

Notes for Broadsheet Poets

Extracts from C. H. Sisson's critical essays, selected by Charlie Louth

There is no question, as it has come to me, of filling note-books with what one knows already. Indeed as the inevitable facility comes, the conscious task becomes the rejection of whatever appears with the face of familiarity. The writing of poetry is, in a sense, the opposite of writing what one wants to write, and it is because of the embarrassing growth of the area of consciousness which writing, as indeed the other serious encounters of life, produces that one has recourse to the conscious manipulation of translation, as it were to distract one while the unwanted impulses free themselves under the provocation of another's thought. I have come in the end to have great sympathy with Dryden, who having pushed his way this way and that at the end of his days took pride in being able to do a translation better than any of them. He was glad, I imagine, to be able to release the energies of poetry without passing for having said anything of his own. I do not pretend that my path has led me so far. There are other enabling distractions – reasoning and analysis, mythology and other narrative, properly used. All these are really modes of the problem of form.

The 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 the poem – any poem – is in its rhythm and that is why critical determination has in the end to await that unarguable perception.

from the Foreword to the poems of *In the Trojan Ditch* (1974)

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It is not an impertinence to try to translate great masters. It is a tribute that one pays.

[...]

It is an ineluctable law that a verse translation has to be done in the only verse that the translator, at the time of writing, can make; and that if he could not make verse before he will not suddenly become so gifted because he is faced with a classical text.

from the Foreword to the translations in *In the Trojan Ditch*

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‘The poem’ is words on a piece of paper, or spoken, just as ‘the building’ is erected before you and you must make of it what you can. Nobody supposes that you feel what the builder or the architect ‘felt’, as he sweated through his work, even in cases where there is one man to whom a ‘feeling’ or an original creative act could with any plausibility be attributed. Of course buildings are in styles as well as being in materials, and many people have a hand in them. And so have poems although one man will, these days, put his name on the title page. Take no more than a due amount of notice of it; it is to get the money, or the reputation, or in hopes of the same.

from ‘On Poetic Architecture’ (*Essays*, 1967)

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One should not write more poetry than one must, and some formula has to be found for passing the time between poems. The conduct of affairs is one, though probably not the best. While one is seeing this world, what worlds is one not seeing! But at least these avocations prevent one from thinking of oneself as a poet, which for most writers of verse must be very salutary. The annihilating pressure of work seems an enemy, but so many times of idleness, as a student and in the army, have produced nothing that one cannot say with certainty that relief from this treadmill would produce more, though I think it would. The writing of poetry is a matter of personal economy, but it cannot be treated as such, for one does not know what one wants to discover. One can only go on living, and be grateful for this by-product if it comes. It may be just pleasure, or it may be the truth peeping out.

[...]

The poet has problems which you can call technical, if you like the word, but when he is at work all his problems are one, which is to keep what he is saying within the limits of the perceptible. The 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. [...] The point is 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.

[...]

Perceptible literary objects come in all kinds of shapes, and the work of a particular writer, taken chronologically, is likely to show a series of shapes related in the same way as the shapes you might expect to see emerging one after another from a painter’s studio. The changes in the series pass for

being the poet's development, but how does it look to him and why does he pass from one point to another in the series? He is not ordinarily thinking of developing [...]. He is thinking – so far as he can be described as thinking of anything apart from the subject-matter – of making a poem which will not be the same as the last one. The development of the series is in one sense the result of a negative rather than a positive effort. If the familiar presents itself as he feels his way through the poem, he discards it, knowing that it would not be part of the poem, but would be a 'soft' bit. What, through its familiarity, can no longer be attended to, is of no use for his purposes. The unfamiliarity ought to be continuous but it is not absolute. Unfamiliarity is a relative thing. It is related to what is familiar; there is a background of expectedness to all that is unexpected. The poet may change things, but he starts from somewhere.

[...]

It is an absurdity to try to be original. You might as well try to be beautiful or intelligent. But the complementary process of ridding yourself of obsessive influences can possibly be assisted by some conscious effort. A young man, however, cannot shrink back at the first touch of an alien hand. He has to live through his Eliot, his Yeats or whatever it may be. For a time he must wear fashionable clothes. Then he must discard them, and be prepared to find, not merely that he is naked, but that under those clothes he simply was not there at all.

[...]

As a piece of technical advice to the writer: Tell the truth and hope for the best is [...] inadequate. Some good writers have been quite extraordinary liars, along certain lines, as for example Ford Madox Ford. The truth is interesting if you can tell it, but the writer will feel a need to simplify his problems by abridging it in some way. What is not so good is putting in phoney bits. This also everybody does more or less, but the better writers less. The advice one might give – if any advice were of any use – might be to write about something about which you have some truth to tell. For the poet the truth is what he can perceive. This is the point at which the technical problems and the problems of subject-matter become the same. But is rhythm a part of the truth? It seems odd to say so. One feels for the subject, and if one finds it one finds the words. But the rhythm? The fact is that you cannot find the words without the rhythm, and what you might call your words, in a borrowed rhythm, would not be your words. So evading other people's rhythm is part of finding your own words ...

from 'Natural History' (*Art and Action*, 1965)

We all live in a language which brings with it more of the past than we can hope to discern; we have to read the poets of the past from where we are and as who we are. When we speak, we speak as we are made.

[...]

There is a tension between the original author and his translator which involves language and thought and the whole world each of them moves in. It is the establishment of this relationship which so to speak constitutes the moment of discovery in which the poet-translator finds that he can venture on his subject. A great poet – any real poet – is present in every line of his work; the essence of his work can be received in a flash from a single poem or from a few lines, and what follows is a deepening of that insight. The poet-translator cannot begin until he has gone a stage further. He has to find the tone in which he can speak. This is not a deliberate search; it is a revelation which can only come to him involuntarily, as a line of his own may come to him, out of the blue. It must come to him concretely, a few words or a rhythm suddenly emerging, a few lines and – suddenly, he knows how the thing can be done. After that he can go on, through all the intervening hours of labour, to the end. No doubt the quality of the intuition varies, and the work that follows can be more or less true to that initial hunch, but some hunch there must be if a poem in a foreign language is to find a voice in this one.

[...]

A poet will not be tempted to say in verse what he could say in prose, but there will be moments when words come to him in a rhythmic form which will admit of no other way of saying them. It is his sense of the sequence of rhythms which will determine what words he takes and what he lays aside during the process of composition. The sense of language which demands that the choice shall be made in this way cannot suddenly be summoned up by any act of will or by a publisher's contract. The suitability of a specific kind of verse is an expression of the relationship established between the translator and his author, between one age and one language, and another age and another language. What we call a translation is no more than a reading, in one time and place, of a text from another place and time. It syphons off something from the original, but as much only as we in our different world are able to take. A successful translation – the concrete embodiment of a reading – does not preclude other attempts, it invites them. All are partial, all give the original a particular twist. That is why, beside the word 'translation', which implies the removal of something from one place to another, we should set the word 'version', which emphasizes the twist.

from 'The Poet and the Translator' (*In Two Minds*, 1990)

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The first necessity is to have something to say, but even this will be present only as an impending cloud, and to assert its necessity is to make an *ex post facto* analysis. The moment announces itself by words conveying a rhythm or, it may be, by a rhythm conveying a few words.

[...]

Poetry – verse in any serious usage of the term – is a receptacle for sense which cannot be put into prose, and which burdens the speaker until it is said. ‘Lully, lulla, thou little tiny child’ is a paradigm of the art; the assonance and half rhyme, and the rhythm, are rigorously essential to the meaning to be unloaded. The line says what cannot be said otherwise. Poetry is precisely that; all other speech hangs more or less loosely. Only the greatest poets maintain this degree of rigour at any length.

from ‘Poetry and Sincerity’ (*In Two Minds*, 1990)

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These lines (40-7 of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*) contain the essential directions for the poet or indeed any writer. Find what you can write about and you have solved your problem. Of course the aspiring writer has to face the possibility that the answer may be, Nothing. At any rate, the beginning, as the continuation, of literary capacity involves a certain self-knowledge. Nothing is further from it, therefore, than the intoxications of publicity and reputation.

[...]

Whether or not the poet can be said to keep the language alive, the language is alive in the poem [...]. The question here is what the individual writer can do for the life of the language. If one has not a certain confidence or at any rate hope that he can do something, one has no business with poetry at all. To make the old word new one has only to use it properly. A word not only carries a meaning but derives significations from the context in which it is put. The full meaning of a word in a poem is the product of its history, including the current usage, and its location. How far one can increase the charge on a word by deliberate placing is questionable. Horace is very precise in what he says on this subject. ‘You will have said well’ is how he puts it – *dixeris egregie* – if it turns out that the way you have placed the word in fact renews it. The novel impression is a critical test you can apply when you have written your poem rather than a trick which can be recommended to anyone wanting to turn out a good one.

[...]

The poet should not only give pleasure but say something sensible.

[...]

Pas de perfection dans les arts could be either a statement of fact or an injunction. While Horace has earlier insisted on the importance of revision, he here (lines 340-52) admits that even the best works have faults. He might have said, ought to have faults, for nothing is more likely to kill a work than trying to make it a treasury of individual beauties or smart phrases. Even in a writer of genius, the determination to ‘load every rift with ore’ – Keats’s phrase – impedes that movement as a whole which is the mark of the successful work, as Keats himself discovered.

[...]

What training should the poet give himself? The question is worth considering, even though it is too complicated to admit of a satisfactory answer. The training of an athlete is, after all, only the final polish on a life well-endowed and hitherto well-spent, so far as fitness for a particular range of movements is concerned. What constitutes the ‘well-spent’, as far as the poet is concerned, is more than anyone can say. It may include the encounter with and solution of infantile and adolescent problems which everyone would avoid if he could. Poetry is so comprehensive in its subject-matter, and its wells are so deep in the psyche, that there is no reason to suppose that the ‘well-spent’, in the case of the poet, is in general any different from that of the rest of the world. Certainly anyone who seeks to justify particular lines of conduct on the grounds that he is a poet is suspect, if for no other reason than that he will certainly not *know* that what he does will produce better poetic results than the line of conduct that he rejects. [...] One’s immediate starting techniques as a poet will [...] be learnt from one’s somewhat older contemporaries who may not be very good and whom one will learn to discard and – properly – date one’s real start as a poet from the date of that discarding.

from the Notes to *The Poetic Art: a translation of Horace’s Ars Poetica* (1975)