post-war period. Whereas the traditional model, to which Sisson's description in *The Spirit of British Administration* remained faithful, was constituted of an anaesthetic government whose only glory was to reflect that of the sovereign (whose glory had an aesthetic dimension, necessitating a close relationship with the arts through the laureateship, among other appointments), the new model emerging in this period involves an expansion of government into the field

of aesthetics, as patron (through the Arts Council, and commissioning poems such as Larkin's) and as glorious subject (in 'Hail Teesside!'). But if Sisson's attack on government is in part a critique of its anaesthetic nature, it is not mitigated by an aesthetic supplement. In fact, the opposite is true. Patrick McGuinness (*Age*: 71) suggests that for Sisson, 'the dullness of the civil service is its strength, because if it were not dull it would not be either *civil* or a *service*'. While Sisson argues that the current linguistic poverty is a recent development (compared with the nineteenth century 'when a report was likely to be the work of one or two able men, unimpeded by a committee and a secretariat,' and 'the human voice' could 'occasionally be heard in official documents' (*AL*: 180)), for him, glorification is due to the monarchy, not to government, and therefore government's encroachment upon the preserve of aesthetics is an usurpation – including the constitutional sense of the term, because of the link between glory and sovereign authority.

The examples of 'Hail Teesside!' and Larkin's 'Prologue' demonstrate the tensions that arise out of these new relationships between poets and governmental power. Larkin's sub-laureate poem does not praise government the way laureate poems traditionally praise the monarch; but featuring a specially-commissioned poem by one of Britain's most famous poets is an adjunct to the bureaucrats' diadem. The poem's content complicates this, however, in that it presents post-war British governments as ingloriously complicit in the destruction of the natural environment and cultural continuity. It thereby obliquely, perhaps unintentionally (given the friendship between Larkin and Day Lewis) criticises the new role Day Lewis created for the Laureateship, as the celebrant of modern government and industry. Though Donald Davie (1973: 64) could still claim in 1973 that Larkin was 'the effective unofficial laureate of post-1945 England', this claim was based on his argument that Larkin 'refuses to recognize any special dignity or sanctity' to the natural environment' because such a recognition 'would impede his level-toned acceptance of that England as the only one we have, violated and subtopianized and poisoned as it is' (*ibid.*: 66). Whereas in fact, when Larkin accepted laurels of a semi-official kind, it was to produce a poem full of what Davie sees as D.H. Lawrence's 'guilt and horror at what the English had made of England' (*ibid.*: 68).

In 1972, Sisson addressed the role of business and management, and the place of the environment in their calculations, in his critical biography *The Case of Walter Bagehot*. Sisson's stance is taken in the face of the prevalent view of Bagehot as 'the innovator who pointed the way for all reasonable Anglo-Saxons in the generations which have succeeded him' (AL: 432). Besides attacking his view of the constitution, Sisson portrays him as motivated by the desire 'to give exclusive respectability to the pursuit of lucre, and to remove whatever social and intellectual impediments stood in the way of it' (AL: 424), including the monarchy and aristocracy, patriotic feeling, and the Established Church. Bagehot, Sisson argues, both practised and preached 'reckless exploitation' (AL: 422) of the common good, simultaneously with the shrewd safekeeping of one's own position and property. The danger Sisson sees in Bagehot's legacy is that his attitudes have become the norm: thus, '[g]overnment is supposed to have become the management of the economy and there is almost universal agreement that it could not be anything else' (AL: 421). This management of the economy has come, in Sisson's view, to mean 'contemplating numbers over a great void' (AL: 424), abstracted from any notion of its concrete impact upon people and the environment upon which they depend:

[i]t will not quite do, in a commonwealth, to count heads as one counts money. The land is also important. [...] An economics which rests entirely on financial measurement is as far from reality as any refinement of mediaeval schoolmen. It will not help if there is nothing to eat in the refrigerator, or the land is soured from Portsmouth to the Wash. (AL: 432)

This should be compared with the statement from Imperial Chemical Industries, owners of the works in the photograph, as quoted in the report:

[t]here is a balance to be struck between what a man, a community, or even a nation, would like to do and what it can afford to do, and this varies in time depending on how rich or poor it happens to be in the period under consideration. When a man is hungry and out of work environment factors are of less importance than his prime needs, and when he is well fed, housed and comfortable the environment is which he lives assumes great importance. (Dept. of the Environment 1972: 3)

This is as much as to say that one's environment is a luxury, to be considered only when one is sufficiently comfortable, rather than the indispensable basis for one's long-term quality of life and even survival – and that in a period of economic stagnation, such as 'Then and Now' was written in and which persisted through the 1970s, environmental damage is unavoidable. Against this short-term form of prudence, and what he calls 'the subordinate prudences of management' (*AL*: 422), Sisson argues:

[a]ny political unit worth maintaining, or which is in any way to be maintained at all, must contain a principle of foresight and continuity which goes beyond the next series of trade figures, and it will be the foresight of care rather than of calculation. An unreasoning love on the part of its inhabitants is the best safeguard for any country – superior even to that love of private gain in which Adam Smith and Bagehot [...] put such trust. (*AL*: 431)

The focus of this unreasoning love is, for Sisson, the crown; thus the implicit connection between the monarchy and the countryside developed in Sisson's early poetry, in contrast with that between the city and government, takes on a new urgency in this period, when poets and government departments (and the monarchy itself: the first quotation in the report is from the Duke of Edinburgh, stating that 'this business of the environment is the only, the vital, moral problem of today' (Dept. of the Environment 1972: 3)) are debating the importance of the environment and how it is to be managed. If Day Lewis's poem represents blind optimism regarding technological advance and the role of government, and Larkin's expresses scepticism, even hostility towards both without offering an alternative, the one Sisson outlines in *The Case of Walter Bagehot* is marked by a reactionary tendency. Sisson agrees with Coleridge that '[t]he objects of the land-owner, with respect to his tenantry and dependents, are precisely those of the state in relation to the country as a whole. Both watch over the *dulcia arva*' – the 'gentle fields', as Sisson would translate Eclogues I.3 (*ITD*: 193; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 24-5) – 'and their inhabitants' (*AL*: 423). This assumes the existence of a landowning class, and an entire class structure such as the one Sisson (in his essay on William Barnes) argues was once 'an order of nature, worth nobody's while to question' (*AL*: 192). This is an extremely contentious and

partial view of class relations in British history: one need only remember the Tolpuddle Martyrs, contemporaries of Barnes within his local area, to find resistance to the exploitation of rural labourers. But Sisson also describes how Coleridge ‘had seen, in what Bagehot calls the “quiet saving counties”, children with their shoulders hunched about their ears, and farmers growing fatter in the very places where the cottagers starved’ (*AL*: 423), and praises Bishop Berkeley’s ‘care for the people starving among the green acres of Ireland’ (*AL*: 425). Sisson’s belief in the class system (‘though not’, Patrick McGuinness (*Age*: 71) notes, ‘in its rigidity or even fairness’) is focused on how it should ideally work to ensure continuing good husbandry: ‘[t]he old landowner planted trees for his grandchildren; the man acting in the spirit of trade wants only to know how much timber he can sell over the next five years’ (*AL*: 431). But the post-war British government was committed, as Sisson saw it, to the abolition of class distinctions, substituting itself as an unreliable alternative to the gentry as steward of the land. On returning from active service after the War, Sisson was briefly posted at the country estate of Wentworth Woodhouse, as he records in *On the Look-Out*:

when, a year or two later, the owner of Wentworth was received by Attlee at 10, Downing Street it was to be told that the acres in front of his house would be torn up at once by open-cast mining. After that an earl would know that it was not worth his train fare to London to defend his estate. It was generally agreed that you shouldn’t ought to have had an estate. (*OLO*: 66)

The epilogue to *The Case of Walter Bagehot* also contains an attack on John Maynard Keynes, as a member of what he sees as the cossetted group of liberals in the Bloomsbury set, and as the modern economist who continued and extended Bagehot’s agenda. Sisson describes him as:

the prophet, only shortly before politicians were reading to receive the doctrine, of central controls which would establish ‘an aggregate volume of output corresponding to full employment as nearly as is practicable’, and consequentially of ‘a large extension of the traditional functions of government’. (*AL*: 436)

Although Sisson does not deal directly with Keynes as the guiding hand of the Arts Council, his summation of Keynesian economic theory may be read as applicable to the ACGB: ‘The *direction* of output was all right; whatever was produced, was good. It was only the volume – the fact that it left people unemployed – that was wrong’ (*AL*: 436). If one extends this critique of Keynesianism to arts policy, one might say that the Arts Council performs a function auxiliary to that of the Ministry of Labour – Sisson’s own department – by managing the employment levels among artists, regardless of the quality of their ‘output’.

Larkin’s letter to Robert Conquest, dated 31 May 1972, in which he reveals that he was made to omit a stanza, begins with an account of his last meeting with C. Day Lewis. The Poet Laureate died of cancer on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of that month, and therefore did not live to see the second ironic twist that would befall his poem to Teesside. In October of that year, the Local Government Act 1972 was passed, to come into force in 1974. This act reformed the system of local government throughout England and Wales, creating a new two-tier system of county and district councils, as well as redrawing the existing county boundaries, and in some places creating new ones out of parts of the old. Teesside was one of the areas thus affected: the county borough, from which Whitby was excluded, was renamed Cleveland. Sisson had argued that while ‘[m]uch is made of these adjustments, and much ought to be made [...] more ought always to be made of the great work of time which is the subject of these meddlesome but necessary treatments’ (*AL*: 128). Day Lewis refocused the laureateship away from the ‘principle of continuity’ embodied in the monarch and towards bureaucratic tinkering with governmental structures, in collaboration with the newspapers who lend importance and dignity to these matters. The abolition of Teesside has a collateral effect on Day Lewis’s poem, and his laureateship: instead of earning ‘fresh honours for our own Teesside’, the poem shares in the obsolescence of the name it was intended to glorify; and the laureateship itself is made subject to the same ephemerality as a newspaper headline or a parliamentary white paper.

Sisson’s poetic response to the 1972 Act came after its implementation in 1974. His 1976 collection, *Anchises*, features a poem dedicated ‘to Pippa and David’ – David Wright, editor of *X* – entitled ‘Swimming the Horses’ (*CP*: 218-9):



Swimming the horses at Appleby in Westmorland  
– Or Cumbria as they now call it, God damn their eyes.  
The rest of the verses *desunt*: they were meant to say  
Damn all politicians and bureaucrats  
Who cannot make fires with uncertain materials. (ll.1-5)

Westmorland was another county redrawn and renamed by the Local Government Act; but unlike the newly created county borough of Teesside, Westmorland was a historic county dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This break with the continuity of English history transmitted through its toponymy has a personal dimension for Sisson: his ‘partial autobiography’, written a decade before the Local Government Act came into force, records that his father was born in Kendal, Westmorland. By removing the name Westmorland from official use, the 1972 Act renders the comparatively recent history of Sisson’s family, and the history of northern England, a degree more remote, undermining the experience of place as a tonic for existential unease central to Sisson’s poetry. It is therefore an attack on the posterity of the poet’s works as well as his personal history, rendering certain passages less immediately intelligible to later generations unfamiliar with the old names. The remapping and renaming of Westmorland as Cumbria constitutes a removal of a landmark, in return for which Sisson curses the ‘regulators whose folders’ (as Wright (1976: 145) glosses the poem in his poetic response, ‘Horse Fair’) ‘[w]ork toward elimination of scenes’ (ll.4, 5) like the annual gypsy horse fair at Appleby.

Sisson’s poem is organised around two antagonisms: that between natural processes and bureaucracy, and that between bureaucrats and those who live in the places they manage. Thus the politicians and bureaucrats ‘imagine that their voices will be heard above | The ripple of rivers and the song of cuckoos,’ (ll.6-7) and ‘think that generations of mud-eaters | Can be stamped out to serve a committee slicker’ (ll.11-2). The ‘generations of mud-eaters’ include the ‘travelling people’ who (in Wright’s poem) ‘used to camp on the road verges here, | But now at Gallows Hill, well out of town’ (ll.13, 14-5). They too are among ‘these rustics’, the rural workers of whom ‘Bagehot always speaks contemptuously’ (*AL*: 421) and with whom Sisson sides, ‘this race which knows about hedging and rabbiting [*sic*] and cider but does not care about the clever gentlemen who read the *Economist*’ (*AL*: 390). Picking up on the subtext of ecological damage, David Wright’s poem describes how the removal of the travellers

to the town's outskirts 'leaves the highway clear | For inter-urban transport' (ll.16-7):

Tankers swing  
Where hedgerows grew and tethered horses grazed,  
Unimpeded now down landscaped carriageways  
With loads of sulphur, liquid oxygen. (ll.17-20)

The two antagonisms are united in Sisson's poem, which prophesies that the politicians and bureaucrats will be 'eaten by a dust | That will soon settle over the whole of England' (ll.13-4). This may be read as the result of an ecological catastrophe, but also as the dust that accumulates on anything old and unused – as the name Westmorland will become. It then becomes the agent of the warning that ends the poem:

Those who kick their ancestors in the teeth  
Prosper for a time, but in adversity,  
Which soon comes, there is a change. (ll.15-7)

'Swimming the Horses' is not a laureate poem in the institutional sense that 'Hail Teesside!' and, in a qualified sense, 'Going, Going' were; but the consistent identification in Sisson's poetry of the countryside with the crown lends the poem a royalist subtext. It may be argued that the disparity between the 'generations of mud-eaters' and the monarchy, and the level of exploitation of the former by the latter, must be greater than between the rural folk and metropolitan managers. Sisson does not argue, however, that no such social disparity exists; rather, that the monarchy expresses 'the coherence and persistence' (*AL*: 430) of the nation, and that the lower classes perceive this – while for Bagehot and his latter-day reincarnations, 'the sole merit of the "historical, complex, august, theatrical parts" of the constitution, "which it has inherited from the past" is that it "takes" the multitude' (*AL*: 389), the better for the managerial classes to manipulate them.

In 1974, the same year as 'Going, Going' appeared in *High Windows* and the Local Government Act came into effect, Sisson published *In the Trojan Ditch*, his first collected poems and selected translations. Among the translations are versions of Virgil and Horace, whom Petrarch believed to have been poets laureate of Rome. Although some of these are literal renderings, others are contemporary adaptations, most notably his versions of Horace's Ode II.xv and 'Carmen Saeculare'. In these

translations, Sisson utilises Horace's proto-laureate status to position himself (repeating the gesture of 'To the Queen') as modern pseudo-laureate, laying claim to the laureate's cultural centrality while writing from the periphery of the cultural establishment, without the advantages of patronage either from the monarchy or the Arts Council.

The fifteenth poem of Horace's second book of Odes (cf. Horace 2004: 124-7) is unusual in that it does not specify an addressee. The theme of the poem, however, indicates that although the poem does not address the Roman populace directly (as does the sixth ode of the third book), it is a civic poem that looks beyond a single auditor. This is appropriate to its subject, the natural and man-made environment the populace shares. D.S. Carne-Ross notes that 'Sisson gives the theme of Horace's ode a contemporary application', and compares it with Larkin's 'narrower [...] treatment of the theme in "Going, Going"' (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 258). In picking up on their thematic similarity, Carne-Ross acknowledges the poem's relevance to the environmental debate in British poetry. He also, perhaps unwittingly, connects the sub-laureate position of Larkin's poem with the pseudo-laureate position Sisson adopts. As a result, the poems are in dialogue not only with regard to what they say about the environment and modern society, but also what they say about this society's culture of patronage. The poem (*ITD*: 226-7) opens with the complaint that the natural environment is being destroyed by the expanding city:

There will be nothing soon for the plough  
But huge bulks everywhere. On all sides  
Wider than lakes, the city  
Lamp-standards drive out the elms,

Planes, beeches. Once it was fertile here.  
Edges of violets circumscribed  
The grove; there was everywhere something for the  
Nostrils, but now there is nothing. (ll.1-8)

Sisson's version differs from and intensifies Horace's original, as translated by Robert Shepherd (1983: 119-20):

bachelor plane-trees  
usurp the elm; beds of violets

and myrtles and all olfactory crops  
scatter their scents in olive-droves  
which previous owners farmed[.] (ll.4-8)

As Shepherd's (1983: 214) note to lines four to five explains, '[g]rapevines were usually trained upon (or 'married to') *elms*; *plane trees* were unsuitable for this purpose.' Whereas Horace's concern was that the agrarian lifestyle idealized in the culture of the Republic was giving way to an effete taste for 'olfactory crops', in Sisson's version the plane trees and violets are grouped, positively, with the elms; his fear is that soon there will be no trees or flowers at all, entirely replaced by metal streetlamps. Carne-Ross comments that this represents 'urban man hoping to enjoy a ramble in the country' (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 258). But the value of there being 'something for the nostrils' lies not only in the enjoyment of colourful flowers and their smells: the deprivation of these indicates that the society is being organized around people not as embodied subjects with the capacity for physical sensation, but as mechanised workers, the subjects of the 'new serfdom' (*AL*: 205) depicted in his satirical poems.

The intensification continues in the next stanza. Horace's complaint that 'dense laurels exclude the burning strokes | of the sun' (ll.5-6) – another symptom of decadence – is altered in Sisson's version:

Where there were once forests a region of  
Concrete. Until quite recently  
There were meadows at Westminster.  
The salmon leaped where Raleigh was beheaded. (ll.9-12)

Here, it is not just the fact of urban expansion but the form this has taken that Sisson attacks, just as Larkin predicted that 'all that remains | For us will be concrete and tires', although Sisson's unrhymed, non-metrical verse enables him to enact, with the ungainly enjambment 'of | Concrete', the perceived ugliness and clumsiness of the new architecture. Horace inserts the first specific references to Roman history in this third stanza, asserting that the new face of Rome does not follow the precepts 'that Romulus | and rough-bearded Cato prescribed (ll.11-2). Horace here makes explicit that his poem is about '[t]hose who kick their ancestors in the teeth', holding up as exemplars the mythical Romulus and the historical Cato the Elder, who embodied the

Roman ideal of simple, virtuous manhood and patriotism. As when, in *The London Zoo*, Sisson approached London as a historical entity through the classicising perspective of Charles Maurras, translating Horace enables Sisson to situate the capital in history in a way rarely found in his own poetry. Sisson's technique is less direct than Horace's, though, reminding his reader that there were once fields even in the heart of London, and that '[t]he salmon leaped where Raleigh was beheaded'. Raleigh recurs in Sisson's work as the 'Protestant hero, and superb poet' (*AL*: 191) to whose time and language he linked William Barnes; he sets Raleigh over and against Walter Bagehot as one with 'the moral strength which comes of a readiness to contemplate stabbing, and of the necessity in some circumstances of facing the block', and who 'drank from the bottom of the well before he had finished' (*AL*: 246). His appearance in the poem, therefore, sets off more associations than a simplistic harking back to a paradisiacal merry England. Raleigh is pictured in the poem at the moment of his death by decapitation in 1618, an example of '[t]he old power of death that symbolized sovereign power' before it was 'supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life' (Foucault 1990: 139-40). He thus illustrates an older relationship of sovereign power and its subjects' bodies, one that (as Sisson might argue) respected their embodiedness even as it put them to death. Furthermore, by the way in which Sisson deploys this synecdoche within an image of natural fertility, with salmon leaping in the Thames, this relationship is presented as a natural, healthy one, implying that the subsequent relationship of subjects to state is as unnatural and damaging as the concrete buildings described a few lines before. Raleigh was a victim of the power of life and death exercised by the sovereign, yet he appears in the poem to vindicate that arrangement.

Petrarch (1955: 310) quotes lines nine and ten of this Ode in his laureation speech, interpreting the shade of the laurel tree in terms of the connection between sovereigns and poets: 'for it may symbolise the rest that is due to the former after their toils in warfare, and for the latter after their toils in study'. In the poem's rhetorical structure, however, the shady laurel groves are seen as a decadent innovation, perhaps suggesting that the intimate relationship between poets and their sovereign is one of the ills of the time. In Sisson's version, 'forests' have been replaced by 'a region of | Concrete', once again endowing the things Horace criticises with a positive valence. Within the context of laureation, this suggests that sovereign patronage, whatever its

flaws, has now been obliterated. Raleigh was a writer as well as a courtier and explorer, but did not make a career for himself as a poet. In an essay published in *X*, Sisson notes that there was in the seventeenth century ‘no living for the writer as such’ (*AL*: 171); the great writers of that era ‘were gentlemen, above the necessity of earning a living, or earning it in some way other than writing, like Milton or Marvell’ and ‘the clergy, who produced masterpieces in the course of their proper vocations’ (*AL*: 171). In short, it was impossible to ‘live by “being a writer,” or “being a poet,” if you’re prepared to join the cultural entertainment industry, and take handouts from the Arts Council’ (Gourevitch 2007: 215), as Larkin would state in 1982. There was private patronage; but Sisson’s point is that the great seventeenth century writers were not great because they had been liberated from practical concerns, or wrote to please a market. In the poem, Raleigh symbolises this earlier relationship between poetry and politics, whereby the poet more often has direct experience of life in the centres of power and occasionally enjoys direct patronage, rather than through the medium of a government-funded committee. This occurs within a society governed by the subject-sovereign relationship defined above, all naturalised by the image of the leaping salmon.

Horace then elaborates on his evocation of the old order, in which ‘private wealth was small, | the commonweal great’ (ll.13-4), describing how this was evident in their architecture:

no private  
North-facing shady porches  
were then laid out with ten-foot rules[.] (ll.14-6)

Sisson moves on to discuss architecture, but diverges from the original in that he follows up the subtext of patronage from the previous stanza:

Once there was only nature for ornament.  
Then there was ornament and art flourished;  
Now there is only the South Bank  
And, of course, the Arts Council. (ll.13-16)

The South Bank Centre, a concrete structure in the Brutalist style, was built in 1968, the year of C. Day Lewis’s laureation and the publication of Sisson’s first translations from Virgil and Horace. Whereas in Horace’s poem the ‘North-facing shady porches’

symbolise the decadent individualism of Rome after the demise of the Republic, in Sisson's translation the South Bank Centre is presented as a dispiriting monument to the government's post-war expansion into the arts, turning them into an area of policy managed by bureaucrats and committees. It can be argued that Sisson is unfair in this: unlike poetry, which can be written and read in private, other arts such as drama, music and painting require public spaces such as galleries and theatres. As a poet, Sisson is therefore able to criticise the Arts Council thanks to the relative independence of his own artistic medium; but he can be accused of being disingenuous in not taking account of the different needs of other arts. Sisson's achievement in the poem, though, is to have articulated the connection between modern state patronage, the condition of the environment and the experience of place, the position of the individual as an embodied subject within the welfare state, and the cultural history of England and Great Britain. If Larkin's 'Going, Going' was a sub-laureate poem commissioned by a government department, and was censored because he attacked the government for what he saw as its complicity in environmental and cultural destruction, then it may be that this conflict of interests rather than the quality of the verse itself led him to say of his own poem, '[i]t makes my flesh creep' (Larkin 1992: 459). Although writing privately, without royal or government patronage, Sisson rhetorically positions himself as a Horatian laureate, the better to critique the relationship of artist and state that Larkin found so fraught, and to connect this to the wider threat that the modern state poses, as he would argue, to the environment and the wider body politic.

In the poem's final stanza, Horace recalls that in the past:

the law forbade abuse of the common turf  
and enjoined the adornment at public expense  
of the towns and temples  
with fresh-hewn marble. (ll.17-20)

Sisson's version, after the liberal adaptations of the previous two stanzas, is closer in detail to the original:

It was not laws but a less abstract  
Technology that made the turf spring.  
The churches in those days, you may  
Remember, were built of stone. (ll.17-20)

The second line of this stanza refers back to one of Sisson's own poems, to the ending of 'A and B' (*CP*: 48-9):

See there where a party of picnickers  
Trace their way over the springy turf  
And the world proceeds without understanding.  
Perhaps all will be well. (ll.35-8)

The reference to springy turf connects the earlier poem – a dialogue with a Bagehot-like antagonist about the body politic, the countryside, religion and patriotism – with the later, the difference between them lying not only in that the translation relates these themes to that of patronage and the poet's place in society, but also in the poem's tone. Whereas in 'A and B' Sisson's persona was passionate but defensive, translating Horace enables him to write with the assurance of laureate authority. Horatian translation has been a constant feature of English poetry, practised by many earlier laureates such as Tennyson, Wordsworth, Dryden, and the proto-laureate Ben Jonson. As well as enabling Sisson to follow in the tracks of these English poets laureate, to translate Horace into twentieth-century Britain is to perpetuate a cultural continuity of the kind the poem itself presents as under threat. Whereas Larkin, in 'Going, Going', associates England with guildhalls and carved choirs, elevating these synecdoches out of their historical contexts so that they can only be nostalgically pined for as inevitably past, translation of Horace is itself part of a living tradition, and acknowledges this branch of English culture's historicity.

Another poem, written in 1968 but unpublished until 1984, attacks the Arts Council through a description of architecture. 'The State of the Arts' (*CP*: 154-5) is 'dedicated to The Lord Goodman', the chairperson of the Arts Council (amongst many other committees) from 1965 till 1972, who presided over the creation of the South Bank Centre. The poem's title plays on 'state' as in condition and as government: the state, therefore, has turned itself into the protector and promoter of the arts, and consequently, the arts are in a good state – 'state of the art' suggesting innovation and the cutting-edge. This is the public image the Arts Council advertises to the world, and which the poem then deflates. '36 poets of the London area | Assembled at 105 Piccadilly' (ll.1-2) – the address of the Arts Council's head office:



The rent is high, explained the curator,  
But we were attracted by the situation.  
Have you seen our furniture?  
I do not know how many pounds per square foot  
For the Council Chamber, but then, think of the members,  
'Selected for pre-eminence in the Arts'  
– A Sunday-paper novelist, and some others.  
Into whose hands, Muses, are you fallen? (ll.5-12)

The emphasis on its grand offices presents the Arts Council as more concerned with 'feed[ing] reputatious mouths' ('Swimming the Horses', l.10) than with good writing. The poem ends,

Poets, tumble downstairs.  
They are marble, and you should be grateful.  
There is safety in numbers. (ll.17-9)

The 'fresh-hewn marble' that symbolises common wealth in Horace's Ode II.xv is travestied as an emblem of the Arts Council's self-interest. The final line refers to the '36 poets' who are being shown around the offices, the tacit assumption being that out of thirty-six from London alone, few are likely to be much good. The argument, again, is that the Arts Council raises employment levels rather than artistic standards. The conclusion may also be read retrospectively in light of Sisson's description of modern economics 'contemplating numbers over a great void', implicating the poets in Bagehot's materialistic nihilism.

The poem includes an attack, more personal and partisan, on Arnold Goodman:

Presiding over the whole, like a frog,  
Mr Wilson's lawyer, 55, unmarried,  
Whose career dates from the Labour victory  
(See *Who's Who*). (ll.13-6)

Sisson's antipathy towards him is partly due to Goodman's centrality to the left-wing establishment and the Labour party, which Sisson saw as primarily responsible for the current 'state of the arts'. Sisson no doubt saw him as one of Bagehot's avatars: Goodman, Brian Brivati (2009) observes, 'liked being at the centre; he liked doors opening, people taking his calls, people knowing who he was', and was 'absolutely at sea with people for whom such things were meaningless or trivial'. The mention of

the fact that Goodman was unmarried may also be taken as a criticism: Goodman's 'sexuality was deeply repressed' (ibid.), and as we have seen with regard to 'A Letter to John Donne', Sisson has greater sympathy with those whose sexuality is more overt. This kind of sideswipe is certainly cruel, as is his characterisation of Goodman presiding 'like a frog'; one unpublished manuscript poem about Goodman is entitled 'The Toad of the Arts' (ASSL DM1275/1/36). But like the innuendo about Goodman's sexual repression, the fun Sisson makes of Goodman's figure is related to his ideology: Goodman's weight makes him a hypertrophied image of 'the pot-bellied bankrupt' with 'a porridge of news-talk | Obscuring his grimace' in 'At an International Conference' (ll.13, 15-6). An alternative attitude to Goodman's physique can be inferred, however, from Lucien Freud's 1987 etching, 'Lord Goodman in his Yellow Pyjamas'. Goodman provided Freud, who was himself a contributor to *X*, with the kind of fleshy sitter he preferred: the image demonstrates that a corpulent body can be an object of aesthetic pleasure, and may even be a better example of embodiment (which Sisson values so highly) than an averagely built person's.

Sisson's animadversions on Goodman may have had other motivations, connected with the tensions arising from his dual career as a poet and administrator. The manuscript version of this poem in Sisson's notebooks (ASSL DM1275/1/36), dated 22/6/1968, immediately precedes an undated draft of a letter that reveals a still more personal and problematic connection between Sisson and the Arts Council. The letter is undated, and does not name an addressee; yet the fact that Sisson drafted it by hand, presumably before typing it up – a unique example of this practice among his archived papers – suggests that it was of particular importance to him.

Since you have been good enough to write to me yourself, in reply to my letter to Abercrombie,<sup>7</sup> perhaps I may now put the matter more informally.

First let me clear up a misunderstanding. I have not claimed the right to know the identity of the other persons being considered for the job. Nor have I at any time asked.

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<sup>7</sup> Nigel J. Abercrombie, Secretary-General of the ACGB 1963-8; see Harris 1970: 75.

You say then there is absolutely no reason why a member of the Council and one of the panels should not be eligible for consideration ~~for the job~~. Of course I realise now that this is your view. But it certainly surprised me greatly when it first dawned on me that this was how you were proceeding. That was when I heard gossip to the effect that the post had originally been offered to a member of one of the panels. I then realised that you would think it perfectly all right to appoint another candidate who was a Council and/or Panel Member.

It surprises me that you should think that way. It is clearly an important issue of policy and I take it that you have discussed it as usual with the Council. The Arts Council is in a very delicate position. It can hardly be necessary for me to spell it out. The Council gives money – & public money at that – to writers and artists. However well it is run there is bound to be the suspicion that the atmosphere is a little too cosy, & that money goes more often than it should to those who happen to know the right people. Will your appointment help this? I should have thought not.

[End of paragraph scribbled out]

You mention the case of Sir William Emrys Williams.<sup>8</sup> You will know how good a precedent that is.

I quite understand that the appointment that you are now proposing was not a foregone conclusion. If my information is correct the [?] candidate was second in line of your nominees. What [?] at the end I shall, of course, never know.

By all means send the correspondence to the Minister; as well as my application and references. You do not mention my request that the correspondence should be sent to the Council. I hope I may take it that it will be.

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<sup>8</sup> Secretary-General of the ACGB 1951-63; see Harris 1970: 74-5.

Finally, let me say that, [inserted: I realise that?] as an unsuccessful candidate, [illegible] I may not be the best person to judge of the [?] But there are some [?] elements in my [scored out: complaint; revision illegible], I think.

Sisson, in an essay written for the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* (Sarkissian 1986: 292-309), writes of the frustration caused his busy career, which curtailed the time he had for writing, and sheds light on the context of his letter:

[m]y efforts to get out of the Civil Service were intermittent, as something of sufficient interest, and sufficiently remunerated, turned up. Among the jobs I might have had, but for some last minute hitch, were the Chair of Government in my old university, Bristol, and the Secretaryship of the Arts Council of Great Britain. The nature of the hitches is somewhat speculative, and each had its comedy – not so funny at the time – involving eminent personages in the dark world of officials and official appointees. (Ibid.: 303)

The official appointee who became Secretary-General in 1968 was Hugh Willatt, ‘long associated with the Arts Council,’ and who ‘played an important role in the development of its diverse subsidy programs; appointed member of the drama panel in 1955, he was its chairman from 1957 to 1968’ (Harris 1970: 76). The letter’s addressee, a highly placed official responsible for the selection of the new Secretary-General, is mostly likely to be Lord Goodman. Sisson had applied for the post, and was apparently almost successful, until it was given to Willatt. The question is, why would Sisson, who had already attacked government patronage of poets, want a job in the organisation responsible for such provision? There is the simple reason he gave later, that it would have been less time-consuming and more interesting than his work in the Ministry of Labour. There is also the fact that ‘no secretary-general [had] previously pursued a career primarily as a creative artist. All holders of the office [had] been administrators, either in government or in voluntary organizations’ (ibid.: 75). Sisson may have felt that, as the author of three collections of poetry, two novels, and a volume of critical essays, as well as translations from German, French and Latin, he would be better equipped with artistic experience than most applicants, and might therefore have some positive influence on the Arts Council’s dispensations.

Evidence that Sisson felt conflicted in his position as a poet-administrator can, however, be found in his poetry. Another of Sisson's Horatian translations renders the final ode of the third book – Horace's claim to enduring greatness – in Augustan couplets. Unlike II.xv, his version of III.xxx (*CT*: 307; cf. Horace 2004: 216-7) for the most part does not modernise the details of the original poem:

While Pontifex and silent Vestal climb  
The Capitol, it shall be said that I  
– Where Aufidus roars and yet the land is dry,  
Where Daunus ruled the country people, great  
Although he was not born to high estate –  
First brought Greek lyricism to our verse. (ll.10-15)

This changes, however, at the poem's conclusion:

Melpomene, the honour this deserves  
Is yours, and yet the laurel crown which serves  
To mark the triumph, properly belongs  
To the executive who wrote the songs. (ll.16-19)

Victoria Moul (*Age*: 64) comments that '[o]nly in the very final line does Sisson seal his divergence in tone and effect from the Latin with a significant departure in the literal details of his translation', and interprets this divergence as an 'acknowledgment of the limits of translation':

Horace would never have called himself an 'executive' – Sisson does so here only because he is writing, as always, as himself, an English poet who does not like to boast; but also because he writes as a translator.

If, however, one discounts the assertion that Sisson is writing 'as himself', we may interpret this surprising ending as reconfiguring the whole poem into a satire upon modern laureateship in the era of the Arts Council: rather than the poet demanding that Melpomene 'willingly | wreath my hair with Apollo's laurel' (Shepherd 1983: 164), the crown of poetic honour goes to an administrative 'executive', who thus usurps the glory Petrarch (1955: 309) argued was due to poets and sovereigns. Alternatively, one might accept that Sisson translates this ode 'as himself', but find another motivation for 'the self-deprecatory tone that marks the English phrase "the executive who wrote the songs"' (*Age*: 64). Although by the publication of *In the*

*Trojan Ditch* in 1974 Sisson had taken early retirement, he wrote and published his first versions of Horace while still working in the Civil Service. The internal conflict this must have caused him is visible in the poems, which sometimes echo the wording of his prose: in *The Case of Walter Bagehot* he had written that ‘it will not quite do, in a commonwealth, to count heads as one counts money’; in ‘Sumptuary Laws’ (*CP*: 170), one of the new poems collected in *In the Trojan Ditch* and thus written after 1968, in the same period as the study of Bagehot, Sisson writes:

So outwardly and above  
 We turn, gracious and empty  
 The old hypocrites, counting the stars,  
 Loving the children, counting them like money. (ll.13-6)

The conclusion of Sisson’s translation of Ode III.xxx therefore makes a satirical attack on modern laureateship, but its ‘self-deprecating tone’ is due to Sisson’s awareness of his own conflicted position as an executive and poet. In other poems, Sisson uses Latin literature to signal his isolation, as a poet, from the centres of power and patronage. In ‘No Address’ (*CP*: 152), drafted the month before ‘The State of the Arts’ (ASSL DM1275/1/36), Sisson invokes Horace along with Pliny and Cicero, and petitions them to ‘talk to me: | I am a dead language also’ (ll.4-5). He then complains that ‘[t]he poetry owners’ – such as the Arts Council panellists – ‘cannot make me out || Nor I them’ (ll.6-7). ‘I am no man, Caesar, to stand by you’ (l.10) can mean simply that the poet cannot compare to the man of action and maker of laws; but in the context of laureation it takes on two further meanings: that the poet will not ‘stand by’ Caesar in the sense of supporting and defending him; nor will he ‘stand by’ him on a stage for the laureation ceremony, accepting reciprocal glorification as did Petrarch. In ‘Horace’ (*CP*: 115-6)), Sisson tells him, ‘my living has come too hard; | Teach me therefore you rentier muse’, alluding to the contrast between the Roman poet, who was granted an independent living by Augustus, and his own circumstances, in which he can only write ‘in such moments as are missed by the forces which organize my life as administrator and *père de famille*’ (*OLO*: 23). Sisson also invokes Ovid to dramatize his sense of cultural and political isolation. In ‘Hod Hill’ (*CP*: 153), Sisson addresses Ovid, imagining that he was exiled by Augustus not to the Black Sea but to ‘Hod Hill in Dorset’ (l.2), the site of a Roman camp. The rest of Sisson’s poem translates passages from Ovid’s *Tristia* to his own imaginative territory in the Vale of

Blackmore, identifying himself with the ostracised Roman. ‘Ovid in Pontus’ (*CP*: 158) repeats the gesture, ventriloquizing Ovid to project a relationship in which his readership ‘eat every word I mean [...] and excrete pity’ (ll.3-4), rather than returning praise.

If Sisson’s versions of Odes II.xv and III.xxx diverge from their originals to make satirical, critical points about government patronage, the counterweight to these is his ‘Carmen Saeculare’, ‘an imitation in the full eighteenth-century manner’, as D.S. Carne-Ross describes it, ‘with Rome and Roman circumstance replaced by England and English circumstance’ (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 51). Indeed, when first published in Sisson’s 1968 pamphlet *Roman Poems*, it was entitled ‘Public Ode’, with a note to state that his merely ‘bears some resemblance’ (*RP*: 3) to Horace’s original. The Latin poem (cf. Horace 2004: 262-7) is ‘a religious, patriotic ode commissioned by Augustus’ (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 51), that is to say, a prototypical laureate poem, commissioned by a sovereign with whom the poet enjoyed a personal relationship. But this privileged position entails difficulties for the poet and the translator. As Carne-Ross observes, the poem is ‘a prayer for the prosperity of Rome designed to support the moral reforms which the princeps was calling for, and in particular to endorse his proposed marriage laws’ (ibid.: 51-2); thus, ‘Horace felt himself called on to assert that the traditional Roman virtues were now truly returning, a claim that many must have treated with scepticism’ (ibid.: 52). Furthermore, the poem is even ‘more difficult [...] for Sisson to English in the decade after the swinging, miniskirted sixties’ (ibid.: 52) – in fact, right at its peak. The poem, then, is in part concerned with the relationship of the law to the healthy growth of the body politic. Horace imprecates Diana (in James Michie’s translation (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 290-3)):

Moon, gentle midwife, punctual in thy office,  
Lucine, Ilithyia, Genitalis –  
Be called whichever title is most pleasing –  
Care for our mothers’ health.

Goddess, make strong our youth and bless the Senate’s  
Decrees rewarding parenthood and marriage,  
That from the new laws Rome may reap a lavish  
Harvest of boys and girls[.] (ll.13-20)

In this passage, Sisson (*ITD*: 221-2): first makes a relatively close approximation to Horace, from which he then subtly departs:

The time will come to open thighs in child-birth.  
Gently, supervising god, look after the mothers.  
Bringing to light is the true meaning of genitals.

Could you bring up these children without laws?  
The statute-book is crowded, what wonder therefore  
If all that interests them is an obscure kindness? (ll.10-5)

Sisson reflects upon the youth culture of the 1960s (the belief that ‘All you need is love’, for example) with perhaps surprising sympathy, rather than (like Augustus) proposing new legislation. In the context of the welfare state, this may even suggest that government should roll back legislation concerned with the body politic. At the eighth stanza, Sisson relinquishes the imprecatory address, offering a description of natural fecundity:

Rich in apples, yes, and seething with cattle,  
The succulent earth is dressed in barley whiskers.  
And grow plump, embryo, from the natural gifts. (ll.22-4)

Whereas in the Ovidian title-poem from *Metamorphoses* (*CP*: 118-27) an aborted foetus is described as an ‘unripe apple plucked within | The forest of the uterus’ (ll.169-70), and in Ode II.xv Sisson describes a devastated landscape where ‘[o]nce it was fertile’, here Sisson presents a pastoral image of natural fecundity. Having dispensed with the classical deities, reducing them to the elemental presences of sun and moon, Sisson implies the health of the body politic as dependent upon its intimacy with the natural processes that were threatened in II.xv:

The sun will shine, as long as the boys are suppliant,  
That will keep sickness away; and you girls,  
Listen, for the moon will hear you if you do. (ll.25-7)

The themes of patriotism and traditional piety, which Horace exhorts, come to the fore in the last movement of Sisson’s translation. As Carne-Ross comments, ‘Sisson, a man of the old covenant, a Christian, a patriot, a monarchist, finally comes down plump on affirmation’ (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 52):



There is God. There are no Muses without him.  
He it is who raises the drug-laden limbs  
Which were too heavy until he stood at Saint Martin's.

It is he who holds London from Wapping to Richmond,  
May he hold it a little longer, Saint George's flag  
Flap strenuously in the wind from the west country. (ll.47-52)

Here, Sisson's affirmation of God's existence and care for England – specifically England, with the flag of Saint George, rather than the United Kingdom – is set in the context of specific locations in London, while 'the wind from the west country' suggests the inspiration of his own West Country background. The succeeding lines then extol the monarchy and its divine appointment:

Have you heard the phrase: 'the only ruler of princes'?  
Along the Thames, in the Tower, there is the crown.  
I only wish God may hear my children's prayers. (ll.53-5)

'The only ruler of princes' is an acclamation addressed to God, from the *Book of Common Prayer*. Sisson refers to it in his essay 'Autobiographical Reflections on Politics', where it concludes a declaration of Sisson's High Tory view of the relationship between Church and state:

[a] man born in England can hardly be more faithful to his country than when he uses, in one of those parish churches where it has been used for so long, the magnificent Prayer for the King's Majesty or the Queen's: 'O Lord our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of Princes...'  
(AL: 146-7)

In the poem, however, by inserting the acclamation in an interrogative clause, 'replacing affirmation by questions' (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 52), Sisson creates a more diffident tone than is found in Horace. The original poem concludes:

That Jove and all the gods approve these wishes  
We, the trained chorus, singers of the praises  
Of Phoebus and Diana, carry homewards  
Happy, unshaken hope. (ll.73-6)

In the final stanza of Sisson's, God, and indeed the poet, await some form of response from the populace:

He bends now over Trafalgar Square.  
If there should be a whisper he would hear it.  
Are not these drifting figures the chorus? (ll.56-8)

Carne-Ross suggests that 'these drifting figure are closer to Eliot's hapless crowd flowing over London Bridge than to the comely Roman children who sang Horace's hymn' (Carne-Ross and Haynes 1996: 53). The accuracy of this juxtaposition goes beyond the geographical proximity of about two miles between Trafalgar Square and London Bridge. The crowd in Eliot's poem are inhabitants of the waste land, and subjects therefore of the Fisher King, the *roi mehaignié* later seen in the poem 'fishing in the dull canal | On a winter evening round behind the gashouse' (ll.189-90), and who, in the Grail legend, subsists on the sacraments until he can be healed by the touch of the Spear of Destiny. But if the Fisher King, as Agamben interprets the myth, is a paradigmatic figure of the separation of authority from power, then the drifting figures in Sisson's poem are no less subjects of a kingdom in which the monarch's powers have been delegated to government ministers. Read in this light, Sisson's translation does not propose radical constitutional change for the improvement of circumstances, least of all disestablishment or abolition of the monarchy (the threats Sisson perceives in Bagehot's work). Rather, as the Fisher King is maintained by the divine body of Christ, and the monarch of Great Britain is sustained (the poem suggests through allusion to the Prayer Book) by God. Moreover, the poem implies that the population must 'remember the old worship' (l.47), as Sisson and T.S. Eliot before him did: that only through this lies 'the all but impossible possibility', as Carne-Ross puts it, 'of recovering the old English virtues' (1996: 52).

In this poem, therefore, Sisson fulfils the traditional role of a poet laureate, celebrating the monarchy, its historical persistence, and its divine sanction. Yet Sisson's is a more qualified affirmation than Horace's. The conception of the monarchy and the body politic, united by incorporation into the mystical body of Christ, is an old, even an old-fashioned one, and though Sisson writes that Horace is 'invaluable in our time not least because of his lack of sympathy with our most current prejudices' (*ITD*: 161), the repeated questions ('[m]ight you not even

remember...’ ‘[c]an you remember...’ ‘[h]ave you heard...’) seem to voice Sisson’s doubts about whether the situation is not beyond recovery. Carne-Ross praises the translation for the reason that ‘Sisson will not, as Horace felt himself compelled to do, affirm more than he himself can believe’, and declares that ‘[h]is imitation is a finer, truer poem than the stately original’ (Carne-Ross and Haynes: 53). Again, though, his wording is polyvalent and precise: the original is stately in tone, but also in the sense of having been commissioned by the head of state to promote his rule. Sisson is unencumbered by such an obligation: the poem’s occasion is his private encounter with Horace’s original, rather than a public event of state, such as the investiture of the Prince of Wales for which C. Day Lewis wrote his one traditional laureate poem. Day Lewis (1992: 725), in ‘For the Investiture’, describes how ‘[a]nxieties and feuds lie buried | Under a ceremonial joy’ (ll.2-3), and concludes with the affirmation that ‘[o]ver the tuneful land prevails | One song, one prayer – God bless the Prince of Wales’ (ll.23-4). If the poem is less powerful, less of an artistic success than Sisson’s, it is at least in part because its author is duty-bound to hide any personal doubts or reservations, the expression of which alloy Sisson’s poem yet make it stronger by internalising the scepticism Carne-Ross notes is likely to attend it. Paradoxically, therefore, while Sisson’s views of the constitution and the nature of modern government were informed by his direct experience of work in the Civil Service, it was his distance as a poet from the centres of cultural power in the Arts Council as well as the royal household that enabled him in these translations to make such a multifaceted critique of bureaucratic patronage, and a resonant celebration of the British monarchy.

#### Laureateship and the Silver Jubilee

Three years after the publication of *In the Trojan Ditch*, Elizabeth II’s silver jubilee provided poets with an opportunity to reflect on the monarchy. The incumbent Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman, was a modern laureate in the sense that by the time of his appointment he was already a well-known radio broadcaster and television personality; yet his laureate verses were conservative in comparison with Day Lewis’s, in that they largely returned to celebrating about royal birthdays, weddings, and occasions of state. Thus he provided lyrics for a ‘Jubilee Hymn’ (Russell 1981: 197-8), performed in the Albert Hall in collaboration with another royal appointee in

the arts, Malcolm Williamson, Master of the Queen's Music. The poem entreats, 'To fire us and inspire us | God save to us our Queen (ll.3-4). But it appears the occasion is inadequate to fire and inspire the Laureate. The poem, written to be sung by many voices together, speaks for 'our monarch and her people | United yet and free' (ll.21-2), ignoring the political tensions that surrounded the event: James Callaghan's Labour government had a minority in Parliament, forcing them to make a pact with the Liberals in order to survive a vote of no confidence. Outside of Parliament, despite the many street parties held for the jubilee, popular disrespect was apparent from the fact that the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' reached number two in the singles chart (Ward 2004: 34). Sisson, however, was among several poets who contributed poems to the special quarto volume *Happy and Glorious*, a copy of which was due to be signed by all contributors and presented to the Queen. 'For the Queen's Jubilee' (*CP*: 288) does not refer directly to the controversies surrounding the event, but begins in a downbeat manner at odds with official optimism:

What use in following  
 So many queens and kings,  
 Elizabeth of our spring,  
 Elizabeth of autumn now?

What use, unless you see  
 Music and poetry  
 Standing to your honour,  
 As we do now? (ll.1-8)

The double invocation of 'Elizabeth of our spring' and 'Elizabeth of autumn' recalls the two Elizabeths of 'To the Queen': the 'first Elizabeth' and her modern namesake. Here, though, the poet tacitly admits that, shorn of executive power, the monarchy counts for little unless it is glorified by the arts. Even the emblems of sovereignty are perishable: '[a] coronation robe | May run in holes' (ll.9-10) and '[t]he Koh-in-Noor be sold | To pay the grocer' (ll.11-2). Sisson perhaps alludes here to contemporary politics: Margaret Thatcher, a grocer's daughter, had become leader of the Tories, whom Sisson described in 1976 as 'a political party which has no conception at all' (*AL*: 530) of the meaning of Toryism, being even more committed to 'the pursuit of lucre' (*AL*: 424) than the incumbent government. In the face of this increasing materialism, Sisson invokes the Muses, identifying them with '[t]he severe line the draftsman traces | Whether anyone likes it or not' (ll.17-8), and '[t]he clearly

expressed thought | That takes the smile off people's faces' (ll.19-20). Addressing the Queen, he asserts that it is these arts 'which can save | Your reign in memory' (ll.25-6). Sisson thus reaches the extreme formulation of the relationship between sovereign glory and poetry, whereby the sovereign is dependent upon the poet. Petrarch (1955: 308) cites Horace's Ode IV.ix to argue that '[m]any mighty men and warriors, and others who have deserved eternal memory have passed into oblivion simply because they had not the good fortune to be recorded by capable authors', justifying the institution of laureateship on the grounds of the sovereign's need for the poet rather than vice versa.. Sisson comes to the same conclusion in this late pseudo-laureate poem: although '[m]usic and poetry' honour the monarch, Sisson tells her in the final lines that '[y]our sceptre, your sway | Still live, *for* poetry' (ll.27-8; my italics).

Philip Larkin, too, was asked to commemorate the jubilee in verse. His poem reads in its entirety:

In times when nothing stood  
But worsened or grew strange,  
There was one constant good:  
She did not change. (Larkin 2012: 116)

The quatrain, with another by Ted Hughes, was incised on a stone set in Queen Square, Bloomsbury, near the offices of their publisher, Faber and Faber. Neil Roberts (2005) comments that 'as the work of the poets who were to be the two main candidates for the Laureateship when John Betjeman died in 1984,' the poems 'give a fascinating insight into what kind of Laureate each might turn out to be'. Roberts argues that Larkin's is informed by 'the tradition of lament for the mutability of earthly life, and the yearning for constancy, traditionally attributed to the stars', which is true; but his comment that the queen 'is merely a symbol of this constancy' (ibid.) overlooks the possibility that the monarch might have a specific constitutional role (as Sisson would argue) in ensuring continuity. This is not readily apparent from the poem itself, in which the queen – referred to only by a pronoun – is counterpoised to an all-encompassing generality. This generality is given concrete detail, however, in another quatrain Larkin wrote for the jubilee:

After Healey's trading figures,  
After Wilson's squalid crew,

And the rising tide of niggers –  
What a treat to look at you. (Larkin 2012: 318)

As Roberts (2005) wryly notes, ‘we know what it was that “worsened, or grew strange”’. While acknowledging that ‘Larkin's reputation as a poet has survived the scandal of his racism’ (ibid.), Roberts allows the reader to imagine for themselves ‘what would have happened if that scandal had engulfed the Laureateship, the monarchy, and the whole network of conservative institutions of which the Laureateship is a very small part’ (ibid.). But though it is necessary and right to arraign Larkin’s racism, it should be noted that the slur is grouped with the other perceived evils of government. There is the same note of personal dislike and partisan contempt for the incumbent government as evidenced in Sisson’s ‘The State of the Arts’, yet Larkin’s squib also contrasts the monarch – regarded as an aesthetic object – with the cabinet that, the year before, had negotiated an International Monetary Fund loan on the condition that Britain’s finances be supervised by the IMF. What ‘worsened’, therefore, was not only the perceived effect of black immigration, but moreover (in point of weight if not emotive impact) the governance of the country. But if, as Sisson repeatedly argues, it is the crown that maintains the populace as a unified body politic, and if (as Larkin’s poem implies) immigrants are unintegrated within this, the question arises as to whether the conception of nationhood and sovereignty we see in Sisson’s work, with its internal dialectic of government and kingship and its relationship with aesthetics, is irredeemably tainted with racism of the kind displayed in Larkin’s private jubilee poem.

#### IV. 'I Came from Troy': Virgil, Prophecy, and National Identity

C.H. Sisson's translations of Horace from the late 1960s enabled him to engage with contemporary issues of sovereignty, government, patronage and the environment by setting these within a broader historical context, reaching back through British history to the Classical past. But Horace was not the only Latin poet with whom Sisson was then engaged. *Roman Poems* contains two Horatian poems, but three based on poems by Horace's contemporary and friend, Virgil. Indeed, Sisson's Virgilian translations make up a large part of his work in translation. Moreover, in translating Virgil Sisson would touch upon the fundamental concerns of his thinking about history and the nation, while engaging with the most urgent and discomfiting issues in British politics after the Second World War. To understand how this is so, we must first account for the changing politics of Virgilian translation in mid-twentieth century Britain.

On 7 March 1969, C. Day Lewis, by then in the second year of his laureateship, delivered the second Jackson Knight Memorial Lecture at the University of Exeter. Rather than confine himself to Jackson Knight's field of expertise – he had been Reader in Classical Literature at the University – Day Lewis (1970: 6) gave a more wide-ranging lecture 'On Translating Poetry', but made special mention of his own experience of translating the classics, offering his audience 'a bit of autobiography':

[w]hen I began to translate the *Georgics* of Virgil, in 1939, I had just moved house from an urban to a rural area. As I worked on into the early summer of 1940, I felt more and more the kind of patriotism which I imagine was Virgil's – the natural piety, the heightened sense of the genius of place, the passion to praise and protect one's roots, or to put down roots somewhere while there is still time, which it takes a seismic event such as war to reveal to most of us rootless moderns. More and more I felt buoyed up by a feeling that England was speaking to me through Virgil, and that the Virgil of the *Georgics* was speaking to me through the English farmers and labourers with whom I consorted.

This account of hearing England speak through Virgil, and vice versa, ties together several ideas about modern England and the classics. In the first place, it gives a

privileged position to the countryside: the England to which Day Lewis feels patriotic loyalty is not an urban centre, not even the capital city, but an area of farmland, where the ‘natural piety’ he feels is tacitly connected with the natural processes of germination most evident in the country. But it is not only an England of grain-threshing and sheep-shearing: Day Lewis claims to intuit, in an almost spiritualist mode, a Virgilian presence in the rural population. This may be an allusion to Jackson Knight’s practice of consulting a medium who claimed to be in contact with Virgil’s spirit (Wiseman 1992: 201); but the argument Day Lewis appears to make is that the true, essential England has Latin civilisation as part of its makeup. Moreover, although for most of ‘us rootless moderns’ this connection with the classical past appears to have been severed, it persists – not, as one might expect, in university Classics departments, but amongst ‘farmers and labourers’, even if they are unlikely to have read Virgil or any other classical author. Day Lewis claims to find that the countryside, even now that farming relies on modern technology such as the combine harvester, still communicates something unchanged from Virgil’s time down to the twentieth century. On another, more subjective level, he describes how the sense of his own past was intensified by translating the *Georgics* in the South West of England where he had first read them at school twenty years previously. Yet this ‘heightened sense of the past’ is interwoven, in his account, with a sense of the past ‘which, through the European tradition of Virgil, I shared with many’ (Day Lewis 1970: 6) – a sense that Virgil, as the ‘Father of the West’, as Theodor Haecker (1934) called him, unites England and the rest of Great Britain to Europe, and even that Great Britain’s place in European history may be articulated through Virgil.

The year before, in his privately printed pamphlet *Roman Poems*, Sisson had also engaged with Virgil in ‘Hactenus arborum cultus’ (CP: 154), based on the second book of the *Georgics*. The poem begins as a relatively close translation of the Latin (cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 136-7), albeit in short-lined free verse:

Up to now the fields  
Have been ploughed and the stars  
Sent us home to our cottages  
At the end of the day.  
There has been the vine,  
Even on these hills, and the slow  
Growing olive. (ll.1-7)



Sisson then introduces a specifically English location:

Not only the Cotswold shepherd,  
But I too, with even pace,  
Treading where the wind can be heard  
Or some horn perhaps. (ll. 8-11)

Thus far, Sisson appears to be making the same argument as Day Lewis in his lecture, that there is a continuity between the life of the country that Virgil knew and that of modern-day Britain – until he declares emphatically that ‘this is over’ (l.11). The remaining, completely un-Virgilian lines describe a desolate landscape:

Not even metal ringing  
At the smithy, or a voice.  
Water sucking the rotting  
Piers,  
The algae lifted  
Tide by tide.  
A single gull  
Banking, back to the dead sea,  
Cries. (ll.12-20)

Victoria Moul (*Age*: 56) argues that here ‘we see Sisson constructing his English tone, and indeed his English landscape, from the distance that he perceives between himself and a Latin classic’. Not only a Latin classic, in fact, but also between the present and what he projects as the recent English past: the belief that, as Raymond Williams (2011: 9) found it formulated in one book, ‘[a] way of life that has come down to us from the days of Virgil has suddenly ended’. Evidently Sisson and Day Lewis conceive of a classical admixture within the English national identity in very similar terms, though Sisson takes a more pessimistic view of the matter. This contrast between a sense of continuity and an awareness of rupture, however, plays out in manifold circumstances, and finds in the translation, interpretation, and appropriation of Virgil a mode of expression for various traumas of twentieth-century history, and their consequences for beliefs about national identity.

The audience at the University of Exeter were presumably aware that Virgil enjoyed a special prominence in the literary and political world of his own day. He not only praises Augustus in his *Georgics* but ‘[w]hen Augustus was returning after his victory

at Actium and lingered at Atella to treat his throat, Vergil read the “Georgics” to him for four days in succession’ (Suetonius 1914: 473).<sup>1</sup> The *Aeneid* ‘contained at the same time an account of the origin of the city of Rome and of Augustus, which was the poet’s special aim’ (ibid.: 471), and Augustus is said to have ‘demanded in entreating and even jocosely threatening letters’ (ibid.: 475) to see early drafts of the epic. The veracity of these claims may be doubted, but more important is the perception that Virgil enjoyed a close relationship with the emperor. In light of this, by describing how he discovered his patriotism through Virgil (having been until then, as his audience would also have been aware, a member of the Communist Party) the incumbent Poet Laureate can be seen positioning himself within a tradition stretching back, as Petrarch believed, to Imperial Rome.

Day Lewis’s qualifications as a Virgilian laureate had been established before he took office. Having translated the *Georgics* during the Second World War, he had been commissioned, at Jackson Knight’s instigation (Day Lewis 1980: 188), to translate the *Aeneid* for radio broadcast by the BBC as part of the Festival of Britain; his translation was later published by the Hogarth Press. Organised by the Labour government in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Festival was intended to be ‘one united act of national reassessment, and one corporate reaffirmation of faith in the nation’s future’ (Cox 1951: 6) This discourse of incorporation has a polyvalent significance. On the one hand, in a way that now appears strikingly dated, the Festival was inaugurated by a service of dedication at St Paul’s Cathedral, attended by the royal family (Day Lewis 1980: 204) – an instance of sacramental incorporation in the presence of the monarch. On the other hand, poetic contributions to the Festival were mediated through other kinds of public body: as well as Day Lewis’s commission from the BBC, the Arts Council funded the Festival of Britain Poetry Competition that marked an early foray into state subsidy of poetry. Day Lewis had originally been a member of the judging panel; but though he resigned from this in order to submit a poem of his own, his entry was barred due to excerpts having already been broadcast over radio, and the *Aeneid* made up his contribution to the Festival instead (Stanford 2007: 253). This is another example of sub-laureation: a poet is commissioned to

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<sup>1</sup> The provenance of Suetonius’s *Life of Virgil* is contentious; I refer to the Loeb edition because the broadly disseminated perception of Virgil’s status is of more importance, in this context, than the truth of the matter or the reliability of the sources.

translate a poem that ‘was thought to contain the right mixture of the epic and the nationalistic’ (ibid.: 253) to shore up national morale and self-belief. But instead of the personal relationship between poet and sovereign exemplified by Virgil and Augustus (or more recently, Tennyson and Queen Victoria), the relationship with the state is mediated by another kind of corporate body. John Hayward (1951: 8) observed in his preface to *Poems 1951* that ‘[t]he State that pays the piper has a way of calling the tune,’ and indeed Day Lewis was paid £100 per book (Day Lewis 1980: 188). But though Hayward (1951: 8) goes on to warn that ‘the tune, as we have learnt in recent years, is not that of the poet’s native wood-notes wild’, in this instance the job was well suited to the poet, who had already translated Virgil and felt attracted to the *Aeneid*’s ‘combination of the heroic and the patriotic’ (Stanford 2007: 253).

The choice of the *Aeneid* as an appropriate text for the Festival of Britain was no accident: its eminent suitability for the occasion was determined by centuries of English literary history. The *Aeneid*, as Tanya Caldwell (2008: 2) demonstrates, has long been ‘intimately yoked to mythology encompassing British history’. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* relates that Aeneas’s grandson, Brutus, led a band of Trojans to the group of islands inhabited by giants whom he would conquer to become the founder of Britain, which was named after him, and of Troia Nova, ‘New Troy’, its capital city on the River Thames; his descendants would include King Arthur. This ur-myth connecting Great Britain to Rome, and ultimately to Troy, has been exploited by numerous writers, such as Edmund Spenser, who incorporated it into the Virgilian allegory of *The Faerie Queene*, as Caldwell (ibid.: 3) argues:

just as Virgil has his Aeneas visit the underworld to view the future heroes of Rome before he enters Latium and takes action for the destined empire, so Spenser recounts the line of British monarchs to Elizabeth descended from Brute the grandson of Aeneas. In this way the *translatio imperii* of Rome to Britain is given historical authenticity as it is set within the epic framework.

The modern currency of this myth, at least as a poetic fiction, is illustrated by Sisson’s version of Horace’s ‘Carmen Saeculare’ (*ITD*: 222). Horace’s poem (cf. Horace 2004: 262-7), written two years after the death of Virgil and the posthumous publication of

his epic, refers to the same foundation myth of Aeneas coming from Troy. In his transposition of the poem to English circumstances, Sisson refers to the legend of his grandson:

The ways that have led here are multifarious,  
Even Brutus from Troy, our ancestors believed,  
But whatever they left they found better here. (ll.31-3)

Sisson qualifies the allusion, stating only that ‘our ancestors believed’ the legend; but it demonstrates that the medieval ‘Matter of Britain’ could still be drawn upon when connecting Britain with the classical world.

Monmouth and Spenser’s embedding of Great Britain into the legendary world of the *Aeneid*, Caldwell argues (2008: 3), evidences and projects ‘a sense of the sacred purpose of history’ and amounts to a ‘sanctification of British history’, founded upon the ‘absolute conviction in the divinity of the epic poet’s allegorical mysteries’. National self-assertion was therefore underpinned by the assertion of Virgil’s status as a prophet of empire. Moreover, just as Rome (and in particular Augustus, supposedly descended from Aeneas) derived its glory from its legendary Trojan origins and held a divine mandate for empire, so Britain (and especially its hereditary monarchy) is exalted by its Roman/Trojan genealogy and enjoys the same imperial prerogative. Thus the *Aeneid* was an apposite choice for the Festival of Britain not just because it can be understood as endorsing imperial rule in general, but because it had been taken as specifically endorsing British imperialism. This belief had been bolstered by history: given that the British Empire had expanded into the largest the world had ever seen, it required no great leap of imagination to see Jupiter’s promise of ‘imperium sine fine’ (*Aen.* I.279) as extending beyond Rome to Great Britain.

Day Lewis, then, was translating the *Aeneid* within a tradition that linked the Trojans’ fortunes to those of the British. But rather than leaving this implicit, he makes the connection overt through the language of his translation. Colin Burrow (1997: 35) claims that Day Lewis makes a ‘poetically uncoloured’ version that does not offer ‘any honestly confessed fruitful overlap between the political and historical concerns’ of his time and the way in which he translates. But on closer examination, one finds that phrases which initially drew criticism for making it, as an anonymous

correspondent wrote in the *Times*, ‘largely a period piece’ (Stanford 2007: 253) are in fact the source of much of the translation’s interest. Patrick Cheney (1983: 436) has drawn attention to Day Lewis’s use of ‘the language of modern war’, such as ‘allies’, ‘shock-troops’, ‘High Command’ and ‘field commanders’. This kind of terminology would have been ‘familiar to an audience who had only recently been through World War II’ (ibid.: 436) – and some of it is reminiscent of the previous war, such as ‘man the system of trenches’ (ibid. 437). Through this, Cheney (ibid.: 444) argues, Day Lewis implies that ‘the story of Aeneas's struggle to found the New Troy corresponds to the struggle the allies of the western world underwent between 1939 and 1945’. Furthermore, this is couched within a Christianised version of divine providence. Cheney (ibid.: 439) recalls that ‘[a]s Medieval and Renaissance commentators often noted, the mythic pattern of the *Aeneid* corresponds to that of the Bible’: ‘like the Christian hero, Aeneas falls from a paradisaal world; he wanders in the wilderness; and eventually he uses personal discipline and divine guidance to enter a promised land’. Day Lewis substantiates this through the use of Biblical language such as ‘apple of my own eye’, ‘washed their hands’ and ‘hardened their hearts’ (ibid.: 438). The effect is to reprise the time-honoured application of the *Aeneid* to British circumstances, with the Trojans representing the British fulfilling a destiny ordained by God – perfect for the ‘corporate reaffirmation of faith in the nation's future’ the Festival of Britain was intended to express.

This identification was supplemented by the BBC’s broadcast, on 9 September 1951, of T.S. Eliot’s (1957: 126) ‘Virgil and the Christian World’, in which he argues that, in the *Aeneid*, ‘Virgil is concerned with the *imperium romanum*, with the extension and justification of imperial rule’. The Roman Empire is further extended and justified, in Eliot’s teleological argument, by its relationship with Christianity:

the Roman Empire was transformed into the Holy Roman Empire. What Virgil proposed to his contemporaries was the highest ideal even for an unholy Roman Empire, for any merely temporal empire. [...] It remains an ideal, but one which Virgil passed on to Christianity to develop and cherish. (Ibid.: 130)

Eliot thus reaffirms Virgil’s status as a prophet not only of empire but of Christianity, traceable to fourth century interpretations of the fourth Eclogue by Lactantius and the

emperor Constantine himself (MacCormack 1998: 21-31). But while the Roman Empire extended over Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, the British Empire had gone further, extending itself across the globe. Thus, when Eliot (1957: 130) argues that '[w]e are all, so far as we inherit the civilization of Europe, still citizens of the Roman Empire,' and that 'time has not yet proved Virgil wrong when he wrote *nec tempora pono: imperium sine fine dedi*', the 'we' can be understood not just as referring to his audience in Great Britain, but to all citizens of the British Empire through the world. Like Day Lewis (whose translation of the *Georgics* Eliot endorses (ibid.: 125)), Eliot uses Virgil to reaffirm the *translatio imperii* from Rome to Great Britain.

In his reading of Day Lewis's *Aeneid*, Cheney (1983: 439) brings to bear Day Lewis's own poetic theories, advanced in *The Colloquial Element in English Poetry* and *The Poetic Image*. In the first, Day Lewis argues that there are 'two kinds of style in our literary tradition: the "grand manner" and the "colloquial"':

the grand manner is a 'royal language – lofty, ceremonious, and formal, hedged in by its own divinity from the infection of the vulgar or the commonplace'; the colloquial is a language that 'speaks for humanity, in the straightforward homespun terms of the common man'.

In *The Poetic Image*, Day Lewis 'derives a theory of literature in which the most powerful poetic images are archetypes, a theory based directly on that of Jung' (ibid.: 442). His project in translating the *Aeneid* was therefore, Cheney argues, 'to ensure that the best poetic images, the best archetypes, are expressed in colloquial language' (ibid.: 444) the better to universalise them, thereby washing 'the sin of Babel clean' (ibid.: 443). This is problematic, as even in Day Lewis's colloquial idiom the poem remains a translation, and thus the 'curse of Babel' still obtains; but it can also be read in political terms. 'In the sixteenth century,' as Cheney (ibid.: 439) summarises Day Lewis, 'style was primarily in the grand manner, as represented in, for example, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*' – the Elizabethan courtier's Virgilian allegory connecting the Tudor dynasty to the Augustan. It is tempting to think that if the immediate post-War period was 'a people's peace' (Morgan 2001: 3), with the creation of the Welfare State and nationalised industries, then Day Lewis's colloquial *Aeneid*, far from being

‘hedged in by its own divinity from the infection of the vulgar or the commonplace’, may be read as a people’s epic. Yet this popularism exists in tension with the poem’s emphasis on the individual authority and charismatic leadership of Aeneas: as a modern sub-laureate poem, Day Lewis’s translation does not so much democratise the *Aeneid* as reflect the position of the British monarchy in an increasingly social-democratic political landscape.

The reign of Augustus was imperialistic in two senses: he adapted the existing Roman constitutional framework so as to hold absolute power, and he continued Rome’s expansionist foreign policy. Virgil connects these contemporary events to the foundation myth at various points, most explicitly in Book VI, in which Aeneas’s father, Anchises, presents to him a pageant of future Roman rulers and generals (in Day Lewis’s translation):

And here, here is the man, the promised one you know of –  
Caesar Augustus, son of a god, destined to rule  
Where Saturn ruled of old in Latium, and there  
Bring back the age of gold: his empire shall expand  
Past Garamants and Indians to a land beyond the zodiac  
And the sun’s yearly path[.] (*Aen.* VI.791-6; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 588-9)

This centralisation of sovereign power and expansion of dominion throughout Europe, North Africa and the Levant contrasts starkly with the circumstances of Great Britain in the last years of George V. At the end of the Second World War, the King was still the head of a global empire. In the aftermath of the War, however, and in consequence of many years of increasing nationalism in some British colonies, several countries were given their independence, the largest being India and the newly created state of Pakistan in 1947. In this respect, the *Aeneid* was an ironic choice of text to use in the Festival of Britain: the imperial destiny apparently manifest for the preceding century and a half had suffered a blow, precipitating its further decline. But rather than undermining the conflation of Trojans with Britons, Day Lewis actually uses this setback to cement their identification. At the beginning of the third book, his Aeneas picks up the Trojans’ story ‘[a]fter the gods had seen fit to destroy our Asian empire’ (III.1). ‘Asian empire’ renders Virgil’s more neutral ‘res Asiae’ (cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 372-3), and implicitly compares the collapse of Priam’s kingdom with the end of the British Raj. Thus even when circumstances would appear to cause a rupture

in the traditional appropriation of the *Aeneid*, continuity could be reasserted, Virgil's prophetic image kept up, and the poem exploited as a vehicle for national reaffirmation.

Yet imperial decline would ultimately lead to a rupture within the British Virgilian tradition, through the intervention of a classical scholar turned politician. On 20 April 1968 (three weeks after the appearance of Day Lewis's second laureate poem), Enoch Powell, the Conservative MP for Wolverhampton Southwest and former Professor of Greek at the University of Sydney, delivered what would become known as the 'Rivers of Blood' speech, owing to his allusion in the peroration to *Aeneid* VI.87: 'Like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood"' (1992: 168).

The immediate context of the speech was the Labour government's proposed Race Relations Bill, due for its second reading on the following Tuesday, which would extend legislation against racial discrimination into the areas of employment and housing. The wider context was the increasing levels of immigration to Great Britain from former colonies. Although Winston Churchill's Conservative government had temporarily arrested the process of decolonisation after his re-election in 1951, it had restarted under Harold Macmillan. Macmillan's Colonial Secretary from 1959 to 1961 was Iain Macleod, who set in motion the granting of independence to several British colonies in Africa, including Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya. This last was to have the greatest influence upon Powell's speech, due to the constitutional arrangements of the newly independent Kenyan state. Upon independence, Kenyan citizenship would only be conferred automatically on those who had at least one parent born there; those who did not would remain citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies. The new Kenyan citizenship law thus excluded a large number of Asians, who had been encouraged to migrate within the empire by previous governments. At the time, it was not expected that many of these Kenyan Asians would want to move to Great Britain, although as British citizens they would have the right to do so. But when in 1967 the Kenyan government passed a law requiring non-Kenyan citizens to apply for work permits, increasing numbers of Asians (as well as European settlers) began to emigrate to Britain, with over four thousand arriving in August and September alone (Shepherd 1996: 329). In his early



adulthood, Powell had been a passionate imperialist, and had even taken a diploma in Urdu after the War to improve his chances of gaining government office in India (ibid.: 62), where he also served during the Second World War (as did Sisson). But after India was granted independence, the shock of which caused Powell (1990: 2) to spend ‘the whole of one night walking the streets of London trying to come to terms with it’, he reacted by becoming vehemently anti-immigration. In 1968, he found himself in a stalemate with liberal members of the Shadow Cabinet like Macleod, who favoured the Race Relations bill. In order to preserve party unity, and allow right-wing backbenchers to vote against the bill without appearing to do so from racist motivations, a subcommittee including Macleod and Powell drafted a reasoned amendment to the bill:

This House, reaffirming its condemnation of racial discrimination and accepting the need for steps designed to improve the situation, nevertheless declines to give a Second Reading to a Bill which, on balance, will not in its practical application contribute to the achievement of racial harmony. (Shepherd 1996: 344)

At the time, Powell made no objection and appeared happy with the amendment; nor did he give any sign that he would make a unilateral intervention shortly before the bill’s second reading (ibid.: 344). When he did, he lost the friendship of Macleod, whose work as Colonial Secretary had indirectly precipitated Powell’s speech (ibid.: 356).

Because of the factors that make the *Aeneid* such an overdetermined text, and because of the repercussions his use of it would have, Powell’s rhetorical gambit deserves to be analysed in much the same way as a literary text. In the furore that attended the speech, Powell came to regret his decision to translate the Virgilian prophecy rather than ‘stick to the Latin’ (Shepherd 1996: 360), arguing that if he had used the original text nobody would have paid it any heed; but Powell’s biographer Robert Shepherd argues that the impact of the speech as a whole was such that the reference would have been traced to its source (ibid.: 360). Powell was also disturbed that he appeared to have misquoted: as Bill Schwarz (2011: 34-5) observes, ‘[i]t was not the Roman but the Sybil [...] who issued the warning of imminent bloodshed’. The Roman with

whom Powell identifies himself is not a character in the scene from *Aeneid* VI: Aeneas is a Trojan; 'the Roman' must therefore be Virgil. By collapsing what the Sibyl sees into what 'the Roman' Virgil sees, Powell reaffirms the prophetic status accorded to Virgil from Constantine to T.S. Eliot, and draws on the authority historically ascribed to him in the British Virgilian tradition. Yet in a sense analogous to how, according to T.S. Eliot (1960: 50), the 'ideal order' of past artworks is 'modified by the introduction of the new', Powell's use of the Virgilian allusion radically reconfigures the tradition of interpreting Virgil in British contexts. Previously, the British had identified themselves with the Trojans, the proto-imperial power arriving to settle in a new land. But after the dismantling of the British Empire led to a reflux of Commonwealth immigration, Powell (and many others) interpreted race relations in the bellicose terms through which the British empire had been extended in the first place: the 'middle-aged, quite ordinary working man' in Powell's speech (1992: 161) predicts that 'in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man' (ibid.: 162), while Powell himself asserts that the immigrant communities have 'a view to the exercise of actual domination, first over fellow-immigrants and then over the rest of the population' (ibid.: 168). In these circumstances, the traditional identification is inverted. The Virgilian context for Powell's quote is the Sibyl's prophecy of '[w]ars, dreadful wars' (*Aen.* VI.26; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 538-9) that will break out between the incoming Trojans and the native Latin tribes. Reading this onto the context of Powell's speech, the 'native' British population must therefore be identified with the Latins, and the immigrants with the Trojans. Powell reverses the traditional identification in an attempt to reverse the flow of migration.

Powell's use of the *Aeneid* was not the first time in the history of British Virgilianism that Aeneas and the Trojans have been subject to ambiguous characterisation. John Dryden wrote his *Aeneis* in enforced retirement from the laureateship, after his patron and fellow Catholic James II vacated the throne in the Revolution of 1688. Caldwell (2008: 110-1) has demonstrated how Dryden's characterisation of Aeneas, in the translation and in his critical prose, betrays ambivalence about the Trojan hero connected with the political events of the translator's own time: he sometimes presents Aeneas as an exiled king like James II, to whom Dryden was still loyal; at others, his Aeneas is an invading usurper, as he saw William of Orange. Before this,

Virgil had been the preserve of Royalist poets. Richard Fanshawe's rendition of Book IV into Spenserian stanzas was dedicated to Prince Charles (who would become Charles II) during his father's imprisonment in 1648 (Burrow 1997: 26). Sir John Denham's version of Book II, published in 1656 (during Cromwell's Protectorate) but ostensibly written twenty years previously, uses the Trojans' plight after the sack of Troy to make veiled commentary, as Colin Burrow (*ibid.*: 26) argues, on 'the desperate position of Royalist exiles after the execution of Charles I'. John Boys is typical of Restoration Virgilians in that he 'relates Aeneas's wanderings to the exile and Restoration of Charles II "by the undeniable conduct of the divine providence"' (*ibid.*: 27). It was only after the 1688 Revolution and Dryden's ambivalent portrayal of Aeneas that, 'nourished by an odd alliance between Milton's austere anti-royalism and Dryden the Catholic Tory's insistence that Virgil was a closet republican' (*ibid.*: 32) that the *Aeneid* was appropriated for Whiggism in translations by Robert Andrews and Charles Symmons. But whatever the encoded politics of these translations and adaptations, they all articulate issues of nationhood in terms of government and sovereignty. Virgil may be construed as consolidating royal authority, or inspiring 'in his intelligent and unaffected admirers' (as Andrews argued) 'the spirit of liberty' (*ibid.*: 32); but the question was always to which kind of sovereign one should be loyal. We may call these partisan appropriations of Virgil. The effect of Enoch Powell's use of *Aeneid* VI was to rearticulate this in terms of race. The threatening black men who knock on the unidentified widow's door; the 'charming, wide-grinning piccaninnies' (Powell 1992: 167) who allegedly break her windows and push excrement through her letterbox; the community leaders who, Powell warns, will 'organise to consolidate their members, to agitate and campaign against their fellow citizens, and to overawe and dominate the rest' (*ibid.*: 168) – all are portrayed as the enemies of 'the existing population' who 'found themselves made strangers in their own country' (*ibid.*: 165). It would never have occurred to Dryden, or any other translator of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, to portray the conflict between the Trojans and Latins in racial terms; race was not the issue. But since April 1968, questions of race and racism have followed closely on subsequent allusions to the Sybil's prophecy.

Powell runs counter to Virgil, however, in his attitude to cultural integration. At the end of the *Aeneid*, Juno agrees to let the Trojans triumph over the Latin tribes, but Jupiter makes a concession:

The Italians shall keep their native tongue and their old traditions;  
Their name shall not be altered. The Trojans will but sink down in  
The mass and be made one with them. (*Aen.* XII.834-6; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.2:  
358-9)

As Michèle Lowrie (2010: 396) points out, ‘the agreement is bizarre’. Illustrating this from an American perspective, she continues, ‘[i]f Juno and Jupiter were arguing about the United States, the European colonists would be victorious, but we Americans would be speaking and dressing in Navaho or Cherokee’ (ibid.: 396). In terms of the Trojan/immigrant identification set up at the end of Powell’s speech, this would mean that the immigrants will be fully assimilated to British culture. Yet Powell (1992: 167) describes the expectation of integration as a ‘dangerous delusion’, and though he acknowledges that some immigrants may intend to integrate, he asserts that ‘to imagine that such a thing enters the heads of a great and growing majority of immigrants and their descendants is a ludicrous misconception’. Historically, of course, cultural assimilation is always partial and a two-way (if not symmetrical) process: English is widely spoken in India, while the British eat Indian food and use some Hindi words. The total assimilation of the Trojans into Latin civilisation is divinely ordained within Virgil’s foundation myth; but Powell’s insistence that the immigrants will refuse to integrate assumes a cultural homogeneity within both immigrant and indigenous populations that is itself mythical.

The decline of the British Empire after the Second World War precipitated the increase in Commonwealth immigration in the 1960s, but the War itself proved to be an ambivalent factor in the controversy surrounding Powell’s speech. Powell had exploited memories of the Blitz when he wrote about immigration in an article for a local newspaper. Taking the part of the estranged ‘existing population’, Powell compared the new ‘invasion’ with the threat recently posed by Nazi Germany:

[a]cts of an enemy, bombs from the sky, they could understand; but now, for reasons quite inexplicable, they might be driven from their homes and their

property deprived of value by an invasion which the government apparently approved and their fellow-citizens – elsewhere – viewed with complacency. (Shepherd 1996: 326)

This comparison was reiterated in the Birmingham speech, pointedly attacking the Labour government's Race Relations bill:

[t]here could be no grosser misconception of the realities than is entertained by those who vociferously demand legislation as they call it 'against discrimination', whether they be leader-writers of the same kidney and sometimes on the same newspapers which year after year in the 1930s tried to blind this country to the rising peril which confronted it. (Powell 1992: 165)

Again, this rhetoric lends an exaggerated bellicosity to the issue, harnessing people's emotions connected to the War, as did Day Lewis's first laureate poem three months previously. But whereas the poem encouraged them to emulate the mythologised 'Blitz spirit' in a time of economic difficulty, Powell plays on their sense of entitlement. He cannot have been surprised, therefore, to receive letters of support such as one he read out on television:

[t]hank God I've found someone that has spoken for the white people of England. Did we go through the day and night terror of doodlebugs, incendiary bombs and bombing so that these hoards of black locusts might come here and buy the homes we've known for years and make our lives unbearable. (Schwarz 2011: 42)

What such a response to Powell's polemic betrays, besides the correspondent's racism, is their partial understanding of the War. From this perspective, the Second World War was just the battle Britain had to fight to ensure its survival as a free country. It certainly was that; but to see it as that only is a literally insular view. The Second World War comprised other facets, including the extermination of Jews, blacks, Gypsies, gay people, and the disabled in the Holocaust. Racism was central to Nazi ideology, so it is highly ironic to compare the threat of Nazi invasion to the 'hoards of black locusts' immigrating after the War – an irony evidently not grasped

by Powell's correspondent. After the Second World War (not just the insular British struggle but the whole European catastrophe of the 1930s and early '40s), any speech or action appearing to advocate racial hierarchies or conflict was bound to be interpreted as fascistic. In the wake of the Birmingham speech, Powell's public appearances were routinely picketed by demonstrators denouncing him as a fascist, and Tony Benn suggested in 1970 that the 'flag of racialism which has been hoisted in Wolverhampton is beginning to look like the one that fluttered over Dachau and Belsen' (Shepherd 1996: 395). Powell declared in response that 'in 1939 I voluntarily returned from Australia to this country, to serve as a private soldier in the war against Germany and Nazism. I am the same man today' (ibid.: 395). It may be doubted, however, whether having fought against Nazi Germany necessarily precludes one's holding racist views. The issue might be argued over indefinitely; the point of interest is that Powell's use of Virgil also brings the Second World War and the Holocaust, as well as the end of the British Empire, to bear upon subsequent allusions to *Aeneid* VI.

In April 1968, another native of the West Midlands, Geoffrey Hill, was writing what would be his third collection of poetry. *Mercian Hymns* draws together the legendary and Medieval past and the world of the modern day, including the poet's memories of the 1930s and the Second World War. Hill also alludes to the same Virgilian locus as Powell, embroiling him in the controversies surrounding that speech and the legacies of empire and war. The collection begins with an epigraph from the introduction to Sisson's privately printed 1967 collection of essays – a passage already discussed in the context of 'A Letter to John Donne':

[t]he conduct of government rests upon the same foundation and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons: that is, as to its object and justification, for as to its methods, or technical part, there is all the difference which separates the person from the group, the man acting on behalf of himself from the man acting on behalf of many. The technical part, in government as in private conduct, is now the only one which is publicly or at any rate generally recognized, as if by this evasion the more difficult part of the subject, which relates to ends, could be avoided. Upon 'the law of nature and the law of revelation', Blackstone said, 'depend all human laws.' This quaint language, which would at once be derided if it were introduced now

into public discussion, conceals a difficulty which is no less ours than it was our ancestors'. (*AL*: 202)

The obvious argument is that modern technocratic government concentrates on practice without regard for values. But the distinction between 'the conduct of government' and 'the conduct of private persons' implies another difficulty: how are private persons to be united into a polity that can be governed? In short, overcoming 'the difference which separates the person from the group' is the foundation of civil society, which we have identified with the structure of sovereignty and, in Sisson's writings, with incorporation into a wider body politic corresponding to the monarch's second body.

The protagonist of *Mercian Hymns* – or perhaps, in Eliotic terms, 'the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest' (Eliot 1974: 82) including the poet's childhood self – is Offa, king of Mercia from AD 757 to 796. In the appendix of notes, Hill (1971: 34) describes Offa as he appears in the poetry as 'the presiding genius of the West Midlands, his dominion enduring from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth (and possibly beyond)', as if this Medieval king's second body survived his physical death. This projects various continuities, political and cultural, as adumbrated in the deliberately anachronistic first hymn, 'The Naming of Offa':

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: overlord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth, the summer hermitage in Holy Cross: guardian of the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge: contractor to the desirable new estates: saltmaster: money-changer: commissioner for oaths: martyrologist: the friend of Charlemagne.

'I liked that,' said Offa, 'sing it again.'

This is a pseudo-laureate poem in much the same vein as 'To the Queen' from *Metamorphoses*: a historical monarch is brought into the present day, raising issues of sovereignty and historical continuity to be explored in the succeeding poems. Hill adds another dimension when he imagines the king responding to this song of praise;

indeed, 'again' may be read to rhyme with 'Charlemagne', indicating a complementarity between monarch and poet. The reprise the poet offers in the second hymn, however, is recalcitrant, progressing through puns on the king's name that mix the mercantile and obscene, such as 'Best-selling brand, curt grafitto', (II). In this way, Hill sets up a dynamic of patronage that oscillates between mutual glorification and antagonism.

'I liked that, [...] sing it again' is an oddly juvenile idiom, suggesting a conflation of adult king and child. Henry Hart (1986: 153) observes that *Mercian Hymns* 'unites Hill's childhood during the Second World War and Offa's brutal but accomplished career during the second half of the eighth century'; yet he interprets the third hymn, 'The Crowning of Offa', solely in terms of how 'Hill punctures the empty shells of ancient rituals and symbols' (ibid.: 167) through Offa's 'humorous irreverence' and 'sanctimoniousness', attributing the discourse to '[o]ne of the children' (ibid.: 166) present at the parodic ritual. Vincent Sherry (1987: 132), however, suggests that the poem is based on 'Hill's memory of the coronation of George VI' on the twelfth of May, 1937, when the poet was almost five years old. The scene is described as being 'like Easter', appropriate to the day of a coronation: since Christ rose in glory from the dead on the third day, the king, in the High Tory conception, never dies. The circumstances of George's coronation, however, lend troubling undertones. The date had been intended for the coronation of George's older brother, who ruled as Edward VIII through 1936, but abdicated on the 11 December – 'the same day on which James II vacated the throne in 1688' (Matthew 2011). Constitutionally, this is problematic for the conception of the monarchy based on a second 'body politic', which is supposed to migrate as it were vertically from parent to child on the former's death, rather than laterally between siblings. Furthermore, it had appeared during Edward's brief reign that he took a 'sympathetic view of Nazism' (ibid.), and after his abdication he visited Nazi Germany where he met with Hitler and made the Nazi salute. This led to speculation (not least among the Nazis themselves) that, in the event of British capitulation, Edward 'would "come back as a social-equalising King" and inaugurate an "English form of Fascism and alliance with Germany"' (ibid.), echoing the fears of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that the exiled Stuart monarchy would be forcefully reinstated by Catholic France. Under the 'hankies and gift-mugs approved by his foreign gaze', therefore, *Mercian Hymns*



begins as a poem about sovereignty in crisis, where the continuities projected in the opening section appear to have been disrupted.

Hill (in Haffenden 1981: 88) has asserted that ‘etymology is history’, but for this to be more than tautology or mythology (as Hill interprets it in terms of a fall from Adamic truthfulness), it is necessary to understand how it functions in the present. Derek Attridge (1987: 203) articulates this precisely, stating that ‘etymology fissures the synchronic surface of the text, introducing diachronic shadows and echoes, opening the language to shifts of meaning that can never be closed off’. In the third section of *Mercian Hymns*, the king’s ‘foreign gaze’ is a case in point. ‘Foreign’ derives from the Latin *foris*, ‘outside’. It may seem strange to describe the king, who supposedly embodies the nation, as an outsider. Yet just as, in Agamben’s theory of sovereignty, the sovereign retains within the *polis* the rights of one outside it as an exclusive inclusion, the poet’s description of the king’s ‘foreign gaze’ may be read as encoding the same dynamic. Aeneas is not a Roman himself, but he founds what will become Rome; he is central to the *polis*, yet excluded from it. This corresponds to Agamben’s reading of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*:

the state of nature is not a real epoch chronologically prior to the foundation of the City but a principle internal to the City, which appears at the moment the City is considered *tanquam dissolute*, ‘as if it were dissolved’ [...] The foundation is thus not an event achieved once and for all but is continually operative in the civil state in the form of the sovereign decision. (*HS*: 105, 109)

Lowrie (2010: 393) has demonstrated the ambiguity of Virgil’s presentation of the juridical order in Latium on Aeneas’s arrival, pointing out that there are ‘two sources within the *Aeneid* for the history of early Italy, Evander and Latinus, and the stories they tell are contradictory’, the contradiction hanging on whether there were or were not laws and a civil society. She concludes that we cannot ‘get back in our understanding to a moment of prefoundation, to a state of nature, whether in the *Aeneid* or even theoretically’ (*ibid.*: 393). Virgil used the myth of Aeneas because Augustus claimed descent from him via his adopted father, Julius Caesar, whose family derived their name from Iulus, Aeneas’s son. But on a deeper structural level,

the poem's narration of Rome's foundation creates a proto-Hobbesian political myth for the continually operative function of the sovereign exception. Augustus, in reserving the right to decide on the exception, embodied that externality within the Roman juridical order.

Hill presents an ambiguous continuity of sovereign power in the context of twentieth-century Britain. If the sovereign is 'the wolf-man of man' who 'dwells permanently in the city' (*HS*: 107), the central expression of this in *Mercian Hymns* is what Hill (in Haffenden 1981: 94) calls the 'murderous brutality of Offa as a political animal', for instance in the eleventh section: '[s]wathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring. It is safe to presume, here, the king's anger'. Elsewhere, sovereign violence appears reduced to childish proportions, as in the seventh section, 'The Kingdom of Offa', when the young protagonist exacts revenge upon his friend Ceolred for the loss of a model biplane; or when, in the twenty-second ('Offa's Second Defence of the English People'), the poet recollects how '[w]e ran across the meadow scabbed with cow-dung, past the crab-apple trees and camouflaged nissen hut. It was curfew-time for our war-band'. Yet this infantile imitation of war occurs in the context of a real one, as he remembers:

At home the curtains were drawn. The wireless boomed  
its commands. I loved the battle-anthems and the  
gregarious news.

Then, in the earthy shelter, warmed by a blue-glassed  
storm-lantern, I huddled with stories of dragon-  
tailed airships and warriors who took wing im-  
mortal as phantoms. (XXII)

Although these memories of the Second World War are a child's, and present the insular struggle rather than the European catastrophe, acquaintance with Hill's earlier poems such as 'Two Formal Elegies: For the Jews in Europe' (from *For the Unfallen*), 'Ovid in the Third Reich' and 'September Song' (from *King Log*) suggest that the wider context also impinges. The mutation of sovereign violence from the localised butchery of Offa's reign into the state-organized programme of extermination carried out by the Third Reich is thus obliquely registered in *Mercian Hymns*; and though the British monarchy conversely appears diminished in the modern day, the suspicion of Edward VIII's Nazi sympathies, as well as the appeal

violence exerts over children in the poem, suggests that there is no comfortable antithesis between Medieval and modern sovereignty, or even between the opposing sides in the Second World War.

The Virgilian intertext first appears in the poem's eighteenth section. The protagonist, on a pilgrimage to Italy (the previous hymn is called 'Offa's Journey to Rome'), passes through Pavia, where the remains of Boethius are kept. Offa imagines Boethius's torture and death, so graphically that he appears to be responsible for it:

He shut his eyes, gave rise to a tower  
out of the earth. He willed the instruments of  
violence to break upon meditation. Iron buckles  
gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men  
stooped, disentangled the body.

Boethius was executed at the command of the Ostrogoth king Theodoric the Great – a victim of sovereign violence. The protagonist, however, displays a dilettantish attitude:

He wiped his lips and hands. He strolled back to the  
car, with discreet souvenirs for consolation and  
philosophy.

Boethius's stoicism is replaced by 'souvenirs' of commodified consolation, with which Offa continues on his way. At this point the Sibyl's prophecy enters, isolated as a fragment:

He set in motion the furtherance of  
his journey. To watch the Tiber foaming out  
much blood.

It is unclear whether this line occurs to Offa, or whether it is the poet's comment on the king's progress and the violence it entails. There is nothing in the text, beyond the shared Virgilian allusion, to suggest a reference to Powell; nor does Hill quote Powell verbatim. Yet the connection is made by Peter Robinson, who points out that Offa's kingdom covered the area of modern-day Birmingham where Powell gave the speech, as well as Hill's native Bromsgrove, just the other side of Birmingham from Powell's Wolverhampton constituency. But 'Powell's classical scholarship', Robinson (1985:

215) argues, ‘visualises violence to gain emotional assent for what is desired by invoking its opposite’, while Hill ‘restores moral attention to an occasion for scholarly accuracy and responsible behaviour’, pointing to the contrast between Hill’s meticulous notes and Powell’s use of an unsubstantiated letter from a constituent. Robinson thus interprets Hill’s allusion as a criticism of Powell.

The entanglement of race, the Holocaust, and the partisan quarrels of preceding centuries are symptomatically manifested in Tom Paulin’s attack on Hill and his critics in the *London Review of Books* (4 April 1985). Reviewing the collection of essays edited by Robinson, Paulin (1992: 282) observes that Robinson ‘connects the visionary poet with the prophetic politician’ while overlooking the contrast he draws between them, and suggests that one may ‘detect a Powellite strain in Hill’s conservatism’. ‘Robinson shows us that Hill began his poem in the year Powell made his speech,’ Paulin (1992: 283) states (although Hill is on record as having begun the sequence in 1967 (Brown and Paterson 2003: 115)), and credits Robinson with ‘tracing Offa’s spoor back to the Midland Hotel’ while arguing that he ‘balks at drawing any conclusions from this conjunction of Black Country powers’. Examination of Geoffrey Hill’s workbooks for *Mercian Hymns* (BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/10-11 and 5/2/111) reveals that Hill took clippings from five newspaper articles about Powell, dated between July 1968 and May 1970, including one that reproduces the peroration from ‘Rivers of Blood’. They testify to a keen interest in Powell (though not necessarily admiration for him), and substantiate the connection between his Virgilian allusion and Powell’s. The workbooks also reveal, however, that Hill deliberately altered his wording – twice writing ‘with’ before crossing it out and substituting ‘out’, and changing ‘see’ to ‘watch’, distancing Powell’s version. Hill’s use of the Virgilian allusion, therefore, is not reducible (as Paulin suggests it is) to a Powellite shibboleth.

Paulin’s (1992: 279) conclusions regarding the proximity of Mercia and the West Midlands Hotel are part of a wider argument in which he claims to confront ‘the essentially *Blut-und-Boden* nature of Hill’s imagination’. ‘*Blut-und-Boden*’, ‘blood and soil’, alludes to a statement by the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg:

[t]he National Socialist vision of the world [...] springs from the conviction that soil and blood constitute what is essential about Germanness, and it is therefore in reference to these two givens that a cultural and state politics must be directed. (*HS*: 129)

These innuendos about crypto-Nazism are framed within a broader argument about national identity. Following his description of the ‘*Blut-und-Boden* nature of Hill’s imagination’, Paulin (1992: 279) adds that Hill is ‘in love with the dark age of the Spanish counter-reformation’, while Christopher Ricks’s contribution to the collection of essays is ‘instinct with that reactionary Anglo-Catholicism which T.S. Eliot managed long ago to foist on Protestant England’. This goes against his own claim that Britain is ‘a pluralist society composed of many different religious and non-religious cultures’ (ibid.: 283), and asserts a contradiction in terms: that Anglo-Catholicism is something alien to England rather than a long-standing part of its cultural make-up. More importantly, the conjunction of these comments connects the internecine conflicts of the Reformation and the genocidal racism of Nazi Germany, which he perceives as latent within conservative British cultural politics after the War. This is problematic because of the different structures of exclusion at work in different historical contexts. Inclusion or exclusion from the Nazi state was based upon genetics – a form of biopolitics. By contrast, the British body politic after the Reformation (with the complicated exception of the Interregnum) was delimited by the Anglican Church – the issue was one of conformity rather than heredity. Agamben (*HS*: 128) identifies the moment of historical rupture at which ‘divinely authorized royal sovereignty’ (under which the individual was merely a subject of sovereign power) gave way to modern forms of ‘national sovereignty’ (in which the individual is subject to but also the bearer of sovereignty) with the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. But Paulin’s argument blurs this distinction, presenting Anglo-Catholicism (such as Sisson’s) as secretly racist and fascistic. The lack of mutuality between these positions is demonstrated, however, by Sisson’s encounter in Freiburg with a great Virgilian scholar:

[w]hile I was there, Goering came and made a speech with allusions to the Church which were stonily received in that so Catholic country. And I attended a lecture to see Theodor Haecker, with grave dignity, turn over page

over page of what he had intended to read while in the front row before him students in brown shirts stamped their jack-boots. These events made me aware of the existence of people who deferred to a principle that was not mere force and wished their unquestionable loyalty to Germany to find some more complex and balanced expression than in the thrust of aggression and oppression. (*AL*: 138)

Natalie Pollard (2012: 134) suggests that ‘Sisson is not unlike Paulin’ – and, we might add, Hill – ‘in repeatedly demanding an audience’s historical and theological tenacity, our aesthetic scrutiny of a fraught, not a glorious, past’. But if Hill’s allusion to the Sybil’s prophecy can be read as a coded signal of allegiance to Powellism (whether understood as a nationalist, racist or fascistic ideology), what should be made of the fact that in 1968 Sisson wrote and privately printed ‘The Descent’ (*ITD*: 189-92), a translation of *Aeneid* VI?

Firstly, although *Roman Poems* appeared after Powell spoke in Birmingham, Sisson had by then already made his translation: the entries in Sisson’s notebook (ASSL DM1275/1/35) are dated from the beginning of March. Furthermore, as the volume of classical translations he produced in this period indicates, ‘The Descent’ was part of a sustained engagement with Latin poetry of the first century B.C., beginning with the poems of Catullus and Ovid before he moved on to Virgil’s *Eclogues*, followed by the *Aeneid* (*ITD*: 160-1); his notebooks show that he also attempted further sections of the *Aeneid* and other odes of Horace which he did not publish (DM1275/1/22, 35). Sisson’s interest in *Aeneid* VI cannot be traced back to the Midland Hotel. But while Powell drew on Virgil to cap his jeremiad about immigration, Sisson retrospectively rationalised his own turn to Virgil as ‘part of a movement away, as far as possible, from the merely personal concern, or from the presentation of our condition which has that appearance’ (*ITD*: 159). For Sisson, translating Virgil was a means of expanding the scope of his work to a wider – perhaps a national – scale. Explaining his attraction to Virgil’s poetry, Sisson comments:

[t]here is a certain elaboration, very unfashionable in our time and perhaps of little use for contemporary literary purposes. There is also something which we ought to value. This is a deep movement of feeling, below the surface of

our exacerbated daily life, and which has greater significance than any ‘frankness’ for those who want to understand the human brute. (*ITD*: 159)

The terms of this prefatory note are structured around a vertical axis, with ‘our exacerbated daily life’ on the ‘surface’, and beneath it ‘the human brute’. It is not clear from Sisson’s statement, though, if he thinks that the ‘elaboration’ of Virgil’s style is integral to this ‘deep movement of feeling’, or if it is an epiphenomenon. Donald Davie (1977a: 282) argues that Sisson turned to Virgil having become ‘disenchanted with plainness’ as a stylistic method, but having not yet achieved an elaborate Virgilian style of his own, Sisson’s versions of the *Eclogues* are ‘a wooden curiosity’, while his ‘stenographic summary’ of *Aeneid* VI is ‘startling and intriguing’. This argument is supported by how Sisson’s terms mimic the spatial trajectory of *Aeneid* VI. It would appear that, at this stage at least, Sisson’s sense of Virgil’s ‘deep movement of feeling’ corresponded to the content of the *Aeneid* VI, following Aeneas into the underworld, as much as or more than to its style, and only later did he embrace Virgilian elaboration.

In fact, the first line of Sisson’s translation, offset on its own, has no basis in Virgil: ‘It follows my footsteps over these hills’. This immediately raises several questions. What does ‘it’ refer to? Who is it whose footsteps are followed? And where are these hills? None of these are explained before the translation proper begins. Metrically, Sisson makes no attempt to replicate Virgil’s hexameters, using a short free-verse line with sporadic rhyme:

Some seek the seeds of flame  
Hidden in veins of flint.  
Some crash through the undergrowth, point  
To new rivers. But the same  
Passions do not seize Aeneas.  
He climbs where Apollo is.  
And the secret parts  
Of Sibyl, in a dread cave,  
Open, having the future. (ll.2-10)

The first two of these lines are extremely close to Day Lewis’s version: ‘some look for the seeds of fire | Hidden in veins of flint’ (VI.6-7). Although in both versions the English follows the Latin closely (‘quaerit pars semina flammae | abstrusa in uenis

silicis'; Loeb p.532), the fact that Sisson's third line replicates Day Lewis's verbatim suggests that Sisson may have had it in mind. Sisson's version, however, is not (like Day Lewis's) a line-for-line rendition of the original. Omitting the ekphrastic section describing Daedalus's temple to Apollo, he continues to the meeting with the Sibyl:

Cut in the rock, lying huge,  
A hundred mouths, you might say,  
A hundred voices, Sybil responds.  
To ask the Fates,  
Time, it is time.  
God.  
Not one face or colour,  
Her hair would not stay, nor colour. Panting,  
Her breast like an earthquake,  
Her heart swelling.  
Not an ordinary voice. There is breathing  
That is not her own, nearer to the god's.  
'Do not stop praying, Trojan  
Aeneas, must you stop? If you do  
No gates can open.' (ll.11-25; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 534-7)

Sisson punctuates irregularly, so that parts of direct speech such as the Sibyl's warning ("Time it is to ask your destiny" | The Sibyl cried, "for lo! the god is with me") (Day Lewis 1952, ll.45-6)) become fragmented and enigmatic, as if there is some ambiguity as to whether they are her utterance or the translator's. This enigmatic quality is continued into the next crucial section. Skipping over Aeneas's prayer, Sisson moves on his address to the Sibyl, and her response:

'Do not trust  
Verses to the winds, but speak.  
Leaves will not hold them.'  
There was no prophecy. In such words,  
Truth wrapt in darkness, that the utterance  
Escaped my patience. (ll.26-31; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 536-9)

Here, Sisson identifies himself with Aeneas: Virgil describes how the Sibyl spoke '[r]iddles that awed them' (*Aen.* VI.99) in the third person; Sisson changes this to the first person. More important is his account of the prophecy – or rather, the lack of one. This is explicit: Sisson states definitively in line twenty-nine that '[t]here was no prophecy.' Evidently, Sisson is doing something beyond summarising Virgil as Davie suggests. Indeed Sisson admits as much in the preface to the translations of *In The*



*Trojan Ditch*, where he notes that ‘the use made of the original is so indirect that there might be some hesitation as to whether they belonged to this or to the earlier part of the volume’, i.e. among his original poems (*ITD*: 161). Sisson could not have known that, the following month, Powell would bring the Sibyl’s prophecy to such bad eminence; but beyond the coincidence of their both drawing on Virgil at this time, it appears that Sisson is putting an alternative construction on the same locus. The Sibyl then instructs Aeneas on how to descend into the underworld:

‘God’s blood, Anchises’  
Son, and a Trojan.  
To descend, yes, through my entrance is easy.  
Will you see the light again?  
But if your mind is love, go down, cupid  
Of the Stygian lakes, twice black Tartarus.  
On a dark tree,  
Golden, in leaf, the stem bending, a bough  
This for Proserpina, a gift,  
When it is torn, another and another,  
The same metal.  
There lies your friend,  
A corpse.’ (ll.33-46; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 540-3)

Sisson passes over the story of Misenus’s death, and proceeds to Aeneas finding the golden bough and gaining access to the underworld:

Two doves flew.  
They were my mother’s birds, and therefore  
Indicate.  
Discoloured, in dark foliage,  
As it were mistletoe,  
Luminous on the oak.  
Aeneas breaks it off  
And carries it away under the roof of the Sybil  
While on the shore the Teucrians  
Paid to the last dust,  
Misenus, your wishes.  
The ground rumbled and the ridged  
Woodland dipped.  
Through the unstable shadows  
The dogs howled.  
The goddess was approaching.  
Then the vatic: ‘Far  
From everything, from this grove  
Those who do not know love.’  
The sword now out of the scabbard.

She entered herself, and Aeneas after. (ll.47-67; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 544-51)

While the Sibyl's warning to the uninitiated is set in quotation marks, Aeneas's words are unattributed, again appearing to hang between the character and narrator, or as if the two are collapsing into each other, the protagonist standing in for the poet. When Aeneas and the Sibyl reach the Styx, the pronoun again hovers ambiguously: whereas Virgil describes the shades of the dead in detail, the poet (collapsing into his protagonist) states that 'I cannot however see the dead | Wailing by the water-side' (ll.90-1). When Aeneas and the Sibyl encounter the ferryman of the Styx, Sisson again interpolates his own material:

A sordid  
Old man, watching the girls.  
Let them come to him. Charon,  
Do not tip the boat in your excitement.  
The dead are not lovers when  
They pass your way. (ll.92-7)

Virgil does not describe Charon 'watching the girls'. This characterisation recalls one mode of 'frankness', about sexual desire, that Sisson employed in earlier poems such as 'The Garden of Epicurus' ('[m]y eyes shot glances and I salivated' (*CP*: 94)) and 'The Regrets' ('[I]ust is the star | Which lit my way' (*CP*: 106)). As part of the movement away from 'the merely personal concern, or from the presentation of our condition which has that appearance' (*ITD*: 159), this kind of impulse is projected onto the ferryman. The crossing leads to the meeting with the dead for which Aeneas embarked on this quest. Of the 'several ghosts | I would wish to see' (ll.100-1) – again, the pronoun hovers ambiguously between Aeneas and the poet – the first, though unnamed, appears to be that of Dido:

her hair  
Plentiful where they have it,  
Weeps from her head,  
Too fragrant to be among the dead. (ll.102-5)

Sisson interpolates this description of flowing hair, which is not found in Virgil, but jettisons perhaps the most famous part of the meeting with Dido, when she silently turns her back on Aeneas. Sisson then continues to the meeting with Anchises:

One whose matted hair  
Resembles Charon's.  
Of him  
Nothing is to be said, except  
I came to seek him, and  
He does not exist. (ll.107-12)

The comparison of Anchises' hair with Charon's is not in Virgil; more enigmatic is the assertion that '[h]e does not exist.' This may be an interpretation of the passage when Aeneas tries three times to embrace his father, and '[t]hree times the phantom slipped his vain embrace – it was like | Grasping a wisp of wind or the wings of a fleeting dream' (*Aen.* VI.701-2; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 580-81). But the assertion must mean more than that, because at this point, when Anchises should reveal to Aeneas the glorious future of the state he will found, Sisson excludes the whole revelation for which the journey has been undertaken, and concludes the poem:

The mist  
Swirls up from Tal-y-maes.  
He is gone with it.  
An empty hill-side.  
Fortune, if you are old. (ll.107-11)

The poem ends where it began, on a hillside, and so answers the questions posed by the opening line. Tal-y-maes is a hill in the Brecon Beacons, just over the Welsh border. Because it is in Britain, far from the Mediterranean world of the *Aeneid*, we can assume that the 'I' of the first line is Sisson himself, although the identity of subsequent instances of the first-person pronoun is, as we have seen, ambiguous. The 'it' that 'follows my footsteps across these hills' may therefore be the poet's memories of *Aeneid* VI, of which the poem can be considered a transcription, hence its idiosyncrasy.

What should we make of this extremely personal adaptation of *Aeneid* VI, with its omissions, alterations and interpolations, framed by the Welsh marches? And how does it figure in 1968, the year a line from that book became synonymous with race and immigration? We have seen that Sisson's statement of Virgil's value mimics the structure of surface and depth found in *Aeneid* VI. Geoffrey Hill (*PNR*: 12) has attempted to explain Sisson's 'heady mixture of clear-sighted social and literary criticism and blind rage' in terms of a 'deep psychic impulse', with reference to

several quotations from Sisson's criticism of other poets, especially Yeats. 'Sisson's recurring metaphors', Hill (*PNR*: 12) observes, 'are those of the root and the well':

[h]e says of the late poems of Yeats, that, 'while the impulse for the poems unquestionably comes from deep sources, there is a strong element of preconception in the subject matter...' [...] and his concession to Yeats's struggle as an artist is cast in the same metaphor: 'there is no doubt, however, that in these final poems, Yeats is trying desperately to cast off pretences and get to the root of his mind.'

Hill (*PNR*: 12) goes on to argue that Sisson's "artesian" metaphor seems to draw less on the strata, the "verticals" of language-in-history – as an example of which, Hill gives the definition and derivation of 'artesian' – 'than on something which Jung would call the *anima* and Yeats the *spiritus mundi*'.<sup>2</sup> Hill's phrase 'deep psychic impulse' rewords Sisson's formulation to echo 'depth psychology', used to translate 'Tiefenpsychologie', the term coined by Eugen Bleuler (Jung's director at the Burghölzli Mental Hospital) to describe the new kinds of psychology that aimed to explore the unconscious. Thus although Hill (*PNR*: 12) acknowledges that he finds 'at the level of discursive argument [...] nothing but hostility in Sisson's attitude towards the Yeatsian-Jungian axis and its possible incitement of several forms of currently fashionable mysticism', he interprets Sisson's 'deep movement of feeling' in Jungian terms that we have already seen Day Lewis and Patrick Cheney using to interpret Virgil. Jung (2002: 111) himself used the words of *Aeneid* VI.126-9 as the epigraph to *Psychology and Alchemy*; and when, after experiencing a series of apocalyptic dreams in 1913, he was asked about the political prospects of the near future, Jung (in Storr 1998: 77) replied that he 'saw rivers of blood'. When the First World War began the following year, Jung interpreted his own dreams as prophetic, manifesting an unconscious death-wish diffused throughout Europe. Jung's phrase prefigures not only the bloodshed of the war, but also Powell's appropriation of the Virgilian trope as a symbol of racial conflict. The 'deep movement of feeling' in 'The Descent' can

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<sup>2</sup> Hill appears to confuse the *anima*, which Jung (in Jung 1983: 110) describes as the feminine embodiment of content in the masculine unconscious, with the collective unconscious, 'the ancestral heritage of possibilities of representation [...] common to all men, [...] the true basis of the individual psyche' (ibid.: 67).

therefore be read, as Hill suggests, as a Jungian descent into the unconscious strata of the mind. What the examples from Jung suggest, however, is that this descent does not lead away from history into an atemporal subjective realm, as Hill implies, but deeper into the historical and political conditioning of the individual psyche.

Curiously, Hill does not draw on Sisson's poems for examples of radical and artesian metaphors; he might also have substantiated his argument about 'deep psychic impulse[s]' with reference to Sisson's poetry, particularly 'In insula Avalonia' (*CP*: 172-9). Donald Davie (1977a: 272) identifies this long poem as the fruit of Sisson's engagement with Virgil, a poem in which his 'patriotic and religious concerns come together in the legend of Arthur sleeping through the centuries in the Isle of Avalon near Glastonbury'. This is alluded to in the title: in 1191, monks at Glastonbury claimed to have found a tomb and 'a cross with the inscription *Hic jacet Sepultus Inclitus Rex Arturius in insula Avalonia*' (*PNR*: 46). This Arthurian legend is not the only one connected with Glastonbury. In his personal copy of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Somerset* (1949: 20), Sisson marked passages of particular interest, including where she records that 'Joseph of Arimathea came to Glastonbury with his staff, his gospel, and his companions, travelling by boat through the reeds and thickets of the fen, and landed at Glastonbury in the isle of Avalon'. Although she admits that 'this might seem no more than part of that "huge system of monastic lying, in which Glastonbury has a bad pre-eminence"', Warner (*ibid.*: 20) suggests that these legends were local pieties of the kind Sisson cherishes: whether or not Joseph founded the monastery, the monks 'built their beehive huts and sang their hymns and husked their corn in a place that was hallowed by an earlier reverence' – Sisson underlined the last two words as of special importance. These two legends connect 'In insula Avalonia' to both Christian and (through Arthur's putative Julian heredity) to Virgilian mythology.

The poem has attracted more attention from literary critics than any other in Sisson's oeuvre, and all find the poem perplexing: Davie (1977a: 272) suggests that the verse, although 'mysteriously beautiful', seems to 'go nowhere and say nothing'; Alan Young (*PNR*: 46) finds it 'puzzling and compelling'; and C.B. McCully (*PNR*: 48) claims that it makes 'usual critical procedure a nonsense'. Every commentator, however, notes the mixture of Christian myth, Arthurian legend and Virgilian

imagery. As McCully (*PNR*: 49) describes it, ‘the Arthurian ghosts are part of a larger and darker landscape, the real Virgilian underworld where Dis himself is found in the “inner ring”, where Proserpine is abducted,’ and where ‘Satan and Christ are figured in the same myth as Pluto and Orpheus’ (ibid.: 50). Not only are the imagery and verse Virgilian: the structure is also. In the third of the poem’s third ten sections, the Somerset landscape takes on ritual significance:

Twisted are trees, especially this oak  
That stands with all its leaves throughout the year  
There is no autumn for its golden boughs[.] (ll.34-6)

The golden bough, the offering for Proserpine Aeneas needs in order to enter the underworld, here inaugurates the movement of descent. The poem differs from the translation of *Aeneid* VI, though, in that the poet meditates on the language through which he makes this descent. In the fifth section, he states that ‘[n]o word of mine will ever reach the sea | For mine and words are clear contrary things’ (ll.91-2) – that is, the poet is alienated from his language, and wishes only to dissolve into the immanence of the landscape he describes:

My earth, my water, my redundant trees  
Breaking the surface like a stitch in skin.  
No word but weather, let me be like that. (ll.103-5)

The poet is divided from the world by the very words he uses to evoke it, leaving him in a state of inertia:

the mind that waits  
For sabbaths of intent but does no thing  
Not seeking, waiting for a peaceful end[.] (l.112-4)

This deadlock is broken not by reasoning, but through slippages of signification centering on the terms ‘mine’ (in the sense of ‘my own’), ‘mine’ (as a tunnel underground) and ‘mind’ (punning on ‘mined’), liberating the poet’s ‘deep movement of feeling’:

A mine of mind, descend who can that way  
As down a staircase to the inner ring  
Where figures are at liberty, and play

A plain of ghosts, among the rest a girl  
(And none had touched her, though the serpent's teeth  
Met in her heel beneath the flying skirt)[.] (ll.121-6)

Here 'below the circle of my mind' (l.134) Eve is conflated with Persephone '[p]laying in spring-time' (l.135). The syncretic intermingling of Classical and Christian mythology is evident in poetry from Sisson's early period, notably in 'Metamorphoses' (*CP*: 118-27), in which Jesus appears in the role of Orpheus:

And when you visited the shades,  
Did you see my Euridyce,

Christ, on that terrifying day? (ll.105-7)

'In insula Avalonia' frames this within the poet's psyche: as he puts it himself in an essay on Ezra Pound, '[w]e are in the depths of the poet's mind, and what should one find in such a situation except images?' (*AL*: 316). A Jungian reading such as Hill proposes would go further, and see images as expressing universal archetypes. But this would conflict with the Christian faith Sisson expresses in his prose, according to which Christ's universality is due to his divinity (God, Sisson argues, 'became Man, one for all' (*AL*: 208)), rather than being one possible manifestation of a more fundamental archetype – one reason for Sisson's impatience 'at the level of discursive argument' with Jungian psychology. On the other hand, Sisson argues in 'The Eros of Poetry' that 'the contemporary Eros [...] will clearly not bear very much unless it is reinforced by streams coming from more profound sources', of which '[t]here are only two – the stream of classical mythology and that of the Christian faith. Both are erotic, though they have proceeded side by side through the centuries, burbling at one another like quarrelsome water-gods' (*AL*: 214). The terms of the closing simile prioritise classical mythology, with Christianity existing in a polytheistic, pagan universe.

Hill's argument about the possible quasi-Jungian framework for Sisson's thought is not confined to poetics. Pushing his argument further, Hill (*PNR*: 12) elucidates 'a fecund complexity: that so resolute an anti-mystic can, at times, promulgate a form of racial mysticism':

[p]raising Ezra Pound's well-known translation of the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, Sisson appeals to 'the heavy yet athletic brooding, the sense of doom without abandon, which are still central to the English character' (*E.P.*, 113-4) Can one really generalize like this? 'Still central to the English character' is not myth but jargon; and it is deeply worrying when a writer like Sisson, who quite justly detests jargon, himself perpetrates it.

The essay on Pound from which Hill quotes (the same one in which Sisson describes images in the depths of the poet's mind) repays further scrutiny regarding the subject of race. According to Pound, '[t]he Englishman thinks "that the United States, once a set of colonies [...] is by race Anglo-Saxon"' (*AL*: 297). Sisson comments that '[t]hat is of course precisely what the Englishman did think, still would, perhaps, if he had not meanwhile forbidden himself to think in racial categories, if at all' (*AL*: 297). If by 1971 when the essay on Pound was first published the English had forbidden themselves to think in racial categories, they had not been abashed to do so earlier in the century, including in literary criticism. Jackson Knight was amongst many scholars in taking up ideas he found in Jung and bringing them to bear on his reading of classical literature. At the start of *Cumaean Gates*, his exploration of *Aeneid VI* first published in 1936, Knight (1967: 142) argues:

literary criticism is compelled to enlarge its conception of tradition in order to face the facts of literary dependence; and it would have needed to invent the theories of racial memory and collective mind, if they had not already been provided by psychologists. Jung in particular describes a situation in which mysterious but attested participations and communications are intelligible; a situation in which Chesterton's epigram, 'The oldest things last longest', is clear. The greatness and originality of a genius may even consist in power to find contacts farther back in time, beyond the reach of others, and to evoke latent stores of feeling and meaning in the collective mind of the present, just because his power penetrates deeply into the unconscious memory of the race.

In this passage, a contemporary Eliotic concern with tradition is expanded beyond the literary and cultural into the provenance of racial identity. Again, later in the same study:



Vergil's poetic meaning is concerned with old values and symbols which are eloquent below the threshold of full consciousness; he assimilates them, and renders them in his poem, in the full characteristically poetic manner, mysteriously conscious of the common racial past alive to his own individual apprehension. The collective mind had inherited something of evocative power from old facts of history that joined Italy to the very ancient east, and to its values, and religious thought. Some old streams of culture had come to Italy from the east, and perhaps many at many times. Antiquity had dimmed the outlines, but pent up symbolic power, which Vergil could release. (Ibid.: 265)

This certainly is racial mysticism: an unconscious system of symbols and values is passed on by birth, and shared throughout the race constituted by this consanguinity – symbols and values which the poet, through a deep movement of feeling or psychic impulse, can revivify and bring to consciousness. Knight's thesis in *Cumaeen Gates* is that the entrance into the underworld in *Aeneid* VI, prefigured by the image of the labyrinth over the gates to the temple of Apollo (which Sisson omits), is the most fundamental expression of this, drawing on primitive thought which has continued to shape human culture long after its meanings – 'the kinship with God and earth and king, the sacred city, and the labyrinthine cave that means them all' (ibid.: 265) – have been forgotten. Sisson may not have been familiar with Knight's work (although the laudatory opening remarks of his own Jackson Knight Memorial Lecture from 1984 suggest that he was (*ITM*: 71)), or with Theo Brown's article 'St Joseph of Arimathea at Glastonbury' cited by Knight (1967: 283), which applies the theory of entrance into the labyrinth as initiation rite to the English context; but he does appear to have held a similar view of Virgil as the preserver and articulator of an unconscious, primal, collective mind.

This may then be what Sisson understands by 'the human brute'. The unconscious mind, which 'The Descent' explores, is a repository of impulses: lust, grief for the lost object of desire, and the terrors Aeneas finds personified on the threshold of the underworld:

Age,  
Fear, Evil Persuaders, Shortage.  
They have terrible faces. Death,  
Passing us ruthlessly. Sleep,  
Also a brother, and the evil  
Pleasures which exist only in the mind.  
There are others. War  
And one coifed with vipers. (ll.84-5; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 550-3).

Whereas T.S. Eliot (1957: 126) portrayed Virgil as one who ‘set an ideal for Rome, and for its empire in general’, which was ‘never realised in history’ but which is still ‘noble’, and praised him for his ‘refinement of manners’ (ibid.: 62) – Virgil as the embodiment of the rational ego – Sisson values Virgil for his intuition of the unconscious. Above (or rather below) all, Sisson appears to mean (and understands Virgil as meaning) that human beings retain and are guided by forms of understanding that reach back into prehistory and have developed through generations of experience. Sisson’s statement (in Vinson 1980: 1405) about ‘a deep movement of feeling’ is structured vertically, but it is also temporal: the human brute, ‘the man that was the same in Neolithic and Roman times, as now,’ exists ‘below the surface of our exacerbated daily life’. Sisson resorts to Virgil in the same spirit that he criticises Walter Bagehot’s ‘emphatic disjunction from the primitive’, and argues that:

[t]he artist, and indeed the orthodox Christian, cannot fail to find in himself a kinship with primitive peoples, or to regard the accidents of the last few thousand years as making small difference in the essential nature of man. Faced with the caveman’s drawings, or the crafts of some tribe surviving from the Stone Age, his attitude will be one of awed deference. (*AL*: 392)

Furthermore, ‘In insula Avalonia’ suggests, with its allusions to classical and Christian myths of the foundation of Britain, that these deep psychic impulses have a national character. An early example of Sisson’s thinking on this question, presented in the same terms Hill identifies, comes from his review of *English Liberalism* by Anthony Ludovici. Ludovici’s argument, as Sisson summarizes it, is that the Anglo-Saxons were ‘a race of particularists’ who were ‘forced to admit the authority of the state’ and were thus civilised – a process reversed by the Regicide, after which ‘the

stock declined so far that some are now born liberals' (*AL*: 21). Sisson's critique of this thesis is elusive:

[i]t is undeniable that races, or at any rate nations, have peculiar characters, but these characters are difficult to define. Wherever it is possible, therefore, to explain a change in a society without reference to them, one should, I think, in the interests of clarity do so. (*AL*: 21)

Sisson agrees that there is such a thing as a national character, which may or may not be co-extensive with a racial character; but he resists using it as a tool for political analysis, because '[w]hoever talks of the national character comes near to encouraging it, and I do not think that the national character should be encouraged' (*AL*: 21). This was written in March 1939, months before the outbreak of war with Germany where the Nazis had made encouragement of the national character (articulated in racial terms) their *raison d'être*. Nevertheless, Sisson acknowledges its existence, and states that it is 'the fund of vitality from which the conscious life of a nation springs, and if one exploits it one debauches the source of life' (*AL*: 21). Sisson therefore assumes a level of national homogeneity underpinning the institutional structures of politics. The relationship of national character to political institutions is also expressed in terms of individual psychology in 'A Note on the Monarchy'. Defending the religious basis of monarchy, Sisson (*AL*: 132) argues that:

religion moves our secularized society as the appetites of sex move none the less the man or woman who denies them. If we deny our ancient motives, it is out of a will to frustrate ourselves and bring our country to ruin. The monarchy, perfectly adapted to the needs of a modern society, is so in part because it can draw its loyalty from the deepest wells. So long as we have the Queen, her heirs and successors, England could remain conscious of herself and give play to her deepest energies even after the most appalling national catastrophes.

Here, the model of the unconscious (symbolised again by wells) is read onto political formations, so as to argue that monarchism is instinctual to the British, part of their national character developed in a reciprocal relationship with the institution of the

monarchy through ‘a thousand years of history’ (*AL*: 133). This assumes homogeneity of character not just in place but across time – into which an immigrant population, by implication, will struggle to become assimilated, and which is perhaps even threatened by their presence. This is comparable with what Robert Shepherd (1996: 276) calls Powell’s ‘mystic nationalism’: in 1964, Powell spoke publicly about how ‘the unbroken life of the English nation over a thousand years’ was ‘the product of a specific set of circumstances like those which in biology are supposed to start a new line of evolution’. How unbroken this life can have been, in spite of the Reformation, the Civil Wars, the Restoration and the Revolution of 1688, the Industrial Revolution and two world wars, may be doubted; but as Shepherd (*ibid.*: 276) comments, believing in ‘the unique continuity and homogeneity of England and the English, he was bound to regard the integration of immigrants as being immensely difficult, if not impossible’. In the essay on Pound, Sisson quotes his assertion that it would be ‘about as easy for an American to become a Chinaman or a Hindoo as for him to acquire an Englishness, or a Frenchness, or a European-ness, that is more than skin deep’ (*AL*: 298). The question in this context is whether a Hindu could acquire an Englishness, or a Britishness, that is more than – in that loaded expression – skin deep.

If in 1939 Sisson had resisted discussion of ‘national character’, the example Hill cites demonstrates that by the 1960s and ’70s he had come to think more readily in such terms, and moreover that he did assume there to be a homogenous, historically continuous national character. He never formulates this in the terms of racial memory, as used by Jackson Knight, perhaps because his literary and cultural criticism is usually confined to specifically English issues, unlike Knight’s attempts to identify archetypal patterns across the world in many ages. But the events already underway in Germany when *Cumaean Gates* was published would come to render discussion of racial memory deeply suspect, and this in turn affected Powell’s polemic about race and immigration in 1968. In light of this, one could argue that human brutality is not so much a result of ‘our ancient motives’ (*AL*: 132), ‘the savage in that mine’ (‘In insula Avalonia’, l.100), as it is of continuing ‘to think in racial categories’. In some cases it certainly has been, as the history of Nazi Germany goes to show. But refusing, in consequence, to think in racial terms at all may blinker one to the ways in which perceptions of race may unconsciously determine one’s own and others’

behaviour. Critical self-awareness may be more constructive than optimistic colour-blindness.

In his essay on Sisson, Hill insists that one must ‘consider also the implications of one of Sisson's most acute critical insights,’ and quotes from the essay on Pound: ‘the transition from generalization to practice completely eluded him, and since the whole agony of practical affairs is in that transition, the gap was a pretty serious one’ (*AL*: 300). Sisson and Powell share many similarities, such as their wartime experience of British India, their government service after the War, and particularly their sense of national identity underpinning their Virgilianism. But these generalities must be understood in the light of the different ways Powell and Sisson put them into action. We have demonstrated how Powell’s speech, clearly a form of political praxis, can be read within the literary context of the British Virgilian tradition; by the same token, Sisson’s translation may also be read as a political act. This is corroborated by what Powell himself is quoted as saying in a 1969 article for *The Times* glued into Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* workbook:

Mr. Powell has said about his famous immigration speech at Birmingham that ‘it was something which had to be done. I have always had the sense of doing things because there was no alternative. When you write a Latin sentence there is no alternative to the Latin ending. When you write verse there is no alternative to the arrangement of the words’. (BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/11)

Of course, Sisson’s poetry, especially the privately printed *Roman Poems*, had a restricted circulation, and thus could not have the impact of a well-publicised speech; but Powell’s comparison suggests that one can read Sisson’s translation for the kinds of political action it manifests and enjoins. The contrast between how Sisson and Powell move from generalisation to practice, beyond the generic difference between poetry and oratory, is most stark with regard to their use of prophecy.

The Virgilian peroration from which his speech takes its popular name was not the first occasion on which Powell adopted the prophetic mode. Powell concluded the February 1967 *Telegraph* article about immigration and race relations with another Sibylline utterance: ‘I am going to prophecy’, he wrote, ‘that there will be subsequent

phases, when the problem will resume its place in public concern and in a more intractable form, when it can no longer be dealt with simply by turning the inlet tap down or off” (Shepherd 1996: 328). Powell was predicting that commonwealth immigration, and its prominence in national debate, would soon increase of its own accord. But in retrospect, his own later actions were instrumental in bringing the issue to the forefront of public concern, and the extremity of the rhetoric he used helped to cast the ‘problem’ ‘in a more intractable form’. Powell used the Virgilian quotation to predict violence – real physical violence, as he made clear later in 1968, saying over BBC radio that the result of increasing immigration would be that ‘tolerance will break down and there will be violence’ (ibid.: 366). But his speech itself had the effect of bringing this about. Baron Boateng, formerly MP for Brent South, recalls how he ‘was shouted at and spat at and abused in the street for the first time ever, the day after that’ (Schwarz 2011: 355). One Jamaican immigrant recalled black people ‘huddling together against the impending violence, the unspoken aggression in the streets’, and wondering ‘how to respond to the violence it [Powell’s speech] seemed calculated to unleash’ (ibid.: 35). In his opening remarks, Powell (1992: 161) makes a pre-emptive defence against the accusation that he was precipitating violence, claiming that ‘people are disposed to mistake predicting troubles for causing troubles and even for desiring troubles’. Yet he seems not to have thought (or thought only lightly) of how his rhetoric would move ordinary people to action, like the Smithfield meat-market porters who marched on Parliament on the Tuesday after his speech, some of whose overalls ‘were streaked in blood’ (Schwarz 2011: 50). T.S. Eliot (1957: 122), in his radio broadcast discussing Virgil and the prophetic role assigned to him by later Christian writers, argued that the best definition of the word ‘inspiration’ is ‘that the speaker or writer is uttering something which he does not wholly understand – or which he may even misinterpret when the inspiration has departed from him’. Shepherd (1996: 359) notes that Powell ‘seemed genuinely to feel that the speech and the events surrounding it were, in a curious way, separate from him or external to him’, and that ‘almost overnight he seemed to be at the mercy of forces beyond his control’. But though he later denied having any foreknowledge of its impact, he had already had a taste of the controversy speaking publicly about race could entail, and even told a friend that his speech ‘would go up like a rocket and would stay up’ (ibid.: 344-5). Powell was consciously expressing what Eliot (1957: 123), regarding Virgilian prophecy, called the ‘secret feelings’ and ‘despair of a

generation’, as proved by the seismic reaction he provoked. But his prophecies were self-fulfilling, and a true prophet is not one who brings about their fulfilment himself. Powell was thus as disingenuous in assuming the prophetic mantle as he was in insinuating that the white residents of England were the threatened and disenfranchised minority. As such, he can only be called prophetic – as by Paulin (1982: 282) – ironically. (Indeed, Paulin also attacks Virgilian prophecy more generally through Hill: when Ricks notes that Hill’s first word was ‘jam-jar’, Paulin (ibid.: 279) comments that ‘[t]his deadline bit of trivia is meant to offer a final bucolic epiphany, for even the preliterate child was vouchsafed an atoning hyphen’, referring to the Christianised epiphany of Virgil’s fourth Eclogue.)

Concluding *Cumaean Gates*, Jackson Knight (1967: 277) argues that Virgil ‘needed the old beliefs, in order to glean his brain; they had gone to make humanity of the present and the future, whose high prophet he was, bound to know and say what others could only be’. In his work, the idea of Virgil as a prophet persists, but as it were re-paganized. It sometimes appears that Sisson entertains a similar view, as in the title poem of *In the Trojan Ditch*: ‘[t]hus say all sages and I too | Vergil, necromancer, renounce Troy’ (CP: 159). Discussing his poetry for his *Selected Poems* audio recording, Sisson states that ‘poems can look forward as well as backward; they often do in fact. They are partly prophetic. They can combine recollection, prophecy, observation – anything that the mind contains can in fact surface in them’ (SP), again drawing on the surface/depth dichotomy. But what is most significant about Sisson’s poetry from 1968 onwards is the insistence with which he rejects prophecy. In ‘The Descent’, Sisson rejects the Sibyl’s prophecy of ‘dreadful wars’, and omits Anchises’ roll-call of future heroes. This is developed in his subsequent Virgilian poetry. Surveying a flight of geese in ‘In insula Avalonia’, the poet asks, ‘What augury? Or is there any such?’ (1.46). Sisson could have developed the archetypal correspondence of Arthur, the once and future king, with Anchises’ pageant of future Roman heroes, thereby projecting a heroic monarchical future for Britain. But the poem is less overtly concerned with British politics than with the poet’s own identity:

I am I am I and nothing more

If any took this shape I took this shape  
Yet taking what I did not ask to have

And being nothing till I took this shape[.] (ll.159-62)

Where is he? Gone

The empty space is better than himself  
But best of all when, certain winters past,  
No one says: There he was, I knew him well. (ll.195-8)

Here, Sisson rearticulates the sense of lack that constitutes the individual subject in 'In Honour of J.H. Fabre', but elaborates it beyond the epigrammatic concision of the earlier poem. Sisson (*PNR*: 56) comments in an interview that the poem evokes the landscape and history of the Somerset Levels, but also expresses his feelings of 'intense dissatisfaction and lack of orientation in the world of my ordinary work' and 'the disappointments of my last years at the Department of Employment'. As with his earlier poems about the country and the city, 'the agony of practical affairs' exacerbates a deeper existential malaise. This is evident, again refracted through the Virgilian trope of descent, in poems from his next collection after *In the Trojan Ditch*, significantly named *Anchises* (the dust jacket of which bore an image of Aeneas carrying his father out of Troy on his back). Sisson begins 'Cotignac' (*CP*: 191-2), one of a series of poems set in Provençal locations, by describing a '[r]iver, deep as death, deeper, Avernus' (l.1) and asks:

If I were to awake in that underworld, whom should I see?  
Not Nestor, not Paris,  
Not any heroic shadow[.] (ll.9-11).

He finds instead '[t]he commonplace merchants of ambition' who stand 'bragging in the market-place' (ll.15, 6); and referring more explicitly to his recently ended career, he describes:

the governors  
Living among themselves without passions  
Touching our parts. I had lived among them as evil  
No man knew better their vain twists,  
Admired what he hated most  
Or so fell to dreaming of impossibles  
Which are only eaten ambition (ll.29-35)

Sisson uses the trope of descent into the underworld to reflect on his professional life and his frustration at the increasing bureaucratisation of the civil service, which



culminated with his highly critical *Spectator* articles in 1971 (*AL*: 231-40) and ultimately his taking early retirement. He does not comment, however, on specific policies or laws. Other poems from *Anchises* focus on the sense of lost love evoked by the meeting with Dido, such as 'Antres' (*CP*: 202) and 'Sillans-la-Cascade' (*CP*: 192):

Lovely hair, cascading over a brow  
Troubled now. I saw her in sleep  
So touching and so betrayed. (ll.4-6)

After these poems expressing emotions of frustrated ambition and desire from the personal strata of the unconscious, Sisson approaches prophetic revelation in the collection's title-poem. Rather than revealing the future as in *Aeneid* VI, however, 'Anchises' picks up from the end of 'The Descent' where he is said not to exist. John Peck (himself a Jungian analyst, although he acknowledges that Sisson 'had no truck with the Swiss doctor' (*Age*: 28)) describes Sisson's Anchises as 'the shade of a dead man holding back from pronouncing auguries' (*Age*: 32):

This is my proper sightlessness,<sup>3</sup>  
The invisible pack hunting the visible air.  
There are those who exist, but it is not I.  
Existent are: bodies, although their existence is  
Not proven; tremors  
Through the vast air expecting some other thing  
Not known, or hopeless; or else hoped for and lost.  
One could devise invisibility,  
Walking by it as if it were not obligatory  
As it is with me, *moi qui n'existe pas*  
NON SUM, therefore NON COGITO, although there are shapes  
Upon a mind I sometimes take to be mine.  
This is not much to show for sixty years  
Here by the Latin gate, or where the Baltic  
Spreads its white arms over the barren sand.  
Do not number me on this seashore  
Where the effete light from the north  
Floods over the ice-cap. I came from Troy  
It was not after she had ended, but before. (ll.1-19)

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<sup>3</sup> The version in the *Collected Poems* of 1984 and 1998, which Peck quotes, differs from that printed in *Anchises*, in which the first line reads 'This is my proper order: sightlessness,' (*Anc*: 30)

As with 'In insula Avalonia', the speaker disavows the stability of his own identity. Peck (*Age*: 33) suggests that Anchises 'speaks from the core of Western patrimony [...] in the arch-father's voice', but argues that Sisson's 'Anchises' differs in that 'it comes from a spirit self-maintained since *before* Troy's fall and its fateful assimilation to Rome'. 'This father utters no prophecies useful to the programme of imperial legend' (*Age*: 33) – nor indeed to populist nationalism. To demonstrate the political valence of this, Peck (*Age*: 32) compares Sisson's poem with Seamus Heaney's 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces' (from the year before *Anchises*, 1975):

I am Hamlet the Dane,  
skull-handler, parablist,  
smeller of rot

in the state, infused  
with its poisons,  
pinioned by ghosts  
and affections,

murders and pieties,  
coming to consciousness  
by jumping in graves,  
dithering, blathering.

Heaney's Hamlet, Peck argues, 'raises his voice loudly, advertising his slapdash vigour', while Sisson's Anchises 'restrains his utterance, pulling back, rather than pulling out, the stops which he carefully sounds through negation' (*Age*: 32). The purpose of this in Peck's argument is to suggest common ground for multilateral action, which would arise not only 'from shared insights into corruption, or the weak leverage against it', but also 'from the fact that opposed tones [...] register kindred ironies' (*Age*: 32). However, another way of thinking about the raised voice and what Peck (*Age*: 35) calls Sisson's 'distantly raised voice' would be to contrast Sisson's refusal of prophecy with Powell's exploitation of it. Peck (*Age*: 33) writes that 'the raised voice gets raised, at least at first, ineffectually'. This is accurate with reference to Heaney, but Powell's raised voice was effectual in unanticipated ways. That it was his own speech, and not the Race Relations bill he was attacking, that had the effect of 'throwing a match on to gunpowder' (Powell 1992: 165) was not the least of the Delphic ironies to which he exposed himself, gaining popular support at the expense of his seat in the shadow cabinet. By contrast, 'the distantly raised voice already

assumes a negative wisdom, choosing irony over engagement. One might call its gambit the higher ineffectuality' (*Age*: 33). As an example of the contrast between his rhetoric and Powell's, in 'No Address' (*CP*: 152) Sisson presents himself in a position of cultural and political isolation:

The poetry owners cannot make me out  
Nor I them. And the big mouths of learning  
Open and close over my thoughts without biting.  
Under the shadow of politics I have no teeth. (ll.6-9)

Inspired by his recent work on Latin translation, Sisson conjures 'Pliny, Horace, Cicero' (l.4) for solace: 'talk to me; | I am a dead language also' (ll.4-5). He concludes:

Inching towards death, let me go there quickly.  
Silently, in the night or in the day-time,  
Equally, I would take it like a Roman. (ll.13-5)

The final words echo Powell's 'like the Roman', with a change to the indefinite article and a different message: writing (as Peck (*Age*: 35) puts it) 'as an earnest private speaker, rather than as an eminent authority on public administration', Sisson opts for stoicism over recklessness. Drafted on 17 May 1968 (ASSL DM1275/1/36), less than four weeks after 'Rivers of Blood' was delivered, it is not impossible that the poetic echo was causally connected. Either way, Sisson's disavowal of political efficacy (including, as we have seen previously, the laureate authority Petrarch ascribed to Horace and Virgil) demonstrates precisely the choice of irony over engagement Peck describes.

On the face of it, one might assume that Sisson would be predisposed to embrace Virgilian prophecy. Colin Burrow (1997: 36) observes that Virgil has 'often appealed in the modern era to conservatives who wish to resist what they see as the cultural decline around them' and specifically refers to Sisson in this regard, although with reference to his later, full translation of the *Aeneid* from 1986 rather than 'The

Descent' (ibid.: 26-6).<sup>4</sup> Burrow (ibid.: 30) describes how Dryden's translations 'draw on his own experience as a resistant member of a persecuted minority', i.e. as a Catholic Tory, 'compelled to bite his tongue in a political milieu which was an abhorrence to him'. This recalls the fact that Sisson identified himself as a Tory, claiming that this 'has almost always been a doctrine of opposition, and so it will remain' (*AL*: 222). It may be that this, aside from purely poetic reasons, is why he claims to have 'great sympathy with Dryden', whose late output was mostly in translation: '[h]e was glad, I imagine, to be able to release the energies of poetry without passing for having said anything of his own' (*ITD*: 13) – that is, anything too incriminatingly Jacobite. But Sisson's position might be thought less oppositional than that of a contemporary such as Tony Benn, who advocated disestablishment of the Church of England and abolition of the House of Lords. For a white, male, middle-class member (and indeed supporter) of the establishment to take the stance of an embattled minority is a similar manoeuvre to Powell's. But while Burrow (1997: 28) argues that 'Virgil's translators need adversity to alert them to the painful worth of a Virgilian prophetic future', Sisson, in turning to Virgil, rejects prophecy. This may be because by the late 1960s the British Empire had declined much further than it had in 1952, when Day Lewis could still draw on the sense 'that the *Aeneid* offers consoling prophecies to losing causes' (ibid.: 26). But there are other reasons for the rejection of prophecy, more specific to Sisson yet with wider significance. In Caldwell's account of Virgilian translation, the 'inability of seventeenth-century writers to assume a sacred purpose or even to create a unity of history or action for an audience inhabiting a world that seemed impossibly ununified' – after the execution of Charles I, the restoration of Charles II, and the enforced abdication of James II, not to mention the rise of new models of science, politics and economics – 'resulted in a series of translation fragments and episodic translations that have more in common with the eighteenth-century novel than with Spenser's series of tales that knit together pieces of a divine British history' (ibid.: 16). If the increasing fragmentation of English versions of Virgil throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflects wider social and constitutional changes, Sisson's Virgilian translations of the 1960s repeat the same gesture, and follow it through to take account of the further

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<sup>4</sup> I do not deal with Sisson's later translation here, primarily because chronologically it falls outside the scope of this study, and for secondary reasons that will be elaborated upon in the following chapter.

breakdown of grand historical narratives, alterations to the constitution and the rise of technocratic government.

This breakdown of divinely sanctioned historical destiny is reflected not only in the omission and rejection of prophecies in ‘The Descent’, but in the poem’s form. Discussing the technique of translation, Sisson consistently argues against preconceived notions of prosodic correspondence. ‘Is the Scottish-Chaucerian couplet of Gavin Douglas, the blank verse of Surrey, the almost-Augustan couplet of Dryden, the right medium for translating Virgil?’ Sisson asks in his Jackson Knight lecture; and, alluding to Day Lewis’s version, ‘[a]re the near-hexameters of one of my predecessors in this lectureship right?’ (*ITM*: 74) He answers that ‘none of these forms is right; it is merely the best that a particular translator could do at the time of his attempt’ (*ITM*: 74-5). In the preface to the second section of *In the Trojan Ditch*, Sisson states that ‘all theory about the proper measures for a translation is out of place’: ‘[t]here is no equivalent in English of Virgil’s hexameter; it is not even the case that the regular couplets of Dryden represent it more exactly than a less regular measure’ (*ITD*: 160). As Sisson relates it, soon after he began translating *Aeneid* VI in the tetrameters he had used for his version of the *Eclogues*, ‘[t]he octosyllabic line broke as I wrote, and although an *a priori* judge might object, a poet is not entitled to’ (*ITD*: 160). It sounds from this that the regular form collapsed under the pressure of trying to render content that had become intractable due to external causes. The syntax is also fragmented, with many clauses incomplete and individual words isolated. On a higher structural level, ‘The Descent’ is a selective rendering of the sixth book, and although Sisson also translated a fragment of *Aeneid* V,<sup>5</sup> and his notebooks demonstrate that he also attempted parts relating to Dido (DM1275/1/35), in 1968 he either would not or could not attempt a complete translation of the epic. If in Caldwell’s account (2007: 21) of seventeenth-century Virgilian translations ‘the fragments of translation reflect the fragmentation of a once-sacred history’, ‘The Descent’ is a fragment of a fragment – less a rendering of *Aeneid* VI than a rendering. But though the verse of ‘The Descent’ is, in a sense, the best that Sisson could do at the time, like the idiosyncratic manipulation of the content of the original, its prosody

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Palinurus’ (*ITD*: 189). The fact that Palinurus appears in *Aeneid* VI.337-83, but not in ‘The Descent’, suggests that Sisson passed up the opportunity of connecting his two fragments.

does not seek equivalence with the Virgilian hexameter. Clive Wilmer (*PNR*: 43) describes Sisson's free-verse prosody:

the lines are of varying length with strong endings, but the syntax is fragmentary. The effect of this is continually to thrust the reader back to the left-hand margin, the ultimate sensation being one of descent or fall.

Just as Sisson describes Virgil's significance in the same terms of surface and depth that structure *Aeneid* VI, so Wilmer describes Sisson's prosody; he goes so far as to say that 'the point of his poems is to be found in a downward movement, their articulation of descent' (*PNR*: 43). Wilmer (*PNR*: 43) also interprets this as a microcosm of 'the larger rhythm' that is the movement of history itself:

Sisson's journey, like that of Aeneas, is in quest of history; he seeks the roots and evidences that will restore the individual to a context in place and time. The purpose of the descent, then, is to re-connect past and future. If that re-connection can be achieved, the human person will be able to draw substance from the nation and culture he derives from.

Perhaps tacitly acknowledging that Sisson omits Anchises' prophecy through which Virgil connects his foundation myth to Roman history, Wilmer admits, 'I do not think Sisson imagines this to be possible' (*PNR*: 43). Yet he concludes that 'the rhythm which persuades amounts to much more than verse movement. It is in that movement, however, that our sense of the larger rhythm begins' (*PNR*: 43). Geoffrey Hill (2008: 91) makes a comparable argument in his essay 'Redeeming the Time', in which he suggests that '[i]f language is more than a vehicle for the transmission of axioms and concepts, rhythm is correspondingly more than a physiological motor. It is capable of registering, mimetically, deep shocks of recognition'. Beyond this, the rhythms of poetry and liturgy build up into 'a rhythm of social duties, rites, ties, and obligations from which an individual severs himself or herself at great cost and peril' (*ibid.*: 93). Sisson's fragmented rhythms are a recognition that such duties, rites, ties and obligations, associated with the national church and the wider body politic, are breaking down around the individual who still clings to them.

Moreover, the form in which Sisson registers this itself has a political valence. Reviewing *Exactions*, Donald Davie (1980: 27) argues that Sisson's 'auditory imagination [...] has earned – by such sideways rhythmical dartings – the right to jeer at the doggedly linear logic' of normative syntax. 'And yet did not Pound say something about "the drive through to action"?', Davie (*ibid.*: 27) asks; '[a]nd did he not, rightly or wrongly, decide that such "drive" not only could be, but peculiarly ought to be, fuelled by poetry?'. Although the examples Davie gives are actually examples of paronomasia (closer to the puns that structure 'In insula Avalonia'), the fragmented rhythms and syntax of 'The Descent' and 'Anchises' correspond to the 'sideways rhythmical dartings' that Davie contradistinguishes from 'the drive through to action'. And 'remembering what it was that Pound finally drove through to, what the courses of action were that Pound's poetry sought to fuel,' Davie (*ibid.*: 27) concludes that this is a political virtue: '[t]hough Sisson's prose sometimes drives through to action, his verse never does'.

For Sisson, poetic rhythm is a bodily phenomenon in several senses: it has its basis in the poet's body (in Hill's terms, the 'physiological motor'); it 'binds together the body of a poem' (*AL*: 77); and it can create an experience of embodiedness in the reader. The fundamental level of poetic rhythm is that which is experienced while reading, created by the interplay of phonetics, syntax and line-breaks. This is the level at which the physical apprehension of verse occurs, as exemplified in 'Anchises':

Existent are: bodies, although their existence is  
 Not proven; tremors  
 Through the vast air expecting some other thing  
 Not known, or hopeless; or else hoped for and lost. (ll.4-7)

The poet's admission that 'there are shapes | Upon a mind I sometimes take to be mine' echoes the key terms of 'In insula Avalonia'; but whereas in that poem the consistently end-stopped lines create what C.B. McCully (*PNR*: 48) describes as crystalline 'movements of mind', in 'Anchises' the shuddering early caesura of '[e]xistent are: bodies', the counterpointing of syntax to line-break in 'their existence is | Not proven', and the clipped single-word hemistich 'tremors', all force the reader into lingual contortions, as if to force a recognition of corporeality in an increasingly disembodied world.

This perceptible rhythm builds up into the rhythm of the stanza or period; and the rhythms of succeeding stanzas or periods builds up to create the ‘body’ of the whole poem. ‘Anchises’ refers back, positioning himself as he does ‘by the Latin gate’ (unassimilated to either the Roman Empire or the Church which succeeded it) to ‘A Letter to John Donne’. In that poem, the poem’s argument develops from stanza to stanza, alongside a phonetic intensification, to the exclusion of ‘vivid images, pretty sounds and fine thoughts’ (*AL*: 77) – an exclusion analogous to the political exclusions of the Anglican settlement, whereby individual bodies were included in the polity through their incorporation into the church, delimiting the wider body politic. But whereas that poem was a rear-guard defence of Sisson’s High Tory conception of the established church, the verse of ‘The Descent’ registers the further fragmentation of that wider body. The contents of the translation have been partially gutted; the poem’s perceptible rhythms are erratic, and do not build into an overarching parabola as do those of ‘A Letter to John Donne’. This mirrors the consequences of the breakdown of the Anglican Church for the individual body. Furthermore, because of the connection between the individual body, the wider body politic, and the monarch’s second body in Sisson’s High Tory poetics, we may speculate that the breakdown of the wider body politic registered mimetically in Sisson’s verse implies that the monarch’s body politic, supposedly ‘utterly devoid of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to’ (Santner 2011: 35), is itself disintegrating. The sensation of descent or fall that Wilmer finds in the rhythms of Sisson’s free verse therefore builds into the larger rhythm of the continuing decline of the High Tory conception of church and state.

One cannot escape the conclusion that this condition would further deteriorate with mass immigration, not because immigrants’ bodies are intrinsically unfit to be part of the wider body politic (as in the Nazi conception of the nation-state), but because they are unlikely to be incorporated into the Anglican Communion. When Sisson writes in *The Case of Walter Bagehot* that the question of non-conformism is ‘so deeply implicated in our history that it does not die and has not become insignificant, merely changed its form’ (*AL*: 373), the new form should be understood as the question regarding the status of other non-Christian religions, as when he argues in an essay from 1969 that the Non-Jurors ‘had been right all along in thinking that an indulgence



to Roman Catholics was a blow at the constitution' (*AL*: 225) and goes on to ask whether it matters that 'we now live in a state in which it is important that Sikhs should publicly exercise their customs but it is thought wrong that a child should be taught the creed or the catechism at the public expense' (*AL*: 225). (Analogously, Juno is angry that the Trojans are '[t]ransporting Troy's defeated gods to Italy' (*Aen.* I.68; cf. Virgil 2000 vol.1: 266-7).) The distinction between faith and race is susceptible to slippage, however, where lines of religious and ethnic demarcation are broadly coterminous. The answer to the question posed at the conclusion of the previous chapter must therefore be an ambiguous one. The conception of the nation with the monarch as its head, held together through incorporation into a wider body politic, is not necessarily (as it is with Larkin) tainted by race hate; but in practical terms, given that immigrants bring their cultures as well as their bodies, racial discriminations are likely to persist – in the neutral sense of a distinction, but always with the danger of shading over into the negative sense of prejudice and mistreatment.

Defending Sisson's ironic, anti-prophetic Anchises, Peck (*Age*: 32) argues that he exhibits 'fastidious disdain for the guilt of empire'. But how much '[s]piritual hygiene' (*Age*: 34) can there be in this, on the part of an Englishman sharing in the corporate legacy of British imperialism, and especially as one who (again like Powell) served in India during the Second World War? Sisson's engagement with the later fortunes of the British Raj began before he published his mature poetry, and tracing its repercussions in his thought will take us from his early writings to the twilight of his creative lifespan.

## V. 'The Return Journey': India and the Church of England

### I. The Outward Journey

In his foreword to *In the Trojan Ditch*, C.H. Sisson outlines the context for his first mature work as a poet:

[t]he earliest poem here reprinted was written on a troopship going south through tropical waters. It was not altogether the work of an innocent beginner: I was nearly thirty. More poems were written in military camps in Bengal and the late North-West Frontier Province. There was a gap of several years, then the break to the surface which occurred with the poems entitled 'Fellfoot' and 'In a Dark Wood'.

That much of history explains how the bulk of the volume is the work of a man going onwards from thirty-five – poems of the return journey, therefore. (*ITD*: 13)

The 'return journey' here is that of one who has reached the mid-point of life (also alluded to in the Dantescan title of 'In a Dark Wood'), and is thus making his way towards second childhood, and eventually non-being. The stages of life structure other such early poems as 'The Art of Living' (*CP*: 26-7):

The child can grow  
Only by being blind  
He owes his greatness  
To his fumbling.

The mind askew  
From the appetite that drives him  
The youth gives reasons  
And has destinations.

The old man's waltzing nerves  
Misdirect his hand  
Aphasia, medicine, hope  
Obscure his end. (ll.1-12)

Lack of self-knowledge is constant; youth is distinguished only by capability and self-confidence. But here, the poet stands at a remove, objectively assessing the human

condition. In poems where Sisson places himself within the frame, death is not only accepted but desired, as in 'Family Fortunes' (*CP*: 21-2):

And I,

Whose hand never steadied a plough,  
Wish I had finished my long journey. (ll.18-20)

The difference is not merely that the poet enters as the poem's subject: his appearance as a person (not just an 'I') occurs within and is substantiated by a context of places within a historical continuum – the North of England where his parents are buried, the Bristol of his childhood, and the Wiltshire village of his grandfather's farm. Within this setting of familiar places, the 'return journey' takes on a personal meaning, as something anticipated rather than blankly inevitable.

In much the same way, Sisson's earliest mature work may be seen as poems of the outward journey, in life and en route to India, while the poems of his 'return journey' from the age of thirty-five are set within a multifaceted context of geographical returns – from India back to England, and from his working life in London and the South-East to the West Country of his early life. Furthermore, these take on the attributes of, and even come to symbolise, forms of intellectual return. This chapter will examine Sisson's early work in verse and prose, and his later work as poet and editor, and will seek to demonstrate the ways in which these returns dovetail.

### 1. The Outward Journey

Sisson records that he joined the Army in January 1942, enlisting in the Intelligence Corps on the basis that he spoke French and German (*OLO*: 151). He was surprised and disappointed, therefore, to find himself en route (by way of South Africa) to India, where there was little to be done against the Nazi threat that had concerned him since his stay in Germany after Hitler took power.

The shock of being sent to India was small in comparison with that of what he found there. The impact of India, and the state of the British Raj in its final decade, is registered in both the tone and bulk of the writing he produced on the subject. In an interview from 1984, Sisson would speak of writing about it as a means of 'getting

those years in India out of my system' (*PNR*: 58). The published portion of this stands at one novel, *An Asiatic Romance* (*AR*); 'One Eye on India', a memoir fictionalised as the story of a soldier named Pearce, which nonetheless repeats passages verbatim (or nearly so) from Sisson's army notebooks, published as part of *On the Look-Out*; seven poems written there, and a few later ones; and scattered references in prose pieces such as 'Autobiographical Reflections on Politics' (*AL*: 134-47). But the unpublished portion (held in Bristol University Library's special collections department) also includes another novel, *The Morning's Danger* (ASSL DM1275/2/6), and an earlier, unfinished draft entitled 'The Dance' (ASSL DM1275/2/2); *Eddio's Tour of India* (ASSL DM1275/2/2), a closet drama written there, as well as several more poems in his army notebooks; and sections of prose towards a kind of anthology to be called *The Mirror of India* (DM1275/2/4) which was to include *An Asiatic Romance* and alternative version of 'One Eye on India' written from the first-person perspective. The process of getting India out of his system evidently took many years and much work. But what also emerges from Sisson's notebooks is his sense that writing was his vocation. As he puts it in one entry, dated New Year's Eve 1943, 'I am in my thirtieth year, it is the time when a man should be putting things out. I have little to offer, but with years the conviction that I am a genuine writer does not diminish' (DM1275/1/1). At the age of twenty-nine, Sisson sees himself on the outward journey, and set on course to become a writer. It is logical that his experiences in India should have provided him with matter to write about – that he consciously took on what we might call 'the matter of India', as he would later draw on the matter of Britain (Davie 1980: 28). This is substantiated by what Sisson says about writing *An Asiatic Romance*: some mitigating words of praise in a rejection letter from T.S. Eliot regarding 'One Eye on India' 'set me on seeing what I could do in the way of narrative proper' (*PNR*: 58). And as he records in his autobiography (*OLO*: 52), after receiving several rejections for *Christopher Homm*:

I resolved, as it were in defiance of publishers, that I would write one more novel. *Christopher Homm* had proved to my satisfaction that I could write, but an itch remained to find someone else to assent to this proposition. I determined to write a novel which even a publisher would recognize as being one. I suppose this was a moment of defection. I organized the superficies in a

way that was supposed to look publishable. Apparently after all my novel did not look like that. No doubt that served me right. [...]

Last time I looked at this novel I thought it was better than it ought to be. It presents a form of military life of which I had had a profound experience. So it is not about nothing.

*The Mirror of India* was also clearly intended to be a publishable work, with prefatory matter explaining to its readers the purpose and methods of its constituent parts. A handwritten note from 1963 on the front page of the manuscript describes it as '[a] synthetic work, compiled in hope of publication from 'One Eye on India' & 'An Asiatic Romance' with interlardings & additions. The original works are better' (DM1275/2/4). But though he abandoned the project, the additional sections of expository prose are a useful resource for understanding how Sisson approached writing about his Indian experiences.

Having written no poetry since turning twenty, Sisson began again en route to India with 'On a Troopship', a poem of the outward journey in a literal sense. A.T. Tolley (1985: 209) describes the conditions behind much poetry of the Second World War:

the war created a situation conducive to philosophical speculation and gave many people a lot of opportunity for it. In addition, more time was spent by more people in waiting or in boring occupations than was spent in actual fighting. This boredom could be accompanied by brutalizing treatment and circumstances[.]

Sisson's first mature poem is typical in these respects. 'On a Troopship' (CP: 3) expresses the position of a sensitive, analytical person in the constricting environment of military life:

They are already made  
Why should they go  
Into boring society  
Among the soldiery?  
But I, whose imperfection  
Is evident and admitted  
Needing further assurance

Must year-long be pitted  
Against fool and trooper  
Practising my integrity  
In awkward places,  
Walking till I walk easily  
Among uncomprehended faces  
Extracting the root  
Of the matter from the diverse engines  
That in an oath, a gesture or a song  
Inadequately approximate to the human norm. (ll.1-17)

The poem is written in sporadically rhyming lines of four to fourteen syllables, with a predominantly iambic rhythm. This flexible, improvisatory metric reflects the poet's responses to the demands made upon him in life aboard ship. 'One Eye on India' records the imbecilities of 'fool and trooper', as well as the confined environment of life below decks:

[l]iving in these burrows, the body acquired a habit of economy in its movements. When hammocks were slung criss-cross over the mess-decks, the smallness of the gaps between one's own and neighbouring bodies predetermined the muscular action by which one could gain access to a hammock, or get down from it in the morning. When the ship nosed and crashed through the wintry Atlantic, a false movement would send one's vomit spraying over the men below.

And the mind acquired a ductile quality akin to the dexterity of the body. As the body learned to thread its way among the trunks of the devilish and uncertain forest of surrounding bodies, the mind became retractile from the simple conversation of the lips, but could be extended at will to counter a falling kitbag or to answer a jest. (*OLO*: 75)

In this passage, both mind and body must adapt to the 'awkward places' inhabited by the troops. The body of the poem (to use Sisson's later formulation) mimics in the nimble movement of its metrical feet the process of ethical adaptation that is partly an exercise in adapting the poet's physical body in relation to the bodies around him.

In the final lines, the poet is concerned with understanding human nature, positing a 'human norm' to which the soldiers 'inadequately approximate'. In the context of

Sisson's later work, this might be taken as referring to the idea that Christ, not being subject to original sin, is the ideal human from whose perfection all others fall short – as Sisson would put it in 1967, the Incarnation 'was like the descent of a Platonic form into physical shape' (*AL*: 208). Yet it is crucial for our understanding of this period of Sisson's work as well as his later to know that, as he explained to Donald Davie in a letter from October 1976, 'the poems before *In a Dark Wood* are, so to speak, pre-Christian' (JRL CPA Acc. 4-2, Box 2, C.H. Sisson Folder 1). Allusion to Christian doctrine is thus likely to be unintentional, but may be present nonetheless.

The emotional impact of India itself may be gauged from a short lyric written there, 'In the Hills' (*CP*: 4):

Whereas I wander here among  
Stone outcrops, rocks and roots  
Below me tapers the peninsula  
All India going to the sea.

Below, summer is a disease  
Which seas surround whose glassy blue  
Nothing can cool and nothing cure  
But seize my heart

The jackal wandering in the woods  
For I have speech and nothing said  
The jackal sniffing in the plains  
The vulture and the carrion-crow

O jackal, howl about my bed.  
O howl around my sleeping head. (ll.1-14)

The poem has the shape of an English sonnet, yet the rhymes are either missing or appear (in the second and third quatrains) only in the written characters, e.g. disease/heart, blue/cure, woods/crow, said/plains. The line lengths are irregular, and shorter than the traditional pentameter, with an especially abrupt truncation at line eight, where the poetic rhythm mimics a breathless pause in the poet's somatic rhythm as his heart is 'seized'. The poet complains in the final stanza, between paratactic descriptions of wild animals, 'I have speech and nothing said'. This may be compared with Thomas Mowbray's assertion in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, that in exile his native language will be useless to him: '[w]hat is thy sentence then but speechless death, / Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?' (I. 3. 172-3)

Banished to India, the poet feels unable to communicate. Yet reflecting on this poem decades later, Sisson commented that ‘it shows an obscure regret at not having said something which poets suffer from, heaven knows why’ (*SP*). The line thus acts as a hinge between the specific conditions of Sisson’s exile and a general condition fundamental to being a poet.

The third quatrain creates a parallel between the poet, who ‘wander[s] here among | Stone outcrops, rocks and roots’, and the jackal ‘wandering in the woods’. The jackal is a pariah, a creature outside human habitation and society; yet the parallelism suggests that the poet is sympathetic to this condition, and even shares it. Again, there is some ambiguity about whether this is because the poet is an exile, or a poet *per se*. In the closing couplet, he addresses the jackal directly, in a complex gesture of identification and differentiation. The direct address implies that the jackal understands and responds to human language; yet it can only ‘howl’, in contrast to the poet’s articulacy, emphasised by the only full rhymes in the poem. The animal is thus further identified with the poet, brought closer while acknowledging the gulf between them. This may be compared with Horace’s Ode I.xxii (cf. Horace 2004: 66-7), which Sisson translated (*CT*: 302-3). The poet begins by claiming that the righteous man may travel anywhere, including ‘those places which the golden Hydaspes | Fabulously waters’ (ll.7-8) (that is to say, Kashmir and the former North-West Frontier Province, now Pakistan) without fear of harm. The poet offers proof of this from his own experience:

as I was wandering in the Sabine forest,  
Singing of Lalage, careless, beyond the boundary  
Of my own property, I started a wolf and he bolted  
Although I was empty-handed. (ll.9-12)

Scholarly readings largely debunk the naïve view that Horace is sincerely claiming divine protection, tending to argue that ‘[i]t is no hallowing effect of love or poetry that puts Horace’s wolf to flight, but the awful racket with which the amorous singer is disrupting the Sabine glades’ (Macfarlane 1981: 24). In Agamben’s terms, the naïve, moral reading sees *physis* as continuous with *nomos*, and the wolf as responding to the force of the poet’s *logos*; the subversive, comic reading is based on the fact that the poet travels ‘beyond the boundary’ of human habitation into an



indeterminate zone where he confronts the wolf as another animal, and his *phone* scares it away. Recalling that Agamben identifies the werewolf as ‘the figure of the man who has been banned from the city [...] a threshold of indistinction and passage between animal and man’ (*HS*: 105), the poet’s confrontation with the wolf (and Sisson’s identification with the jackal) traces the same threshold of indistinction. Thus ‘In the Hills’ dramatizes the position of the poet as liminal figure of the political order (prefiguring Sisson’s later laureate poetry) as well as his sense of banishment. The identification with the jackal appears to stem from a desire to face the wildness that lies outside the human order, which is rigidly maintained in army life. The poet wishes not to become inured to the country’s strangeness and morbidity, but to remain alert to his experiences of it, and to take from it what he can of value.

The same desire is manifested in different ways by two further texts: *Eddio’s Tour of India*, written in Abbottabad in 1944, and *An Asiatic Romance*, written on his return to Britain. In the former, Eddio is described as a philosopher wearing ‘the uniform of a B.O.R.’ (a member of the British Other Ranks, i.e. a non-commissioned officer or private soldier). The other character is a Tourist, who comes comically over-prepared with photographs and guidebooks. Eddio takes him on a kaleidoscopic tour of Indian scenes, attempting to strip the Tourist of his preconceptions and show him the chaotic, confusing reality of British India. Sisson wore the same BOR uniform as Eddio, and to some extent the philosopher is his persona; but his account in ‘One Eye on India’ records that Sisson felt ‘astonishment’ (*OLO*: 95) at what he saw in India comparable to the Tourist’s. Their relationship thus dramatizes Sisson’s own internal conflict between his ‘suppressed wonder’ (*OLO*: 95) and growing sense of insight into a world misrepresented at home, and his desire to impress this upon others.

*Eddio’s Tour of India* attempts to reveal the reality of India behind its illusory representations in Britain; contrastingly, in *An Asiatic Romance* Asia comes to represent reality behind the illusory self-representations of the British, in their colonies and at home. The story follows three Englishmen (Sir Bertram Sligh, a senior civil servant; his junior colleague Dacres; and Curly, an Army corporal) who are tricked by a signals officer and amateur anthropologist, Bridgwater, into believing that England along with the rest of Europe and America has been destroyed in a mass ballistic onslaught. Expecting a further attack on their unspecified British colony, the

three men flee, ending up in the palace of a prince. Sligh ingratiates himself, and tries to set up a civil service for the employment of himself and Dacres. The bureaucrats arrange a visit by the younger sister of the Prince's new bride from her cautious, conservative father, king of a neighbouring province. Sisson bases the rest of the story on the myth of Philomela: the Prince rapes his sister-in-law, cuts out her tongue and imprisons her; but she gets word to her sister, and they revenge themselves by feeding the Prince his infant son in a stew. As chaos engulfs the palace, the Englishmen discover from a newspaper that England has not been destroyed, and set out to return.

Michael Schmidt (*PNR*: 1) describes the novel as a satire on 'England as a colonial power: the English system of class, the otherness of those it blithely sought to administer, the imperviousness of the administrators to that otherness'. The main object of this satire is Sir Bertram, as the representative of the British ministerial class. Besides the pomposity and impercipient with which Sisson characterises him, his distinguishing quality is that he is concerned only with the means, and not at all with the ends, of politics: he is 'an expert in superstructures, not foundations. He could suggest a dozen things that might be done, but he knew no reason for selecting one of them rather than another' (*AR*: 103). He is the embodiment of the purely functional bureaucrat, unconcerned with values, that Sisson would later describe in *The Spirit of British Administration*. As a result, Sligh always works to effect compromises between parties, and in the process compromises their fundamental values, illustrated in the colonial context by the business he is concluding at the World Conference on Special Aptitudes just before getting word of the supposed disaster:

[t]he Hindus had agreed to abandon the caste system in favour of a system of occupational selection based on interviews; the Muslims had promised that no-one whose talents lay in that direction should be prevented by religion from spending his life decorating beer mugs with the head and shoulders of the Prophet as well as with the inscription 'A Present from Mecca'; the Christians had accepted in principle that no-one should be admitted to their priesthood who had not been vetted by a panel of atheistical and therefore impartial psychologists. (*AR*: 21)

The novel is thus the first sustained example of Sisson's satire of government, which he would develop in his poetry. Dacres, on the other hand, acts as a foil to his senior colleague, as when they are compiling a report on the prince's lands and subjects for taxation:

'But whether,' said Sligh, 'the map is to be Appendix I or Appendix III, is a matter about which I can't, at the moment, quite make up my mind.'

'But how are we to find out the facts on which the report is to be based?' asked Dacres, with a more sceptical air than he had used at home.

Sligh looked at his subordinate as at an impertinent who wasted time by seeing things in the wrong order and in the wrong proportion. (*AR*: 62)

Dacres is identified as someone curious, even anxious, about how to get to the reality underlying Sligh's verbiage. By contrast, Curly is so completely absorbed by his current situation that he raises no speculative questions, and happily settles down to life in the Prince's capital:

[i]t had never occurred to [Dacres], on leaving the palace, that Curly might have set up an independent household, but now as he stood by the east gate it seemed perfectly natural that it should be so. (*AR*: 87-8)

In his introduction to *The Mirror of India*, Sisson points out to the reader that the other characters – chiefly the Prince – are 'not specifically Indian figures, for what I wish to say is something about ourselves in relation to people of whom all the sap has not yet run into bureaucracies and false abstractions' (*DM1275/2/4*: 357). If Sligh embodies western 'bureaucracies and false abstractions', the function of the principality in which he and his compatriots find themselves is to imagine an alternative world. It is a world in which the human body is constantly exposed to force: to disease and natural forces; to violence (including sexual violence) whether from bandits or the Prince; also to forces that work from within, like the lust that impels the Prince. The vortex of these forces, unmediated by discourse, constitutes (in Martin Seymour-Smith's terms) 'the jungle of human existence, raw reality' (in Wright 1988: 244). Schmidt (*PNR*: 1) argues that, in the principality, 'all civil considerations are secondary to the autocratic ruler's fantasies and lusts', which is

true. But beyond ‘fantasies and lusts’, Sisson implies that the Prince’s body is the centre of this world, ‘a world that irradiate[s] from his own muscular vitality’ (*AR*: 119). As Sisson describes Dacres’ perception of it, the Prince takes on that ‘strange material and physical presence’ (Santner 2011: 10) of the sovereign in the *ancien regime*:

[‘]Here the highest offices are collected in my person.’ The Prince drew himself up and Dacres was so conscious of the man’s muscular strength that he felt himself facing a flayed torso, with all the muscles exposed and exaggerated on a kind of living anatomist’s dummy. (*AR*: 50)

The principality is an absolute monarchy: when Sligh puts forward plans for a new legislature, suggesting that ‘[t]he first thing that was wanted was a deliberative assembly, whose members would need memoranda, minutes and drafts of laws’, the Prince stipulates that ‘there are to be no assemblies. Assemblies are treason’ (*AR*: 103). Indeed a large measure of the satire derives from the superfluity of Sligh’s services to the prince. In the principality, the polarity of kingship internal to sovereignty maintains predominance over that of government. The principality thus provides a controlled environment for a thought experiment in which the ‘bureaucracies and false abstractions’ of the decadent modern West are pitted against simpler and more robust conditions. This is of considerable interest in light of Sisson’s later monarchism, which continued to develop after he wrote the novel in 1949. Indeed, as mass devastation such as the English characters believe has occurred (possibly inspired by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) became an increasingly oppressive threat during the Cold War – also reflected in ‘Things Seen’, from *Numbers* (*CP*: 60) – Sisson appears to have envisaged a consequent return to monarchical government: in ‘A Possible Anglicanism’ he considers this the likely result of ‘a physical devastation which sends us back to our primitive concerns’ (*AL*: 207); and in ‘A Note on the Monarchy’ he argues:

[i]f the mechanical civilization of the West should one day break down, and we can no longer ignore the possibility, that nation will most readily re-assert itself which can re-establish, around the indubitable leader to whom a

thousand years of history point, a compact and simple administration. (*AL*: 132-3)

In *On the Look-Out*, Sisson eulogises ‘the time – more recent than one can easily believe – when roads were not metalled and natural ills found the body more defenceless’ (*OLO*: 23). Sisson’s depiction of life in the principality shows no distaste, and even seems to relish the harsh conditions. The most extreme case of such brutality is the princesses’ revenge. The cannibalism theme takes on another dimension when one considers a dictum recorded in Plutarch’s ‘Life of Marcus Cato’, which Sisson very likely read in India, being included in Herbert Read’s anthology *The Knapsack* which he took with him. (He also took a copy of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, in which Cato the Elder has a prominent position as the gatekeeper of Purgatory; Sisson’s notebooks indicate that he read the *Purgatorio* while in India, making it more probable that he would have read Plutarch’s biography.) According to Plutarch (1942: 218-9), Cato once said that ‘a king is by nature an animal that lives on human flesh’. This formulation does not originate with Cato; as Agamben points out, Plato discusses it in the *Republic*, although with reference to mob rule:

[t]he story goes that whoever tastes of one bit of human entrails minced up with those of other victims is inevitably transformed into a wolf... Thus, when a leader of the mob [*demos*] seeing the multitude devoted to his orders, does not know how to abstain from the blood of his tribe... will it not then be necessary that he either be killed by his enemies or become a tyrant and be transformed from a man into a wolf? (*HS*: 108)

Because the Prince is tyrant as well as protector, feeding him his son in revenge for his wolfish act of rapine constitutes poetic justice. (The wolf/sovereign identification also recalls Sisson’s Horatian identification with the jackal; Sisson’s attraction to monarchy, even in its bestial aspect, seems partly to reflect his self-recognition as another liminal figure.) Critics may argue that this reveals the true character of Sisson’s monarchism, glorifying absolute rule and sovereign violence. It should be pointed out, though, that the constitution of the fictional principality differs from that which Sisson describes in *The Spirit of British Administration*, in which he recognises

the role of Parliament in balancing sovereign power, thus preserving both peaceful government and the institution of monarchy itself.

The only character to benefit from sojourn in 'the jungle of human existence', as Seymour-Smith (in Wright 1988: 244) calls it, is Dacres. Bewildered but inquisitive, better attuned to facts than his superior and more contemplative than Curly, he alone undergoes a change as the novel progresses, from early deference to Sir Bertram towards final indifference. This development is connected with the Ovidian narrative. Sligh and Dacres are present at the royal reception when the Prince first sees his sister-in-law:

[o]nly her ankles and her little hands were visible, but her figure was swathed, although voluminously, in such a manner that the line of her thighs and buttocks could be seen, and she clutched her shawl about her as if it alone concealed her defenceless belly. The Prince did not turn his head but his lowered eyes followed her from the moment she entered. When she stood in front of the throne, nose and lips could be seen within the shawl. The nose was of the same delicacy as the hands, and the lips pouted. The girl raised her head to address her father and for a moment the Prince saw a pair of large black eyes. A shiver passed over his back as visibly as over a horse's. The wings of his nostrils widened. (*AR*: 95)

Although Schmidt writes that the narrative unfolds 'before the unapprehending eyes of functionaries' (*PNR*: 1), only the elder one is oblivious. The Prince charges Sligh with ensuring a visit from the younger princess, on the pretext of his bride's happiness. Sligh appears naive:

'The Prince seems very keen,' he said approvingly. 'Very keen that his Princess should not be disappointed.'

Dacres looked up and a smile passed over his face from lips to temples. He felt that he was passing into a region where speech was useless. (*AR*: 96)

Speech is useless because it would be impossible to convey the destructive compulsion of lust to Sligh. Although Sir Bertram is, as Schmidt says, impervious to

the otherness of those he seeks to administer, Dacres is not. At the novel's conclusion, when they discover that Europe is intact, the point of the deception becomes clear to the reader. As Seymour-Smith (in Wright 1988: 244) puts it, Bridgewater was 'giving the three men the chance to experience some reality' – an opportunity only Dacres seizes:

when Sligh and Curly return to England they make up the kind of story that will be acceptable only to non-realists; they are glad to re-enter the world of unreality, and they take care not even to acknowledge reality. But Dacres returns to explore reality, in the company of Bridgewater [sic], for 'non-political' reasons.

Dacres, who as a junior civil servant with an inquisitive mind and a taste for Flaubert<sup>1</sup> most resembles Sisson, finds himself impelled 'to try to understand' (ibid.: 244) the reality smoothed over by bureaucracies, and expresses the same desire as the final couplet of 'In the Hills'.

Schmidt (*PNR*: 1) writes of *An Asiatic Romance* that the only thing 'lacking of Sisson's mature concerns is the Anglican theme'. This is so; but Sisson's more personal accounts of India set greater importance on the religious dimensions of his experience. Though reticent about its protagonist's faith, 'One Eye on India' raises the issue of the relationship between Pearce, Christianity, and British India from the first page. It begins with a description of a valley, with nothing to indicate that the vista is Indian rather than English:

[t]he pale blue of a fine January day hung over the little town and the encircling hills. The air was not without moisture, and the ground was sodden. Drenched matted grass held the observer's eye and invited the noses of the cattle [...]

[...] jutting above the near horizon were one or two house-tops and, a little more remote, the tip of a church spire. (*OLO*: 73)

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<sup>1</sup> Dacres borrows a copy of *Madame Bovary* (*AR*: 73) from the French-educated Princes; Sisson would state in an interview that while writing *An Asiatic Romance* Flaubert was among his favourite novelists (*PNR*: 58).

Just as Sisson would later write that, in George Barnes's Dorset, 'the church [was] as much a part of his countryside as the "wide-horned cattle"' (*AL*: 199), at first glance the same might be true of this scene. This is then thrown into doubt:

'Remember that we are English, that we are Christian.' The air above the little town was heavy with Christianity. The soldier shook his long limbs, and the weight of his boots rippled the muscles to his shoulder-blades. He was at least English. (*OLO*: 73)

The unattributed speech seems to be recalled from a senior officer speaking to troops about to be sent to a far-off country; Sisson's notebooks record this remark, dated Bradford-upon-Avon (his point of embarkation (*OLO*: 155)), January 1943. But Pearce can only affirm that he is English; the colonial town seems to be more Christian than he is himself. Sisson portrays his alter ego as being initially ironic about Christianity. Among his early observations, he notes that '[t]he lack of machines and plumbing was what struck the troops most forcibly', and jokes that '[t]he life of the villagers was evidently that of such unenlightened people as Our Lord Jesus Christ. No doubt, Pearce reflected, Jesus would have got around to preach the gospel better if he had had a car' (*OLO*: 87). The tone is irreverent, but the butt of the joke is less Christianity itself than Westerners who look down on a culture little more sophisticated (but not therefore worse) than that of the god they claim as their own. Pearce's attitude begins to shift as he experiences more of India, and especially Hindu culture. One of Sisson's sources of knowledge was *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* by Abbé J.A. Dubois, who worked in southern India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and whose perspective is evident from an extract Sisson quotes regarding the phallic lingam symbol:

'It is incredible, it is impossible to believe, that in inventing this vile superstition the religious teachers of India intended that people should render devout worship to objects the very names of which, among civilized nations, are an insult to decency...



‘What I have said about the *lingam* applies also to the *naman*, another emblematic and not less abominable symbol.’ (*OLO*: 95)<sup>2</sup>

This contempt for what is foreign and different, with the cultural imperialism that drove missionaries and was used to justify colonialism and exploitation, today sounds as ignorant and offensive as Dubois evidently found Hinduism. But Sisson found himself in agreement with it:

[t]he gloomy Abbé’s book evoked a world which answered to the stinking and sweltering atmosphere of the place Pearce found himself in. The Abbé had observed with a Christian and Roman anger that was both a nostalgia for and a defence of the France he had left for so long. (*OLO*: 95)

It would be inadequate to excuse Sisson’s sympathy with this xenophobia on the grounds that he was homesick; but Sisson does suggest that the conditions of exile affected his judgement, and his sense of Britain as a Christian country:

Pearce’s nostalgia sometimes took the form of a belief that a country like his own that had been Christian, and seemed still, for all its diseases, healthy compared with this one, should not tread lightly on the corns of India. (*OLO*: 97)

In ‘Autobiographical Reflections on Politics’ (*AL*: 141-2) Sisson quotes the same passage, rendered in the first person, from his army journal. Sisson makes clear (in another passage largely identical to his notebook entry) that in India he began to value British culture and support the British Raj on the basis of its being Christian:

[b]efore coming to India Pearce had felt that, although the British should continue to govern the country to prevent worse, Indians and their creeds were perhaps best left alone. But in this atmosphere he felt the oppression of a tradition backed by centuries not of Christianity and respect for the human

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<sup>2</sup> Dubois appears to mistakenly use ‘*naman*’ in referring to the vaginal yoni symbol.

person but superstition, torture, even (not so far away) self-immolation and human sacrifice. (*OLO*: 97; cf. DM1275/1/8)

One might point out that, leaving aside the question of distinguishing between faith and superstition, Christianity has its own history of torture and martyrdom, especially as previously discussed in the context of the Reformation. Although Sisson was a non-believer at this time, it appears from this that he saw Hinduism as a superstition, while admitting that Christianity had at least some claim to truth. Hinduism, being polytheistic, appears to Sisson relativistic and anti-foundational, to which he ascribes what he sees as its 'rotted civilisation' (*OLO*: 97): '[a]midst the evasions of a Hindu world it was possible to see something of what was meant by saying that Europe had been affected by Christianity' (*AL*: 142). As well as Hinduism, India also brought Sisson into contact with Islam in Kashmir and the North-West Frontier Province (modern-day Pakistan). Sisson found there a striking contrast to what he had seen in Bengal:

Pearce looked with delight on the Indians waking about the camp. They were men of a very different stamp from the abject race he had been accustomed to, from those who for centuries had sweated and rotted in a filthy climate and had hoped for nothing. These men were tall, many bearded – beards naturally black but some dyed red in compliment to the Prophet. They wore loose trousers and shirts and their pugris hung loose at one end.

Everyone had a shirt on his back. (*OLO*: 104)

As he would recall in his introduction to *Is There a Church of England?*, Sisson found the Islamic North-West, where 'it was at least admitted that there was such a thing as the truth, and the endless elusiveness of Hinduism was an aberration' (*ICE*: 5), more congenial. Overlooking factors such as their differing relations with the western colonizers, Sisson sees the Muslims' relative health and prosperity as substantiating his belief that polytheism is relativistic and leads to cultural decay:

[t]hey had one God, which their dark eyes asserted against the multiplicity of India. Was it Mahomet or the poverty that had scoured them to this stony completeness? They drew their blankets more closely about them and stood

watching the poor acres, terraced on the hillside, from which they had wrung a livelihood – wretched and stony fields, pitifully shored up with a few stones against the invisible action that had swept soil, riches, all down to the disingenuous plains. (*OLO*: 136; cf. DM1275/2/2: 5)

But though more comfortable with the Abrahamic culture of Islam, Sisson still describes it as a distorted and distorting faith: the Muslims' 'steady, eager stare was pathetic as the gratitude of the poor; an excess that corresponded to nothing outside lay coiled in the violent passions of their heart' (*OLO*: 136). The 'excess' and 'violent passions' that here typify Islam imply a corresponding antithesis, presumably a Christian, European moderation. On the basis of Sisson's portrayal of the Europeans in India, though, it can hardly be said that they exhibit any such equability. The unstable antithesis between these qualities forms the generative dynamic of Sisson's third, unpublished novel, *The Morning's Danger*.

The novel is set on a single day, although rather than a Joycean/Woolfian style, it is written in a more conventional realist mode. It tells the story of Peter, a BOR stationed in India, who is infatuated with a Frenchwoman named Denise. His friend Bill has recently been made an NCO, but, because of the trauma of having lost a child, Bill has become an alcoholic and is threatened with a court-martial; while drunk, he buys a knife in the local bazaar. When Peter and Denise meet in the morning, they secretly kiss, but are interrupted by a female missionary who wants to help Bill. Denise later acts coldly towards Peter at a dinner party, and he becomes convinced that she will reject him for someone else. At the novel's climax, at a dance later that night, Peter takes Bill's knife and kills a senior officer dancing with Denise. Peter will be imprisoned or even executed, and will certainly never return to England. With the typescript of the novel held in the Bristol University Library there is another typescript, an aborted attempt at the same story entitled 'The Dance' (DM1275/2/2), dated 1945. Evidently Sisson conceived and began the story during his stay in India but abandoned it at an early stage, before returning to it years later. Many of the ideas and phrases are copied over, though some differ; I will draw on both to emphasise different aspects, where appropriate.

Much of the plot, and many incidental details, are based on Sisson's Indian experiences. The story of the drunken NCO is recounted in 'Misadventures of an Anarchist', part of *The Mirror of India*; a sub-plot about a mess servant who is arrested and on whose behalf Peter intervenes is also recorded in 'One Eye on India'. Denise, in many ways the pivotal character, is also based on a real person, but not one Sisson knew in India. In 'One Eye on India', Sisson records how, having befriended a family in South Africa, they took him to meet 'Philippe and Denise, whose flat was a petty France in Durban' (*OLO*: 82). Describing Denise, Sisson repeats 'Heine's remark that no one could say whether the women of Paris are beautiful because their liveliness and wit stops one examining their features for immobile beauty' (*OLO*: 82) in his notebook (DM1275/1/8) and 'The Dance'. One episode from the visit was decisive for Sisson:

Van B. showed a film he had made. It showed, among other things, Indians walking through fire at Rossburgh. Denise, at whose knees Pearce was sitting, expressed herself forcibly as disgusted by such spectacles and as not interested in India. By this she won Pearce's heart. Fakirs lying on nails were to her merely diabolical. She had no wonder for what was remarkable in the spectacle. She had lived in Mauritius and Madagascar, and had left Paris in 1924; her travels and her nostalgia no doubt counted for something in the matter. But still more depended on the fact that she had a closed and classical mind, not interested in morbid deviations from human reason. (*OLO*: 82)

This episode, which Sisson writes into both 'The Dance' and *The Morning's Danger*, defines Denise's character and what she symbolizes in the novel. As he writes in *The Morning's Danger*:

[w]hat made Denise seem sympathetic was that she lived visibly according to Latin laws. Industrious, sensual, with a clear disdain for the formlessness of this Indian world, she appeared in this context less as a person than as the exemplification of a civilisation. (DM1275/2/6: 16)

The civilisation she exemplifies is a conception of the classical world 'which, emanating from the city states, had spread over the delicate surface of Europe and left

it fresh and washed’, and extends in time and space ‘to render the grey streets of Paris luminous and suave even under the dull cold winds and sky of winter’ (DM1275/2/2). Peter’s desire for her is as much a desire and a nostalgia for what she represents:

[i]t was perfectly clear to him that he did not love Denise. His relationship with her was going to be of a more rational character. He was going to enjoy her as a morsel of civilisation. (DM1275/2/6: 69)

Peter’s dilemma is that though he worships this ‘closed and classical’ ideal, because of his situation – exiled from home, subject to military discipline, and exasperated by the complacent Anglo-Indians – he finds that he cannot live up to it, but distorts and denatures it; driven by ‘an excess that corresponded to nothing outside’, he succumbs to ‘violent passions’. This is particularly clear in Sisson’s use of Dante. Sisson copied many stanzas from the *Divine Comedy* into his notebooks, sometimes with his own interlinear translations, for example *Purgatorio* VI.76-8 (the meeting with Sordello):

Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,  
nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta,  
non donna di provincie, ma bordello!

Alas slave Italy, the home of grief  
the ship without a captain in the tempest  
not mistress of an empire, but a brothel[.] (DM1275/1/8)

Sisson may have been particularly attracted to these lines because of their applicability to the decayed state of the British Raj; Dante thus affords Sisson a classical standard against which to judge what he saw of British rule in India. (Sisson also records in a notebook that he unconsciously took the model for *Eddio’s Tour of India*, with its guide-and-traveller device, from Dante (DM1275/1/9).) Pearce has a volume of Dante in ‘One Eye on India’ (*OLO*: 112); in *The Morning’s Danger* Peter has ‘a copy of the *Inferno*’ (DM1275/2/6: 16), and Sisson repeats that the light in the Indian hills sometimes seemed to be that of ‘Dantean latitudes’ in both ‘The Dance’ and *The Morning’s Danger* (DM1275/2/6: 15). Dante represents intellectual clarity and universal justice; but as Peter becomes more deranged, he fantasizes revenging himself upon Denise’s imagined lover: ‘[a]n officer, of course. Some young sissy. Peter would hold him upside down in flames, like a figure in Dante. For this hell

would never end. His mind had rotted into a mass of lust and jealousy' (DM1275/2/6: 90). Peter's unprovoked attack makes him a murderer, to be punished in this world and (in the Dantean scheme) the next. As well as the military discipline he will face, Peter suffers Denise's reaction to his loss of classical balance and self-control: when she looks at him for the last time, she appears 'not frightened but reproachful' (DM1275/2/6: 329).

The descriptions of Denise and the narrative of Peter's desire for her appear to express Sisson's nostalgia not only for England, but also his Parisian sojourn of 1934. Moreover, the vision of France as the scion of classical civilisation is one that he learnt there from Charles Maurras, 'for whom Paris', as Sisson puts it, was 'the unique surviving and the third in historical order of the capitals of the civilized world' (AL: 102). A consequence of Maurras's 'closed and classical' outlook was xenophobia and anti-Semitism, in his literary criticism as in his politics: in his critiques of Romanticism, '[i]t was the Jewish spirit, not merely the undisciplined voice of the individual conscience, that he wanted to suppress' (AL: 102). Maurras also has a special connection with Dante in the context of inter-war modernism: T.S. Eliot's essay on Dante was dedicated to Maurras, whose work Eliot translated and praised in *The Criterion*; thus the Dantean references in *The Morning's Danger* take on a particularly Maurrassian valence. While Sisson was in India, Maurras was collaborating with the Vichy regime and informing on members of the French resistance who were hiding Jews. Though he claimed to abhor Germanic barbarism, he was willing enough to help it exterminate the Jewish population of France. In light of this, Maurrassian classicism is not merely an aesthetic preference: it is predicated on the same logic of exclusion as his anti-Semitism. It is thus potentially, if not always actively and explicitly, a fascistic discourse.

*The Morning's Danger* does not raise the issue of anti-Semitism, but the same logic is at work in the Indian context. In his notebook, Sisson quotes Abbé Dubois as suggesting that '[w]ere Hindu literature better known to us, it is probable that we should find that we have borrowed from it the romantic style of our day' (DM1275/1/8), in much the same way that Maurras blamed romanticism on 'dishonouring hebraisms' (AL: 102). In another journal entry, Sisson argues:

[x]enophobia you would expect to find as a concomitant of realism, for it is the exclusion of what is imperfectly understood. The taste for what is not understood is a nostalgic turning from what is, even a refusal to understand. (DM1275/1/9)

This explains how the logic of exclusion operates in *The Morning's Danger*. Written in a realist style, the novel focuses on the Western characters to the exclusion of Indians (the only Indian character is Ritzy, a mess servant, whose story is ancillary to the main plot) and the impact of the British Raj on India. Sisson is interested in the sufferings of the British troops, but not at all in those of the Indians the troops are there to suppress. Sisson's justification is set forth in his introduction to *The Mirror of India*:

[w]here an English writer has given us a valid memorial of the life of India [...] it is a memorial to European life there rather than to that of the Indians themselves. [...] the picture they represent is of a prominent white figure against a more or less indistinct background of brown. (DM1275/2/4: 1)

Sisson recognises attempts to counteract this, but frames them within a critique of the Bloomsbury liberalism he would later attack in *The Case of Walter Bagehot*:

[t]he period between the wars produced books which were supposed, like 'A Passage to India', to show a more intimate understanding of the brown by the white; but most people who have lived in India detect a forcedness, even a falsity, about them. The 'understanding', even of so subtle a mind as Mr. E.M. Forster's, was a derivative of the political clap-trap of the age: it was the expression of a will rather than of a spontaneous and unimpeded perception. Its falsity, and its affinity with the most popular political fallacies, won acceptance for it, but the real gap between east and west was not thereby narrowed and may have been widened. [...] It is as prominent white figures against an indistinct background of brown that all but a minute minority of Englishmen in India saw themselves. It was through the eyes of that prominent figure that they saw India. We can no longer imagine that we might gain anything politically by lying about the matter. (Ibid.: 1-2)

Although Sisson desiderates ‘spontaneous and unimpeded perception’, it is evident from this passage that ‘we’, the British audience whom he imagines himself addressing, means ‘white people’; the idea that there might be a British reader who is also Asian does not occur. This may be a result of the time at which this was written, before the period of large-scale immigration subsequent to British decolonisation in the late 1950s and 1960s; but it goes to show that what Sisson might believe to be spontaneous perception is itself based on ideological assumptions, such as the conflation of Britishness with whiteness.

*The Morning’s Danger* may be best compared, not with *A Passage to India*, but George Orwell’s first novel, *Burmese Days*. P.J. Kavanagh (PNR: 64) compares Sisson with Orwell as members of ‘the English “awkward squad”’, and both spent a formative period in the Far East serving the British Empire, which they drew upon in their fiction. The two novels share many structural features: in both, the protagonist (Peter, and John Flory in *Burmese Days*) is a young Englishman in British India, alienated from his fellow Europeans by his comparative sensitivity and culture; both conclude with their protagonists’ self-destruction as a result of sexual jealousy (Flory kills himself when he is rejected by the young English woman Elizabeth). Yet whereas Peter pays little attention to the Indians around him (only attempting to help Ritzy because he is an able servant) and admires Denise’s ‘disdain for the formlessness of this Indian world’, Flory is friends with the Indian doctor Veraswami, admires Burmese culture, and wishes Elizabeth ‘to love Burma as he love[s] it’ (Orwell 1967: 112). The female characters are also contrasting: Denise is French and genuinely cultured, but though Elizabeth has lived in Paris, she despises art; her disdain for Indian culture is presented as a result of meanness and narrow-mindedness, rather than held up as a classical ideal like Denise’s.

These contrasting characters signal a generic difference between the novels. Peter’s inability to live up to the ideal Denise represents is designed to end in genuine tragedy. Flory’s infatuation with Elizabeth is based on a misapprehension: his suicide over a girl whose antipathetic nature he never understood is part of Orwell’s satire – even the most sympathetic character is weak and foolish. *The Morning’s Danger* also has elements of social critique in its depiction of the British Raj: Sisson was in Bengal



during the famine of 1943, and has Peter attack the British handling of it during the dinner party:

‘Whose fault is it if the people are starving, anyway? You cannot pretend to govern a country and then tell people it is their own silly fault if they starve...’

‘There is nothing very out-of-the-way about people starving in this country. It has always been so. It will always be so, I imagine...’ The Indians were hopeless and numerous, and any fault in the administration somehow automatically lay at their door.

‘But if there is a fault we are responsible,’ said Peter. (DM1275/2/6: 209-10)

This echoes Sisson’s feelings of complicity and guilt expressed in the poem ‘In Time of Famine: Bengal’ (*CP*: 3), in which he describes an Indian girl ‘[w]ho lies with open eyes upon the pavement’ (l.12) and concludes that her starvation ‘is a fault in which I have a part’ (l.16). But Sisson’s criticism of the British Raj does not extend so far as to disavowing the Empire as a whole; rather, its final stages are described as a betrayal of previous English sacrifices:

[w]e are not the last of the English... The exuberance of those young conquerors had run into little stagnant pools all over British India. The cantonments. So that the ground for which young men from England had poured out their blood was guarded by women who wanted to do war work. Such as organising mah jong parties and giving their winnings to the Red Cross. (DM1275/2/6: 139)

Orwell, by contrast, uses Flory’s conversations with Veraswami as an opportunity to attack the whole imperial enterprise:

‘My dear doctor,’ said Flory, ‘how can you make out that we are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It’s so simple. The official holds the Burman down while the businessman goes through his pockets. [...] The

British Empire is simply a device for giving trade monopolies to the English – or rather to gangs of Jews and Scotchmen.’ (Orwell 1967: 38)<sup>3</sup>

Yet Sisson’s position is more nuanced than the belief that the British Empire was an unmitigated good and should have continued. In a review for the *New English Weekly* in 1948, shortly after India gained independence, Sisson ascribed the end of the Raj to ‘a certain weakening of motive on the part of the British in India and of the British at home – to an increasing uncertainty as to why we were in the country at all’ (*AL*: 59). He posits this as an observation rather than a judgement:

[t]hat is not to say, of course, that whatever had supplied the motive power hitherto – an appetite for money, the indulgence of our self-importance, or a mystique of empire – was necessarily a good thing: I am leaving out the bad and the good because they are too hard for me. (*AL*: 59)

When Sisson goes on to note that ‘[t]he mission of conquest is simple and gives moral coherence to a nation or other group as few other missions do’ (*AL*: 59), he implies that imperialism cemented British identity; but ‘[w]hen we held the prize, it became evident that we did not know what to do with it’ (*AL*: 60). Consequently the cement began to crumble. Sisson had come to this conclusion while in India, where he noted in his journal (and reiterated in ‘Autobiographical Reflections’ and ‘One Eye on India’) that ‘the British were leaving India because they lacked conviction. They no longer knew what they wanted in the country’ (*OLO*: 97; *AL*: 142; *DM1275/1/8*). Sisson would give this perception its most complex expression in the longest of the wartime poems he would later publish, ‘The Body in Asia’ (*CP*: 4-5).

The poem begins in the manner of a Romantic meditative lyric, evoking the poet’s mountainous surroundings and his responses to them. But instead of the elation of Coleridge’s ‘Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni’ or Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’, the poet feels only dejection:

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<sup>3</sup> Although Flory is receptive to Burmese culture, this and Flory’s reference to ‘aged Jewish whores with the faces of crocodiles’ (Orwell 1967: 62) display more anti-Semitism than Peter does in *The Morning’s Danger*.

Despite the mountains at my doorstep  
This is a hollow, hollow life.  
The mist blows clear and shows the snow  
Among the dark green firs, but here  
Upon the cold, scorched, dusty grass  
The camels linked together raise  
Their supercilious noses.  
Upon the road the donkeys trot  
And mule-teams with their muleteers pace.  
The country lies before me like  
A map I carry in my mind –  
A wall built by the Hindu Kush  
A plain that falls away to sea  
I on the foothills here between  
Sniffing the cold and dusty air. (ll.1-15)

Having placed himself in this alien landscape, the poet describes a disjunction between his physical exterior and interior subjectivity:

I can imagine my exterior  
The body, and the limbs that run off from it  
But there is nothing in it I am sure  
Except the ball of heart that weighs one side  
Like the lead ballast in a celluloid duck. (ll.20-4)

The country around him then begins, from his disjunctive viewpoint, to reflect his body:

And in my head a quarter-incher's brain  
Looks out as best it can from my two eyes:  
It can imagine how the country lies  
To left and right, extensions of the limbs  
But has no thoughts that I can understand. (ll.25-29)

The landscape becomes a kind of macrocosm of the poet's body; but rather than solacing him through this complementarity, its very scale exacerbates the sense of disjunction from his self:

The flat and muddy banks, remote  
Beyond the miles of plashing water  
Diminished me  
Till, smaller than the skin I stood in  
I leaned against the rails and watched  
The searchlights on the licking water. (ll.39-44)

Dwarfed by the scale of the subcontinent that he yet sees as a distended reflection of himself, the poet's body is stretched, compressed, and broken up. In the poem's final section, he relates this to the wider 'crack-up' (*AL*: 59) among the British:

The secret of diminishment  
Is in this sad peninsula  
Where the inflated body struts  
Shouting its wants, but lacks conviction.  
Conviction joins the muscles up  
But here the body flaps and flutters  
A flapping sail in a fitful wind. (ll.45-51)

Sisson's politics as well as his theory and practice of verse imply that the body of the poem, the poet's body and the wider body politic are bound together. If in this case, as one of his 'pre-Christian' poems, the poet asserts that conviction rather than sacramental incorporation 'joins the muscles up', the same logic is in play: the British administration of an enormous, alien country and its population has distended the wider body politic, which is now disintegrating – a process registered in the poet's body as he projects it in the poem. Orwell (1967: 35) articulates this same perception in satirical mode in *Burmese Days*, in which Flory and Dr Veraswami share a running joke 'that the British Empire was an aged female patient of the doctor's', whom he diagnoses with various ailments. This characterisation of course alludes to the first Empress of India, Queen Victoria, who is still represented in the outpatients' department by 'a dusty portrait [...] much awry' (*ibid.*: 137). Though the queen is dead, her body politic lives on; but while the latter is said to be 'utterly devoid of [...] natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to' (Santner 2011: 35), the spectral second body here becomes afflicted with diseases brought on by imperial and colonial expansion – whereas in 'The Body in Asia', the poet makes his own body the site of the 'crack-up'. Similarly, when Sisson describes the troopship taking Pearce to India as 'a fragment of England that was being pushed slowly across the still sea' (*OLO*: 83), the implication is that England itself is being broken up and scattered across the world.

While Sisson obliquely narrates his growing awareness of and identification with Christianity in 'One Eye on India', he never describes Pearce as making any private act of conversion or devotion, such as visiting an army chaplain; in *The Morning's*

*Danger*, Peter automatically assumes that the woman who dispenses medicine '[a]nd the Gospel of Christ' is 'cracked' (DM1275/2/6: 82). One might infer that Sisson's religious thought followed that of Maurras, who 'had no concern for the truth of the revelations the Church teaches' but 'was concerned to support her merely as a vehicle of a Latin tradition' (AL: 101). But while his journals reveal that he was reading and thinking about Christianity, a greater impression was made upon him by his friendship with Cecil De Vall, the High Church garrison chaplain at Barrackpore. Sisson would recall in that he occasionally attended Mattins or Evensong (though not Communion, as he had not been confirmed) and was impressed by 'the ringing, metallic tones' (ICE: 4) in which De Vall read the liturgy. Sisson found him 'sharp, sardonic, even a trifle silly' (ICE: 4) in private, and also learnt from him: De Vall introduced Sisson to Abbé Dubois. De Vall can therefore be credited with influencing Sisson's understanding of Hinduism as well as his movement towards the Church of England. They would meet again in London after India gained independence, as Sisson records in his conclusion to *The Mirror of India*, assigning him the alias Alec Desfarges, whose church 'stood for a Latin and discreet right reason as well as for a profounder opposition to the abominable idolatries which are traditional in that part of the world' (DM1275/2/4: 359). He would later appear in Sisson's poetry of the mid-1960s, in the elegy 'In Memoriam Cecil De Vall' (CP: 64-6).

Without referring to its titular subject, the poem's opening stanzas combine statements of self-accusation with descriptions of the landscape in which the poet situates himself:

You can count me as one who has hated  
Out of spoiled love rather than malice.  
Let me lie now between tufts of heather,  
My head in the grass.

The sky is too high, I prefer to be far under it  
The road is happily distant.  
No angel shall catch me here, nor tourist  
Abase me with his talk.

Out from this patch of dust the flat plain  
Extends like Asia under a blue sky.  
It is no misanthropy that binds me here  
But recognition of my own failure. (ll.1-12)

The circumstances of his 'failure' and the reasons for his 'spoiled love' are mysterious, but the spatial dynamics are clearer, and begin to delimit a context. The plain where he lies is covered in heather, suggesting that it is in Britain; but it '[e]xtends like Asia', recalling the 'plain that falls away to sea' in 'The Body in Asia'. One may see in this an inversion of Orwell's description (1967: 63) of how, during the short winter, 'Upper Burma seemed haunted by the ghost of England', and one could find 'misty, incongruous wildernesses, clearings of drenched, almost English grass and naked trees where monkeys squatted' (ibid.: 64). Under British rule, the English landscape itself seemed to have a spectral presence in its dominions; now, after resigning its largest colony, the haunting has been reversed.

Although the poem is an elegy for Sisson's friend, the poet appears to be more concerned with his own death and decomposition:

Soon the fallen flesh will begin to crawl  
Making off in the worm's belly  
Into the undergrowth, and the polished flies  
Will riddle me like hat-pins.

I bid their rising lives welcome because  
It is better to be many than one;  
The mirrors of blue-bottle and worm  
May reflect to more purpose than I. (ll.17-24)

This longing for death is a common sentiment in Sisson's poetry; but as we have seen, when he describes his body breaking down one may infer that this represents more than just his own condition, especially in this post-imperial context. In an essay from two years later, Sisson argues:

[i]t makes no sense to talk of the individual mind. The individual body, perhaps. [...] The individual, if anything, is this, without regard to consciousness. It begins with the egg and the sperm; it ends, not with certified death but with the disintegration which follows. In the end it is not there, as an identifiable thing. There is no 'personality' apart from that. If that were ever collected again, it could only be at the resurrection of the body. (*AL*: 210)

The poet wishes to hasten this disintegration, but seemingly without hope for its reintegration at the resurrection. This may seem to contradict ‘The Body in Asia’, in which bodily breakdown is lamented; but in reprising this theme and the Indian references, the later poem is also a continuation. The following stanza links the poem more closely to his Indian writings:

Curl my fin where the shark  
Lurches in the blue Mediterranean;  
Open my wizened eye  
Like a lizard under a tropical leaf. (ll.25-8)

The Mediterranean is described in both *The Mirror of India* and ‘One Eye on India’, when he sees it on his return journey, as ‘[t]he blue carpet that had spread under the feet of Odysseus’ (*OLO*: 147), and in *The Morning’s Danger* as ‘[t]he legendary blue which [Peter] had never seen’ (*DM1275/2/6*: 69). Moreover, it has for Peter a similar spectral presence in the Indian landscape as described by Orwell:

[h]e imagined the light of that sea as chaste and as bestowing on all forms a miraculous clarity. It was the same light which, for a moment in spring and autumn, visited the plateau on which the camp stood and gave the low hills surrounding it an air of Greece. (*DM1275/2/6*: 69)

Sisson’s reference to ‘the blue Mediterranean’ in the poem evokes both the classical world which for him it represents, and the Indian world he sometimes views as its antithesis, but which nonetheless gave him his first glimpse of that sea. The ‘lizard under a tropical leaf’ also recalls the one that falls on Pearce’s face in ‘One Eye on India’ (*OLO*: 122), a detail he repeats in *The Morning’s Danger* (*DM1275/2/6*: 146).

Anticipating the decomposition of his body, the poet turns to the fate of his soul. Given that this poem dates from after he entered the Church of England, one might find his sentiments surprising:

I do not wish to recognise Christ  
As I enter the shades.  
What other company could I have  
In darkness of my own choosing? (ll.33-6)

The 'other company' he imagines is that of De Vall:

Perhaps it is no more than a recollection  
–The banks of a river,  
The heavy vegetation wet with the monsoon,  
My friend on the verandah?

He brought out the long whiskies and proved  
That God hated nothing that He had made:  
At no time did I take at his hands  
Any but his own hospitality. (ll.37-44)

Sisson also draws upon this scene in *The Morning's Danger*. While getting drunk, Bill recalls sitting on a veranda in the jungle, 'in doubt and with a tumbler of gin in his hand. With the trees in front of him. And if he looked to the left, there was Stephen' (DM1275/2/6: 150) 'discoursing, on the other side of the bamboo table, of gentle, reasonable matters' (ibid. 155). Bill is even resistant to Stephen's message: '[h]e did not wish for the quiet discourse of Stephen for his eyes were deliberately turned against the light' (ibid.: 158). The phrase recalls the gospel of John: 'the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not' (John 1. 5); 'light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil' (John 3. 19). This may explain what Sisson means by '[a]t no time did I take at his hands | Any but his own hospitality': the other kind of hospitality, which he refused, is the Host, the sacramental bread of the Eucharist. The poem is thus partly an expression of regret for not having taken Communion with his friend; but this alone hardly accounts for its severe tone:

Fill my mouth with sand, let the passer's boot  
Unwittingly fold my skull.  
I have resigned the pretensions  
Of the individual will. (ll.45-8)

These lines may suggest total surrender to God. But the final stanza returns to the Indian scene, and a vision of His absence:

From the darkened shores of the river  
The dogs howled;  
I was alone with the famished and the dead.  
Whatever stirred in those shadows was not God. (ll.49-52)



This negative epiphany from the banks of the Hooghli haunts the poet, since returned home. Whereas in 'The Body in Asia' the framework of incorporation was not yet in place (hence his use of the term 'conviction'), by the time of 'In Memoriam Cecil De Vall' Sisson had come to a more developed view of 'the identity of the Church and the commonwealth, as aspects of the same body' (*AL*: 206). But just as the earlier poem registered the break-up of the British Empire, the later one obliquely registers the aftershocks of this (especially since the further decolonisation of the intervening years). This would colour the Christian faith that Sisson had subsequently acquired. Though he welcomes death, he seems to entertain no hope for the afterlife. The tentative suggestion from his essay, that the body might be collected again at the resurrection, appears to be too much to posit in the poem, suggesting a rift between the forms; Rachel Gould, for one, concludes that 'the verse is more truthful in its admission of the failure of the intellect and of the coherent structures – both political and religious – that it produces to regulate life' (*PNR*: 18). Sisson's essays may therefore be, in his own words, 'the expression of a will' – i.e. to faith – 'rather than of a spontaneous and unimpeded perception'. Taking the prose and verse together, though, one finds that India, through personal contact with De Vall and what he saw as the negative example of Hinduism, led Sisson towards faith, but also into doubt, and a persistent spirit of disavowal that would recur throughout his poetry.

## II. Contrapuntal Returns

By 1976, C.H. Sisson had achieved the kind of professional security as a writer that had eluded him for thirty years. In 1972, Sisson came into contact with Michael Schmidt, general editor of Carcanet Press; the following year, three new poems would be published in the first edition of *Poetry Nation* magazine, co-edited by Schmidt; in 1974, Carcanet would published *In the Trojan Ditch*, collecting most of Sisson's original poetry, adding to it poems written since *Metamorphoses* and a selection of his translations from German, French and Latin. *Poetry Nation* would become important to Sisson, not just as an outlet for his poetry: in 1975, Calvin Bedient contributed to *Poetry Nation* 5 a review of *In the Trojan Ditch*, the first extensive appraisal of Sisson's poetry of the 1960s and the new direction manifest in his recent work; and Donald Davie contributed to *Poetry Nation* 6 an essay on 'The Politics of an English Poet', making a case for the significance of Sisson's poetry and political writings to the state of Britain in the mid-1970s. Davie would also champion Sisson in *The*

*Listener*, while in the American magazine *Parnassus* he would go so far as to claim that Sisson 'is the answer (unheard) to a need (mostly unrecognized)' for 'an authentic English Toryism' (1977b: 131), and that *PN Review* (as *Poetry Nation* was relaunched in 1976, with Davie and Sisson as Schmidt's co-editors) had been 'built up around Sisson, his past and his current writings' (ibid.: 131). 1976 would also see the publication of his fifth collection, *Anchises*.

At last having found a committed publisher, Sisson was unsurprisingly keen to bring to light his earlier work such as his autobiographical writings, as he wrote to Schmidt on 8 September 1976:

ONE EYE ON INDIA is something I should like to see published, if an opportunity ever arose. Perhaps with ON THE LOOKOUT, as you suggest: and perhaps with an introduction showing the connection between the two books and throwing some light on the author's later convolutions. (MRL CPA Acc. 4-2, Box 2, C.H. Sisson Folder 1)

Perhaps more disconcertingly, given his growing reputation as an Anglican Tory, Sisson goes on to divulge,

[a]s to these last, I should perhaps say, to confuse you further, that I am thinking of giving up going to church. It is now more than ever the outward man who goes, to tell the truth, the churchwarden about his civic office. It is not that I have become hostile, or even that it seems to me to mean less than the rival Weltanschauungen, rather the reverse. But even so, the meaning has begun to wear thin, all meaning has become thin almost to the point of meaninglessness, and what is one to do? (Ibid.)

Though this might seem unexpected to one familiar with Sisson only by reputation, to others who had been reading poems such as 'In Memoriam Cecil De Vall' it cannot have been such a surprise. But what is of interest here is the connection, albeit paratactic rather than causal, Sisson makes between his experiences of India and his later spiritual struggles.

This connection is drawn out in Sisson's contemporaneous poetry, collected in *Exactions* (1980). The collection's opening poem, 'The Desert' (CP: 239-40), was drafted (DM1275/1/46) three days before the letter to Schmidt:

This is the only place that I inhabit:  
The desert.  
No drop of water: no palm trees: nothing.  
No gourd, no cactus: sand  
Heaped on all sides like mountainous seas  
To drown in (ll.1-6)

This desert is a non-place, a representation of internal desolation – 'a scepticism [...] more abysmal and terrifying than most of us have experienced or can contemplate without extreme discomfort', as Donald Davie (1981: 28) described it in his review of the collection. Davie extrapolates from these poems an epistemological dilemma, whereby Sisson's uncertain, fluctuating subject seeks traction in the objective world beyond the self. The desert, then, is a projection of the mind's emptiness without the content and context of verifiable places situated in history. Only a few details connect this projection to a realm of lived experience – a few 'impedimenta of the desert' (l.18):

–Khaki shirt, shorts, chapli,  
Mess-tin, for nothing to eat;  
Water-bottle, nothing in it (ll.19-21)

'Chapli' are the type of sandal Sisson saw in the North-West Frontier Province; the other items would have been part of his army uniform and kit. ('Khaki' is especially appropriate, deriving from the Urdu word for dust, reinforcing the Indian context and the desert imagery.) These give the barest lift out of the non-place of the desert, albeit towards a time when Sisson was not a Christian, and where he felt most alienated from his surroundings. This suggests that as Sisson began to feel distant from the Church, his imagination reverted to his memories of India, where he first seriously began to consider Christianity. Furthermore, the imperative to '[s]hatter the retina so that the eyes are many' ('The Desert', l.41) recalls the desire for bodily fragmentation expressed in 'In Memoriam Cecil De Vall' ('The mirrors of blue-bottle and worm | May reflect to more purpose than I', ll.23-4), carrying with it the dual implication of a breakdown in the mystical body of Christ, and the body politic of which it is the

paradigm. Indeed, this recurs throughout Sisson's poetry of the 1970s, in the title-poem of *In the Trojan Ditch* (CP: 159-60):

Uncovered, dismembered  
The ribs  
Cracked in a nutcracker, the head  
Opened with a tin-opener  
[...]  
This is my mercenary self  
Also my best  
Elegant, denuded, damned[.] (ll.47-50, 56-8)

It also appears in 'The Corridor' (CP: 203-11) (another non-place) from *Anchises* –

The paradigm  
Of the extended body  
Lying in furze  
Under the sedge  
Or twisted  
Under effete grasses, dead also  
[...]  
    these tatters, my flesh  
Blow away like salt to the edges of the universe[.] (ll.89-94, 228-9)

These poems are also metrically more fragmented, eschewing even the basic quatrains of the De Vall elegy, and are organised as a sequence of disparate sections rather than a single argument – in contrast with a poem such as 'A Letter to John Donne', in which Sisson's Anglican vision found expression in consistent form.

Sisson would return to Indian themes in other poems from the late 1970s and early 1980s: 'In the Raj' (CP: 340-2) from *Night Thoughts and Other Chronicles* (1983) recounts the story of a disgraced quartermaster from *The Morning's Danger*, and 'Taxila' (CP: 392-3) from *God Bless Karl Marx!* (1987) recalls the Bactrian Greek city also referred to in the novel. In 'A Sleep' (CP: 257-8), from *Exactions*, Sisson refers to 'the Atman of each breath' (l.15) – the definition of which ('the vital essence of man') he transcribed from Betty Heinmann's *Indian & Western Philosophy* into his army notebook (DM1275/1/9). Desert imagery recurs in 'Au Clair de la Lune' (CP: 241-2), also from *Exactions*:

So I came through that territory  
With camels, at least I had the hump,

Down several deserts where there were windbreaks (ll.23-5)

Again, though the desert is not a literal one, the camels recall those described in ‘One Eye on India’ and ‘The Body in Asia’. However, coming after the refrain ‘[t]his is the end of everything, of everything, of everything | This is the end of everything | On Christmas Day in the morning’ (ll.20-22), which parodies T.S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men* (Eliot 1974: 91, 92), the journey with camels also echoes Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’ (ibid.: 109-10), with ‘the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory, | Lying down in the melting snow’ (ll.6-7) and ‘the camel men cursing and grumbling | And running away, and wanting their liquor and women’ (ll.11-2). But whereas Eliot’s pilgrims seek the revelation of God incarnate in Bethlehem, Sisson rejects any ‘bloody nonsense about the king of hosts’ (l.16), and seeks instead ‘the palace of luxury which is alone worth finding’ (l.48), or at least a ‘hovel for fornication’ (l.47). Thus, whereas after the War Sisson had followed Eliot into the Church of England, by the late 1970s Sisson’s Eliotic allusions repudiate the religious vision articulated in Eliot’s poetry of the late 1920s and after – ironically, given that Davie (1977b: 131) was publicising Sisson’s Toryism as comparable to that of ‘the Eliot who edited *The Criterion* and wrote *Four Quartets*’.

At this time, Jim Callaghan was leading a minority Labour government through high inflation and unemployment, eventually forming a coalition with the Liberal party in 1978. In *Poetry Nation* 6, Davie (1976: 90-1) made a case for the unrecognised centrality of Sisson’s vision in this period of division and uncertainty:

[t]here are still, it must be hoped, those who, when in *The Times* and elsewhere they see a plea for national unity and the national interest translated immediately into a proposal for coalition government, will think instead of stanzas from Sisson's noble adaptation of Horace's 'Carmen Saeculare' (from *In the Trojan Ditch*, Carcanet Press, 1974):

We have been through it all, victory on land and sea,  
These things were necessary for your assurance.  
The King of France. Once there was even India.

Leaving aside the doubtful likelihood of any beyond a small number of poetry readers being familiar with this poem, the irony of the third line quoted is striking. Here, dominion in India is held up as a source of glory and national pride, since lost; and indeed, Sisson had argued that conquest 'gives moral coherence to a nation'. But the subtext of Sisson's Indian poetry is that this eventually brought about an undoing of national coherence.

In 1978, Sisson (and with him Davie, Schmidt and *PN Review*) became embroiled in polemics with Jon Silkin, editor of *Stand*, in his magazine as well as the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Parnassus*. The first issue of *PN Review* contained two essays by Sisson: 'A Four Letter Word' (*AL*: 529-35) and 'Looking Back on Maurras' (*AL*: 536-43); the latter was given pride of place on the magazine's front cover. The essay is a reckoning with the figure whose influence is evident in *The Morning's Danger* and elsewhere; but the tone is one of disillusionment rather than advocacy. Sisson begins by declaring that '[t]he influence of Charles Maurras is something I should like to shake off', though he admits that '[t]he seduction remains' (*AL*: 536). Sisson attempts to convey his personal idea of Maurras, whom he originally saw as 'the defender of intelligence and of "la cite", the western, ordered, Romanized world' (*AL*: 541) (embodied in *The Morning's Danger* by Denise), and latterly as 'a sympathetic and wrong-headed figure' (*AL*: 542). As for Maurras's thought, Sisson asserts that it provides 'matter for digestion and reflection rather than assent' (*AL*: 542); rather, it is 'in the direct irrelevance of much of Maurras's work that its fruitfulness for us lies. It does not so much command assent as work on the mind and provoke reflections' (*AL*: 541). Sisson says the same of Coleridge, who 'leaves us with pointers and provisional ideas which enter into our own minds and there operate to more or less effect' (*AL*: 552).

Silkin, in his articles for *Stand* and *Parnassus*, is anxious to guard against what he sees as a potentially dangerous contemporary revival of Maurras. Characterising Sisson's essay as 'a defence' (Silkin 1978a: 34) of Maurras and an attempt to 'rehabilitate' (ibid.: 36) his reputation, he argues that Sisson disingenuously omits an account of Maurras's salient political activities, including the fact that he 'defended the forgery of Colonel Henry' and 'rallied the extreme right' (ibid.: 34) during the Dreyfus affair, and 'published the names of French resisters [...] and, it is said, the

names of Jews in hiding' (ibid.: 36) under the Vichy regime, with which he collaborated. More broadly, Silkin accuses Sisson (and *PN Review*) of being royalist in the sense of being 'concerned with the rights, or power, of the "sovereign"', around whom 'cluster those who claim the power they would deny others' (ibid.: 31). The danger he sees is that, in a society 'taut with polarisation' where 'rightist activity [...] is now approaching the scope and ambition it had in the thirties' (ibid.: 30), 'right-wing apologists and intellectuals' may provide the respectability and intellectual credibility to justify the anti-democratic violence of the National Front (as when they marched through Lewisham in 1977, causing a riot) – just as, a decade earlier, Enoch Powell had given racism a spurious respectability. Although in his article for *Parnassus* (which repeats much of the *Stand* feature) he states that 'I do not believe that Charles Sisson is a fascist; I do not even think that he is a member of the National Front', Silkin (1978b: 287) presents himself as writing to prevent their 'potential alliance'. Making his case for the defence, Sisson (1978b: 26) again describes the personal influence Maurras had on him, but declares that '[it] never occurred to me that he was any sort of model for British politics'. As for the accusation that he opposes democratic government, he states that 'I have no disposition to suppose that a clean sweep of our remaining old institutions would serve any liberating purpose. I am a constitutionalist' (ibid.: 26). The key distinction is between democracy and republicanism: Sisson's criticisms of democracy are intended to maintain its place below the sovereign power of monarchy within a mixed constitution, as opposed to republicanism – a distinction that Silkin blurs (as Tom Paulin later would regarding Geoffrey Hill) in his argument that Sisson's monarchism is at root fascistic.

Silkin raises the question of how far Sisson follows Maurras's ideology, and to what extent this makes him an anti-Semite – a question lent urgency by the fact that Silkin was himself Jewish. Maurras never disguised his anti-Semitism, and Sisson was certainly aware of it; but Sisson either downplays it or takes an ambiguous stance. Sisson quotes a letter in which Maurras describes Nîmes as 'un ramassis de protestants, de juifs, et d'anciens mercantis beaucairois' to demonstrate 'how narrow Maurras's basic sympathies were, how narrow, really, the world of his imagination is' (*AL*: 537) – whereas, as Patrick McGuinness (*Age*: 73) observes, '[t]he more logical deduction would be to see that letter as evidence of Maurras's anti-Semitism and sectarianism'. Following an acrimonious discussion at the 1979 Cambridge Poetry

Festival, Davie (1980: 17) claimed that ‘in Jon Silkin's polemics against *PNR*, without ever quite saying so, he is persistently trying to tar me and Schmidt and Sisson with the brush of anti-Semitism’, and challenged him to ‘come right out and say so, and present his evidence’. Certainly, there is nothing in Sisson’s poetry like the anti-Semitic caricatures found in Eliot or Pound’s; nor does his prose contain the kind of casual anti-Semitism found even in the work of an anti-fascist writer like Orwell. While admitting the ‘charm’ that he found in Maurras, Sisson also admits that ‘this secret charm spread its tentacles right into the brutal day-to-day world of politics’, and that only later did he ‘identify those more personal poisons of that love of death and emptiness which lurk under Maurras's devotions’ (*AL*: 541). Yet the 1978 essay remains, as McGuinness (*Age*: 72) puts it, ‘a pretty brazen defence of Maurras’ that presents him as ‘a more idealistic, more principled and, one might say, more quixotic figure than he was’ (*Age*: 73). The dust-jacket of Carcanet’s 1975 republication of *Christopher Homm* features a list of books by C.H. Sisson published and projected, among them ‘The Case of Charles Maurras: a reassessment and selection of his writings’. For whatever reason, this never appeared. Schmidt has said that Sisson ‘lost interest in it. It came to seem no longer pertinent’, and that he did not even get as far as beginning the translations;<sup>4</sup> if so, this seems to precede the hostilities with *Stand*, after which it may have seemed unwise to pursue the case of Charles Maurras any further. It may also be that Sisson began to feel the ‘wish to shake off’ his influence expressed in the essay. It is another irony that Sisson was being publicly attacked for supporting Maurras at a time when he was privately distancing himself from him.

Sisson was also returning, at this time, to a text that had been important to him in India: Dante’s *Commedia*, which, as he began to translate it, provided the basis of poems, notably ‘Cato’ (*CP*: 233) and ‘The Question’ (*CP*: 234-5) from *Anchises*. Reviewing the collection in *Agenda*, Penelope Palmer observes that ‘Sisson asks himself, “How can I climb the Mount of Purgatory?” and rather implies that he doesn’t want to’; and (in ‘The Question’) ‘the theme of the (divine) mountain, which the poet both recognises and needs but will not climb, returns’ (Palmer 1977: 137):

So turn to God. The old immutable

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<sup>4</sup> Personal correspondence



Accessible great mountain of my soul.  
Here on the lower slopes I will remain.

It is ironic that Sisson should have translated the medieval Christian epic during a period of deepening personal disillusionment. In fact, this can be detected in the poems, if we consider 'Cato' as symbolising his misgivings not only about his faith, but also about the travails of translating:

I who have never seen the last evening  
–No more had Dante then– slip in behind  
It is not for me to intrude upon the company  
No supreme lady called me; if I go upwards  
It will be stumbling, by myself, unobserved (ll.5-9)

Sisson as translator can be seen struggling to render the 'progression towards beatitude' (l.14) in vivid English verse – hence, perhaps, Schmidt's conclusion that Sisson's *Divine Comedy* (published in 1980) has 'a pedestrian quality [...] half way between speech and prose,' with 'the literal sense dragging like a broken wing and Dante's form reflected only in the stanza breaks' (*Age*: 41). Bearing in mind the Maurrasian inflection given to Dante in *The Morning's Danger*, we may also read this as an allegory for Sisson's contemporaneous climb-down from advocacy of Maurras.

Why was Sisson moving away from the Christian faith at this point? Several poems in *Exactions* wrestle with the problem of belief as a philosophical question, as in 'The Pool' (*CP*: 245-8):

I held the meaning of life in my hands  
For a while: then I abandoned it.  
Why? There were several reasons: first,  
The life it was the meaning of was not mine.  
Then it was a mistake I made about God.  
I simply imagined that there was somebody there  
And, having imagined it, strove to be polite to him. (ll.19-25)

The poetry in these lines can be hard to identify: many consist of the kind of 'logic-chopping discourse' for which Davie (1977a: 273) criticised 'The Discarnation', with a tendency to lurch into obscenities ('[f]lies and whiskers growing out of a dead cunt' (l.33); '[p]laying with one's own genitals, it might be said' (l.45)). But there are more subtle effects, as when Sisson places a blasphemous twist on George Herbert's

definition of prayer as '[t]he six-days' world-transposing in an hour' in his assertion that:

The world, which was made in six days,  
Has contracted. A week, a minute, an hour,  
Are short enough to comprise it. (ll.100-2)

The allusion to Herbert is telling because of his significance for Sisson as an exemplar of seventeenth-century Anglicanism. In *The Morning's Danger*, Bill is from Bemerton, Herbert's parish, and reminisces about his home just as Geoffrey Hill (*PNR*: 14), in his essay on Sisson, describes Christopher Tietjens 'groping for the name of George Herbert's parish' as 'an unconscious strategy to ward off shell-shocked despair and paranoia', taking succor from 'the attachment of a particular religious and political vision to the soil of England itself'. For Sisson, the validity of belief is inseparable from the institution that embodies it – in his case, the Church of England. But the Church of England as he found it was far from satisfactory. On the parochial level, the church next door in Langport, All Saints, was at this time making the transition (as he explained in a letter to Schmidt) 'from the situation in which had a rector of our own, for a parish of less than 1000 people, to one in which we are part of a group of 8 parishes, served by 3 clergy' (CPA Acc. 4-2, Box 2, C.H. Sisson Folder 1, 11/10/76). Beyond this local frustration, there was the fact (as Clive Wilmer (*Age*: 44) argues) that 'as the Church of opinion – particularly of opinions locked in conflict – grew more and more prominent, Sisson found less and less room for himself in what he had long thought his natural home'. Wilmer does not elaborate on these conflicting opinions, but the controversy that touched Sisson most nearly at this time was the introduction in 1980 of the Alternative Service Book; indeed, the Prayer Book controversy draws together many themes that had exercised Sisson from his earliest work.

The movement for liturgical reform had been gathering momentum in the Church of England for many years, so this came as no surprise, and actually provided the opportunity to make an intervention. Fearing that the Alternative Service Book was being foisted upon Anglican churches as a replacement for the Book of Common Prayer, as well as the New English Bible over the Authorized Version, Sisson and his co-editors published 'Crisis for Cranmer and King James', a special issue of *PN*

*Review* guest-edited by Professor David Martin, including polemical and scholarly articles, as well as three petitions to the General Synod of the Church of England, asking them to uphold the regular use of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible. These were signed by six hundred people from diverse fields: clergymen and theologians; servicemen and politicians (among them Sisson's old *bête noir* Lord Goodman); artists in all media, especially writers, including the then Laureate, John Betjeman, the future one, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, and several contributors to *X* (including David Wright, George Barker and Geoffrey Hill). In a 1978 essay on Coleridge's 'On the Constitution of Church and State', Sisson recounts how Coleridge defined the Church of England as a clerisy comprised of

the learned of all denominations; – the sages and professors of the law and jurisprudence; of medicine and physiology; of music; of military and civil architecture; of the physical sciences; with the mathematical as the common *organ* of the preceding; in short, all the so called liberal arts and sciences, the possession of which constitute the civilization of a country, as well as the Theological. (*AL*: 552)

Although Sisson admits that this conception 'had in Coleridge's day shrunk to a degree which made the proposition seem paradoxical' and 'in our day it looks frankly ridiculous' (*AL*: 552), the list of signatories to the three petitions may be seen as a contemporary rallying of just such a 'National Clerisy' (*AL*: 552).

Many contributors argue that the new rites in the ASB are poorly written and inferior to those in the BCP, offering analyses of egregious examples. But one could only dismiss this as mere aesthetic fussiness in ignorance of Sisson's beliefs about language. For Sisson, language is inextricable from embodiment: when it is degraded to an abstract sign-system for swapping reified meanings, the speaker and listener are reduced to 'talking to one another as if they were constructions of wire' (*AL*: 161). The 'bald, rhythmless transliterations' cannot create 'the poetry of the Church' (Martin 1980: 2), and as such cannot do justice to the ideal of incarnation which is the cornerstone of Sisson's poetics as much as his faith. Another problem with the ASB expressed is that in offering so many possible combinations (over a hundred for the Lord's Prayer alone) it 'unhinge[s] the very idea of a common prayer': '[e]ach coterie

of the faithful selects a permutation and seals itself off from the other coteries and from any relationship to the wider culture' (ibid.: 1). This threatens the unity of the Anglican community, recalling the factionalism Sisson attacked in earlier essays. Even if these problems were ameliorated, the greatest danger and betrayal in phasing out the old liturgy is that it would create a rupture in Britain's cultural continuity – as Geoffrey Hill (2008: 93) puts it, disrupting the 'extra-liturgical' rhythms and responses. The consequences of this extend beyond the Church, rendering many proverbial expressions and much of English literature fossilised. Martin (1980: 1) concludes that in replacing the Book of Common Prayer and King James Bible 'we shall lose an Atlantis of the mind. There will be and can be no replacement. So far as memory is concerned, we face a universal blank'. Sisson's (1980b: 8) own argument that 'the whole effectiveness of this form of discourse depend[s] upon common points of reference, common echoes, in which the memorability of the Prayer Book and the Authorised Version have an irreplaceable part', goes as much for poetry as liturgy.

The red cover of the special issue reproduces a woodcut depicting Latimer and Ridley about to be immolated while Cranmer looks on helplessly, suggesting that the Church of England is turning against its own heritage and carrying out a second Marian persecution. The image recalls Sisson's poem 'Cranmer', in which he links his family history with that of the Oxford Martyr (albeit the wrong one), and celebrates his sacrifice at a point of historical rupture that inaugurated the Anglican culture with which Sisson identifies himself. But while Mary failed to destroy Cranmer's legacy, the cover of *PN Review* 13 implies that the Church of England is now doing just that – the difference being that this will usher in no new, comparable culture:

the Prayer Book contains a whole system for living in the world – in this realm of England for which it is designed – and if one does not have that system one has to have another, and that other has not yet been adumbrated. (*ICE*: 150)

Furthermore, having identified himself with this Anglican culture, the replacement of the BCP and Authorized Version strikes at Sisson's poetic identity and claim to cultural authority (as did the renaming of England's historical counties in 1974). Richard K. Fenn (1980: 15) argues:

a liturgy no one is willing to die for, least of all those who have authored it, will lack authority to unite the spontaneous and personal with the collective and the given aspects of social life. [...] the text is synthetic and will remain so until it is kindled in the hearts of people or in the flames of personal sacrifice.

But ‘the present facility in extracting from theological conceptions all trace of practical meaning’ (*AL*: 205) ensured no such trial would be made of the new liturgies.

Martin (1980: 2) attacks the origins of the new liturgies, which are ‘put together in odd mid-Atlantic bodies largely financed from the United States’ which are incapable ‘of generating the poetry of the Church, and in any case they work by rubrics which prevent them attempting to do so’. Echoing the critique of bureaucracy in Sisson’s essays and the editorials of *X*, Martin (*ibid.*: 2) describes the machinations of ‘bureaucratic encroachment’:

[t]he General Synod had placed before it some one thousand amendments to GS 364A. The Revision Committee which put GS 364A together was composed of hard-line Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals, set to work like scorpions in a bottle. Thus the new liturgy was framed in political compromise as well as bureaucratic procedure.

Whereas Sisson once found in government committees a nefarious parody of a Christian congregation speaking as one, the ASB was devised by committees that seemed to have taken on the characteristics of the babel Sisson feared. This was a consequence, in his view, of a rebellion against apostolic hierarchy recalling the seventeenth century, in which the members of the Synod:

committed themselves to the absurdity of a largely democratic assembly giving itself the airs of a government – rather as if the House of Commons tried to function without Crown or Ministers or government departments. That such a body is more or less at the mercy of bureaucrats and committee-men operating in the neighbourhood must be obvious. (*ICE*: 151)

This threatens to undo the corporate identity of the Church, the body of Christ:

The counting of heads must always threaten to drive the Church to compromise – a situation which may be well enough for a lay government, which tries merely to get by, but which must raise rather fundamental questions about the real nature of a body which has more august pretensions. (*ICE*: 151)

Geoffrey Shepherd (1980: 9) points out in his contribution that:

[t]he Book of Common Prayer was conceived, born and re-born amid councils, committees, compromises and late-night decisions. Under its smooth and stately surface still work the prejudices and denials, the political passions and commitments of Church and assemblies, Parliaments and people.

This would suggest that the difference between the genesis of the BCP and the ASB is a matter of degree; but Sisson's response might be that multiple circumstances, including the Regicide and the revolution of 1688, as well as the development of the language since that time, make for a qualitative difference between the processes.

Although this may seem to be a conflict internal to the Church of England, it is not unconnected to the legacy of British imperialism that had recently re-emerged in Sisson's writings. Martin (1980: 2) states that '[b]ureaucratic governance and the shift to the ecclesiastical multinational also run *pari passu*', and describes how the 'indiscriminate urge to inaugurate the ecclesiastical multinational is responsible not only for losses of integrity but for a homogeneity which sorts ill with the fragmentation which occurs at local level' (*ibid.*: 2-3). Shepherd (1980: 10) draws attention to the role of the Prayer Book in British imperial history, quoting the Victorian cleric and scholar H. B. Swete, according to whom the Anglican liturgy 'heads a new liturgical family, and one which already has taken root . . . wherever the English tongue is spoken' and was destined, under the aegis of the British empire, 'to surpass even the Roman Mass in the extent of its influence upon mankind'. Whatever the accuracy of that prediction, the British Empire fell into decline; echoing former

US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Shepherd (ibid.: 10) asserts that '[t]his country has lost an Empire and has not found a role'. Attempting to disentangle the Prayer Book from this period of its history, he argues that it 'is not in its politics imperialist, nor Liberal, nor Socialist nor Conservative. It strikes deeper' (ibid.: 10). Indeed, Fenn (1980: 11) argues that:

to take part in any liturgy is to signify to oneself and others that one is constituting a community and oneself as a member of that community. So to take part in the Christian liturgy is to take on one's role in a new kingdom: one that 'shall have no end'. It is the political act of all time and is therefore potentially seditious within the secular politics of a specific time and place.

The logical result of this is that '[a] Eucharist that unites believers in Calcutta and Chicago in a common language diminishes the impact of a pledge of allegiance performed with more or less compliance in public schools around the country' (ibid.: 11). This sits awkwardly with the established nature of the Anglican Church. If Sisson believed in 1954 that an Englishman best expresses patriotic loyalty 'when he uses, in one of those parish churches where it has been used for so long, the magnificent Prayer for the King's Majesty or the Queen's' (AL: 146-7), how could the same prayer be common to Indians in Barrackpore after the British had left? Although Shepherd (1980: 10) adumbrates the contemporary function of the BCP as helping to 'stabilise a sense of identity... until an idea of our modern community is worth uplifting once again', the global reach of Anglicanism in the wake of the British Empire may be the undoing of that supposedly stable identity founded upon the establishment.

'What happens to a person who believes in a truth which for him finds expression in a particular institution,' Wilmer (*Age*: 44) asks, 'when that institution ceases to exist?' Such was the scale of the crisis for Sisson, for whom the Church of England had been his 'the vehicle of meaning' and 'the centre of England' (AL: 204). From when he joined the Church and wrote *Christopher Homm*, throughout the 1960s and 1970s when he wrote his first six collections of poetry, Sisson's relationship with the Church of England was the crux of the tensions that made for his finest poetry: the tension between the 'demented orthodoxy' (Roger Garfitt's description of 'A Letter to John

Donne', which Sisson wryly accepted (CPA Acc. 4-2, Box 2, C.H. Sisson Folder 1, 6/10/76)) of his will to believe in a particular vision of the Church, pitted against what Wilmer (*Age*: 44) calls 'a pessimism [...] that verged on nihilism' and increasing frustration with a Church that failed to live up to his ideal of it. The combination of the closure of All Saints, Langport, the demotion of the Prayer Book and Authorized Version, and the General Synod's ignoring *PN Review*'s three petitions, was the final disappointment. Sisson's next collection, *God Bless Karl Marx!* (1987), contains satirical poems full of angry contempt and hurt, addressed 'To His Grace the Archbishop of York' (*CP*: 361-2), 'For the Primate of All England' (*CP*: 384-5), and 'On the Prayer Book' (*CP*: 361), in which '[t]he empty bucket, sound, clangs in the well | And draws up nothing, banged against the wall' (ll.1-2). But the effect of this disappointment was that the animating tensions fell slack. Although Sisson's last three collections contain many fine poems, they are increasingly given over to discursive poetry in strict forms, such as 'Vigil and Ode for Saint George's Day' (*CP*: 349-55)) and 'The Pattern' (*CP*: 476-81), in which he expounds settled opinions in regular quatrains. Sisson had written of Eliot's *Poems 1920* that 'the bastions of the quatrain, within which Pound could not contain himself, proved almost morbidly attractive to the slightly younger man' (*AL*: 280). Likewise for Sisson, his poetry of the 1980s and 1990s came to be dominated by regular forms unruffled by the 'awkwardnesses of expression' (*EP*: 30) and 'irregularities and straggling rhythms' (*AL*: 323) he admired in Hardy and Edward Thomas. The poems display great accomplishment, but his judgement of another poet again rings true of his own late work when he writes of Auden that 'facility vitiates most of [his] later work. It is as if the tensions necessary for the production of poetry had departed – as they often do – leaving a notable literary talent playing with some ideas' (*EP*: 211). So with his translations: Sisson's versions of *The Song of Roland*, plays of Racine and various lyrics are all skilful and readable; but he would no longer make creative use of the originals as before. Most telling is his 1986 translation of *The Aeneid*. A very different project from 'The Descent', his full version renders the epic in workmanlike blank verse without personal interpolations. It is of course more satisfactory for the casual reader wanting a reliable rendering of Virgil; but it is an index of Sisson's creative hardening that he put his talent to work on suitable tasks, rather than finding in them the spur to new discoveries. That is why 1980 is a fitting point at which to end this study.



If the return of Indian themes and imagery is symptomatic of the deepening rift between Sisson and the Church, one poetic response to it may be found in the ‘garden’ poems from *Exactions*, ‘most of them reflections on his terraced garden at Langport’, as Wilmer (*Age*: 44) notes, where Sisson moved in the early 1970s – a literal return journey to the West Country of his childhood. The collection thus traces a contrapuntal movement of return: to India, then the South West, further into the past but also deeper into the present. In the ‘garden’ poems, Wilmer argues, Sisson seeks to assuage his ‘sense of emptiness at the heart of the individual’ by ‘reach[ing] out towards the material world of growth and decay’ (*Age*: 44-5), and exploring his own memories. The sequence ‘Burrington Combe’ (*CP*: 281-6) takes its title from the limestone gorge near Ellick Farm where Sisson holidayed as a child, and the site of the earliest known cemetery in Britain (BBC News 2003):<sup>5</sup>

But this is where I came  
And where I wish to be  
Burrington Combe, half in the dark  
Half in the light of the moon

Ellick Farm you are buried  
Deep in your greenery  
And there is nothing miraculous left  
Under the sky (ll.49-56)

Here, Sisson returns to the countryside he made the basis of his poetic identity with poems like ‘Ellick Farm’ and ‘Cranmer’, in search of the solacing continuity of natural processes and a context of human history that reaches back over millennia and forward to a millennial future:

The land stretches to doomsday  
The rivers to the sea  
And nothing done and nothing said  
Matters to me (ll.25-8)

The poem’s final stanza describes ‘[t]he flat land with its willows, the great sky | With the river reflecting its uncertainty’ (ll. 141-2) which will persist when the poet’s ‘I’ is ‘no more’ (l.143). This retrenchment, this desire to be gathered ‘among the named

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<sup>5</sup> Although the remains were dated after Sisson’s death, he would likely have been aware of the cemetery in Aveline’s Hole, records of which go back to the seventeenth century.

dead [...] [s]peaking to no man, not spoken to, but in place' ('In Flood', *CP*: 280), is in Wilmer's argument the poetic correlative of to Sisson's avowed preference (in the essay on Coleridge) for 'those who stay and fight their corner, content to be merely the Church in a place', as against those 'international gangs of opinion – that which has its headquarters in Rome or that which has a shadowy international meeting-place in Canterbury' (*AL*: 553). But though in the poem Sisson claims that '[n]o distance was ever like this one' (l.140), it recalls the 'flat plain' that 'extends like Asia' in his elegy for De Vall, where '[t]he mirrors of blue-bottle and worm | May reflect to more purpose than I' – not so much through physical resemblance as the poet's relation to it. Though Davie (1981: 29) argues that Sisson strives for 'a condition of perceptiveness free of egotism, such as the human perceiver cannot attain to, except momentarily', the poet's description of the scene is necessarily coloured by his historical circumstances. The international reach of Anglicanism continues to haunt its home nation, most especially for the one who would repudiate its global legacy.

Sisson also returns to Bristol in the sequence 'Across the Winter' (*CP*: 271-6), in which he explores the scenes and emotions of his childhood:

Stapleton Church, which is not fine,  
Or only so because it is mine  
To skirt and go down to Black Rocks (ll.40-2)

Eastville Park! Down through you  
I came to this Elysium  
–Which I call it in irony,  
In old man's language, because no freedom  
Was without terror or was mine. (ll.49-53)

'In the West Country' (*CP*: 310-3), though from after *Exactions*, is similar to 'Across the Winter' in form and content:

By Mina Road I crossed the Frome  
Hic, illic, I knew it had come  
Past beeches near Oldbury Court (ll.81-3)

These reminiscences are gentler in tone than 'Family Fortunes', in which 'it is possible | To live harshly in that city' (ll.1-2); looking back, Sisson asserts:

I know what ought

To be, what is, and that they are  
The same. (ll.85-7)

Many people and places recollected in these poems are also described in the final pages of *On the Look-Out*, including the house where Sisson was born. The conclusion of Sisson's 'partial autobiography' was first published in 1984, in *PN Review* 39, where it ends (like *Christopher Himm*) with the birth of its protagonist:

It was at 468, Stapleton Road that I spent the years of the First War, and the two that followed. [...] It was above this shop that, on the twenty-second of April, nineteen hundred and fourteen, I was born. (*PNR*: 71)

When in 1989 it was finally published (as Sisson had suggested in 1976) with 'One Eye on India' in addition to an introduction and postscript 'throwing some light on the author's later convolutions', Sisson added one final sentence, to say that '[t]he place is now the Bristol Rovers Supporters Club' (*OLO*: 221). There is a wry humour about this, a circumstance fit for *Christopher Himm*, whereby the football fans who (like those he avoided in Eastville Park (*OLO*: 214)) would have intimidated the young Sisson have since taken over his house; but they at least remain part of the social fabric with which he was familiar.

Walking down Stapleton Road today, coming from the nearby train station, one passes terrace houses, a few pubs and small shops, all conceivably similar to how Sisson would have known it. At first the only obvious change is the noise from the M32, increasing as the road bends northwards and closer to the motorway to which it lies parallel, before it turns into Fishponds Road and skirts the south edge of Eastville Park. Following Stapleton Road to the left, you can count the numbers on the houses getting closer and closer – until they abruptly stop at 466. Nestling on the corner of Stapleton Road and Napier Road, occupying numbers 468-70, there now stands the Shah Jalal Jame Mosque. 'I am at home in Stapleton Road' ('In the West Country', l.91), Sisson could write in 1982. The final irony of his return journey, from India and from the mid-point of life, is that his birthplace and first home should become the site of a place of worship for the religion he encountered with mixed feelings in the North-East Frontier Province. Sisson's vision of England, as we have seen, comprised

of particular places existing within a historical continuum, all the more loved insofar as they offer some sense of a continuous self through personal attachments, and a sense of the wider body politic (held together by the Anglican communion with the sovereign's body politic at its apex) which could guarantee his 'corporate identity as an Englishman' (Davie 1981: 28). Amid the erosions of cultural history he saw around him, Sisson clung to these in his later years; but it is no surprise that they have continued to diminish in the decade since his death.

What alternative could there be? One cannot expect every house to which somebody has an attachment to be preserved throughout their lifetime, let alone after their death – even if that person were a poet, and if the country and the age placed greater value on poetry than this one does. And once a house is torn down to be replaced, why should a mosque not be built in its stead? Any argument that such a building should not be there, being foreign and unfitting, could only be based on a vision of Englishness that seeks to ignore or reverse the changes in society brought about in large part by Britain's own colonial past. Insofar as Sisson's attitude matches this description, it is unworkable as a guide to how Britain can best negotiate its imperial legacy, including the ineluctable reality of religious and cultural pluralism, and its current place in the world.

Nonetheless, repudiating some facets of Sisson's outlook does not mean rejecting his work wholesale, any more than in the case of those other modernists – T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, to name just three – who entertained and even acted on reprehensible political views. The best of Sisson's poetry is so rich in argument, imagery, and above all the rhythmic vitality that finally eludes analysis, that it will continue to repay further reading for the simple pleasure it brings. Sisson's *Collected Poems* compares favourably with equivalent volumes by his more famous contemporaries; set beside his translations, novels and critical prose, his is one of the largest, most varied and challenging oeuvres among all British poets' in the last century. Furthermore, Sisson's poetry demonstrates the persistence of Modernist poetics and Eliotic politics in the mid to late twentieth century, alongside the work of his interlocutors such as Donald Davie and Geoffrey Hill; our understanding of the period will be impoverished and distorted by overlooking Sisson as it would be by overlooking Davie, Hill, or Basil Bunting.

As well as the enjoyment it provides in itself, and what it can tell us about the time of its writing – two rewards one expects of great literature – Sisson’s poetry, translations and prose also provide a third. Many aspects of Sisson’s doggedly argued politics, and the body of myth he put to such individual use, cast light upon issues of current concern. Although Sisson’s imaginative engagement with the Matter of Britain may appear to be regressive, the myths connected with it – those of King Arthur, and Joseph of Arimathea’s bringing Jesus to Glastonbury – have enduring power. In 2012, Danny Boyle’s ‘Isles of Wonder’ opening ceremony for the London Olympic Games took Glastonbury Tor as its focal point, beginning with an idealised ‘Green and Pleasant Land’ representing ‘a reminder and a promise of a once and future better life’ (a reference to the legend of the once and future king). The mythology that Sisson drew on so heavily was presented as an integral part of modern Britain’s cultural identity, in a ceremony in which the Queen had a central role, and which coincided with her Diamond Jubilee. This Sissonian mythology was incorporated into a celebration of multiculturalism, with immigrants arriving on the *Empire Windrush*, a love story involving two black Londoners, and music by Dizzie Rascal, Ilaiyaraaja and A. R. Rahman in later parts of the ceremony. Every retelling of a story has political determinants and motives, Boyle’s no less than Sisson’s; the point is that the sources do not dictate the resultant politics. Sisson’s modernist exploration of the Matter of Britain will remain suggestive, alluring and troubling so long as those myths retain their wider currency.

The issues I have raised in the context of Sisson’s work have since developed far beyond the point at which this study has left them. In the wake of devolution, there are now Scottish and Welsh poets laureate; women have now been appointed to all these posts; and the terms of the contract have changed to a fixed-term incumbency. These developments are continuations of the modernising process that began with the creation of the Arts Council and the laureateship of C. Day Lewis, and of the changing national politics with the United Kingdom. The historical and constitutional context that I have built up around Sisson’s writings demonstrates, I hope, a fruitful way of understanding these changes (and further changes that may yet occur) not simply as piecemeal alterations but as part of a coherent and fundamental movement away from the model I have sought to reconstruct.

In other constitutional matters, the position of the monarchy is of continuing importance, especially as we approach the succession of a prince whose political activities have been a cause of controversy. While Sisson had to make a case for the monarch's continuing political power, his position has apparently been strengthened (whether or not one approves of it) by the *Guardian* newspaper's on-going attempts to gain access to Prince Charles's 'black spider' memos (so called, apparently, 'because of his handwriting' (Evans 2013) but also suggesting secret machinations *à la* Louis XI), which suggest that the monarch and the heir to the throne does have a high degree of influence, including the power of veto. Sisson's construction of the relationship between monarchy and the environment also appears to be supported by Prince Charles's promotion of organic farming, although recent revelations about the tax arrangements of his Duchy of Cornwall estate (Booth 2013) cast doubt upon the disinterestedness of his stewardship. The relationship between government, the environment and poetry continues to play out in the terms of the third chapter of this study, as when the former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion recently quoted Philip Larkin's 'Going, Going' to attack the government's plans for building roads and houses (Carrington 2013). Although poetry is unlikely to be the main driving force behind a thoroughgoing reassessment of our relationship with the environment, it might be beneficial if poets (especially those who have the opportunity to speak publicly) had a clearer understanding of how poetry has been entangled with successive governments' environmental policies, rather than seeing themselves as prophetic spokespersons for the natural world – a clarity that Sisson's writings, as I have tried to demonstrate, can bring.

The Church of England has recently been a matter of debate, and although the pressing issues are now those of the ordination of gay and female bishops rather than liturgical reform, Sisson's accusation that '[s]o conscious has the Church become, in sexual as in other matters, that many are left wondering whether it is not so much set against the world as following the world's teaching, but at a respectful distance' (*ICE*: 153) still raises the question of how the Church should respond to changing social mores. But though the Anglican Church will be praised and criticised for whatever course it takes, Sisson's critical prose alerts us to the fact that it still has a central place in the constitution, and its fate will be tied up with the monarchy whose

authority it draws upon and upholds; disestablishment could not be effected without more widespread constitutional changes.

Sisson's attack on unconstrained financial speculation in *The Case of Walter Bagehot*, prescient in the decade before Thatcherism, now in the wake of the financial crash of 2008 seems more relevant than ever, while his critique of bureaucracy has lent irony to the business of writing this study in an institution increasingly given over to arrogant and incompetent managerialism. Sisson's response to these excesses is often, it must be admitted, reactionary; nevertheless, as John Peck (*Age*: 32) argues, '[w]hat makes for a lively mind in truly urgent political situations is not a *posse comitatus* of like views, but of unlike views converging on limited, principled grounds.' Sisson's stance might strengthen a left-wing critique of the current situation in universities, banks and governments by drawing older, non-libertarian forms of conservatism into a fruitful dialogue about forms of value beyond commodity exchange.

Sisson's relevance to these issues can be demonstrated with the model I have constructed, which offers us a point of departure from which to evaluate subsequent developments. But what make his criticism potentially useful for the study of poetics are the connections he suggests between poetry, the physical body, and the wider body politic. The insight that poetry traces the threshold of *phone* and *logos*, *physis* and *nomos*, which is the domain of sovereignty, may help us to understand more clearly the political dimensions of poetry. There is so much and such a variety of poetry in Sisson's oeuvre that I have barely scratched the surface of it in this study; but I hope to have indicated areas of interest, and perhaps stimulated curiosity about other dimensions of his work that deserve closer scrutiny. As we approach the centenary of his birth, critical study of C.H. Sisson's work is more timely and necessary than ever.

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