

Sophie Hannah

The Guessing

In my back garden, there's a sundial with a verse from a C. H. Sisson poem engraved on it. I'm looking at it now, through my study window. The poem is 'Uncertainty', from his collection *Antidotes* (Carcenet, 1991). Here it is, in full:

The future is the only thing
That makes for thought, the past is past:
It brought its presents, had its fling,
But what it flung could never last.

The future has not lasted yet
Even the second that it can
And so is good for any bet:
It is the guessing makes the man.

Human uncertainty is all
That makes the human reason strong:
We never know until we fall
That every word we speak is wrong.

I first encountered this poem as an undergraduate student at Manchester University. I was doing a course in twentieth-century poetry, and my tutor was Michael Schmidt, who, as well as being a lecturer in the English department, was also Sisson's publisher and a passionate advocate of his work. The middle stanza of the poem (which is the one on my sundial) puzzled me at first. I couldn't work out the syntax of the verse's first sentence, the one that stretches over the first three lines. In particular, line 2 confused me. I suppose I was being dim, because once I worked out what it meant, it seemed obvious: the future has not yet lasted, not even for the second that it's capable of lasting once it arrives.

Interesting, though, that the line that tripped me up is the only one in the poem that is telling an outright lie. 'The future hasn't lasted yet' - true, because it hasn't arrived. But 'even the second that it can'? The future never arrives, and therefore never gets to last, not even for a second.

There are other things in the poem that one might wish to take issue with. Doesn't the past also sometimes make the human reason strong? Doesn't what the past 'flung' sometimes last an awfully long time, in people's memories if nowhere else? What about in westerns, when Clint Eastwood rides into town to avenge a wrong done years ago? Wherever revenge is a motive, and it often is, it is surely the past that makes the human reason strong, not the future.

Of course, Sisson might not have been making a claim for truth with the poem's first two lines; he might simply have been expressing his own opinion. Or he might have been trying to express something more complex: the past only has meaning because the future is unknown. If we knew for sure that the world was going to end tomorrow, we might try to live entirely in the moment and let go of the threads of the past that we've been carrying around with us, since we wouldn't need them to connect to a cancelled future. What does it matter that we were wronged in the past if there's going to be no time for reprisals? What does the past count for if the ongoing narrative of our lives is about to end abruptly, if we're to have no opportunity to learn from our mistakes?

If the past can so easily be made not to matter by the removal of the future, then the past needn't - and therefore doesn't - matter. The future, however, always matters to us, and would even if the past were suddenly to be cut away, excised from our memories. We will always care about what's going to happen to us, both in the immediate and the distant future. This, perhaps, is what Sisson means when he says that the future is all.

At the end of verse two we have the line, 'It is the guessing makes the man', but according to the poem's final couplet, 'We never know until we fall/That every word we speak is wrong.' Does this mean our guesses are never correct? Or do we only fall when we guess wrongly? If our guesses always miss the mark because only God/Fate knows what the future holds, and yet, at the same time, it's the guessing that makes the man, then Sisson could be making a complex point to do with there being honourable and dishonourable ways to behave in the face of uncertainty.

One thing I'm sure he never considered when he was writing the poem is detective fiction. I was asked to contribute to this collection of articles about Sisson in my capacity as a poet, but I am also a writer of psychological thrillers, and I believe Sisson's poetry is essential reading for any crime writer or reader. 'Human

uncertainty is all/That makes the human reason strong' - this is certainly true for readers of detective fiction, who read on to find answers, because they're desperate to know who did it, or why they did it, or how they got out of the locked room that contains the dead body.

I read almost nothing but crime fiction these days. Occasionally a highbrow friend will lend me a literary novel to improve my mind. I grit my teeth and make a start, and quickly find myself thinking, 'Why on earth would I want to carry on reading this? There's no mystery in it; I know exactly what's going on. I'm not waiting to find out anything.' You could paraphrase Sisson's lines and say that, for me at least, reader uncertainty is all that makes the reader's reason strong.

When I was writing my second crime novel, *Hurting Distance*, I decided I wanted to write about a particularly painful species of uncertainty. What's the only thing worse than not knowing something and being desperate to know? The certain answer is this: knowing that someone else knows and won't tell you. That someone is cruel and twisted, and so they taunt you with their knowledge and your lack of it.

In *Hurting Distance*, there is a character called Juliet who knows exactly what's going on - who the psychopath is and why he/she is doing what he/she is doing. If Juliet so wished, she could tell the detectives everything they want to know straight away, and the book would only be 63 instead of 408 pages long. She doesn't, though - instead, she's glibly uncooperative, and seems not to care that this behaviour might land her in prison. Here's an abridged extract from chapter twelve:

'Was your husband physically or psychologically abusive towards you, Juliet?'

'You know what? I think it'll make your job more exciting if I don't tell you anything.' She nodded at the file in Simon's hands. 'Have you got a bit of paper?'

He pulled a torn envelope out of his pocket and passed it across the table to her, rolling a pen after it. She leaned forwards, spent a few seconds writing, then pushed the envelope towards Simon with a smile. She'd written four lines, either a poem or part of one:

Human uncertainty is all
That makes the human reason strong:
We never know until we fall
That every word we speak is wrong.

'What is this?' asked Simon. He was annoyed that he didn't recognise it. She couldn't have made it up, not so quickly.

'My thought for the day.'

I couldn't resist having my information-withholding character quote Sisson's poem; it seemed so perfectly appropriate. When the novel was published, my publishers bought me a sundial as a publication-day present (the novel's heroine is a sundial-maker) and it seemed hugely fitting to have a verse from that same poem engraved on the side of the dial; Sisson's poems are all about time. I chose the middle stanza of 'Uncertainty' because, taken in isolation, it sounds reasonably optimistic (which can't be said of some of Sisson's work - he's a great poet, but no one could accuse him of excessive jollity.)