

Calvin Bedient on Charles Tomlinson

Charles Tomlinson is the most considerable English poet to have made his way since the second World War. There is more to see along that way, more to meditate, more solidity of achievement, more distinction of phrase, more success as, deftly turning, hand and mind execute the difficult knot that makes the poem complete, than in the work of any of Tomlinson's contemporaries. It is true that the way is strait; but Tomlinson would have it so. For his is a holding action: he is out to save the world for the curious and caring mind. And if he is narrow, he is only so narrow as a searching human eye and a mind that feeds and reflects on vision—an eye that to everything textured, spatial, neighboring, encompassing, humanly customary, and endlessly and beautifully modulated by light, dusk, weather, the slow chemistry of years, comes like a cleansing rain—as also like a preserving amber. The quality everywhere present in Tomlinson's poetry is a peculiarly astringent, almost dry, but deeply meditated love; this is true whether his subject is human beings, houses, lamplight, chestnuts, lakes, or glass. Tomlinson is a poet of exteriority and its human correlatives: the traditional, the universal, the unchangeable, the transparencies of reflection. And he is thus the opposite of a lyric or "confessional" poet. Yet what a mistake it would be to confuse this outwardness with superficiality. To read Tomlinson is continually to *sound*: to meet with what lies outside the self in a simultaneous grace of vision and love. Tomlinson's chief theme is, in his own phrase, "the fineness of relationships." And though his poetry is in great measure restricted to this theme, the theme itself is an opening and a wideness.

Tomlinson's theme, or his strict relation to it, is one with his originality; and this originality is most salient in his poems on the world's appearances. We have been asked to admire so many poets of "nature" that we can but sigh, or look blank, to hear it announced that still another one has come along; and we will greet with skepticism any claims to originality. But Tomlinson is unmistakably an original poet. There is in him, it is true, a measure of Wordsworth: the at-homeness in *being* as against *doing*, the wise passivity, the love of customariness, and what Pater spoke of as Wordsworth's "very fine apprehension of the limits within which alone philosophical imaginings have any place in true poetry." Both poets awaken, moreover, in Shelley's phrase, "a sort of thought in sense." But how different in each is the relation of sense to thought. In Wordsworth, sense fails into thought. Nature strikes Wordsworth like a bolt; it is the charred trunk that he reflects upon. His thought looks back to sense and its elation, hungering. In Tomlinson, by contrast, the mind hovers over what the eye observes; the two are coterminous. Together, they surprise a sufficiency in the present; and if passion informs them, it is a passion for objectivity. For the most part, Wordsworth

discovers himself in nature—it is this, of course, that makes him a Romantic poet. Tomlinson, on the other hand, discovers the nature of nature: a classical artist, he is all taut, responsive detachment.

The sufficiency (or something very near it) of the spatial world to Tomlinson's eye, mind, and heart, the gratefulness of appearances to a sensibility so unusual as his, at once radically receptive and restrained, separates him from such poets as D. H. Lawrence and Wallace Stevens—though the latter, indeed, exerted a strong early influence. This marked spiritual contentment—which makes up the message and quiet power and healing effluence of Tomlinson's work—may be conveniently illustrated by one of his shorter poems, "The Gossamers."

Autumn. A haze is gold
By definition. This one lit
The thread of gossamers
That webbed across it
Out of shadow and again
Through rocking spaces which the sun
Claimed in the leafage. Now
I saw for what they were
These glitterings in grass, on air,
Of certainties that ride and plot
The currents in their tenuous stride
And, as they flow, must touch
Each blade and, touching, know
Its green resistance. Undefined
The haze of autumn in the mind
Is gold, is glaze.

This poem is in part a parable on the propriety of the self-forgetting mind. The mind—it seems to hint—is in itself a wealth, like a gold haze; the mind turned outward, however, is wealth piled upon wealth, a glaze upon particular things—a haze lighting up glittering gossamers. This reflection, which encloses the poem, forms part of its own wealth; and yet it is to the poem only what the enclosing haze is to the gossamers: an abstract richness outdone by and subservient to the vivid interest of the concrete. The poem is as good as its word: proclaiming the supremacy of the particular, it stands and delivers. To the tenuous intellect, it presents a living, green resistance. Tomlinson's poem discovers gossamers as a scientist might discover a new chemical; indeed, Tomlinson himself has quoted with covetous interest from Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* a phrase applicable to his own cast of thought: "the science of the concrete." Of course the phrase omits the grateful quality of Tomlinson's attention: a scientist observes, Tomlinson regards, has regard. The gossamers are his host, he their thankful guest. And as a consequence of this humble gratitude, of this self-abnegating attention, Tomlinson brings into the human record—as nothing else has ever done—the look and being of gossamers, an obscure yet precious portion of articulated space. Impossible, now, not to know how gossamers plot currents, ride air, tenuously stride,

connect and resist. Modest as it is, the poem is as good as a front row, a microscope, the opening of a long-buried treasure.

With this example before us, we may perhaps approach to a sharper view of Tomlinson's originality as a poet of nature. Among such poets, he is the anchorite of appearances. To poetry about them he brings an unexpected, an unparalleled, selflessness and objectivity. An ascetic of the eye, Tomlinson pushes poetry closer to natural philosophy than it has ever been before—and at the same time prosyletizes for fine relationships with space, writes and persuades in earnestness, if not in zeal. Into an area crowded with hedonists, mystics, rapturous aesthetes, he comes equipped with a chaste eye and a mind intent upon exactitude. Nature may indeed be a Book; but not until now, say the chaste eye, the intent mind, has the book been more than scanned. The fine print, the difficult clauses, the subtle transitions, the unfamiliar words—Tomlinson will pore over them all. And his language will be as learned and meticulous, his dedication as passionate, his ego as subdued, as that of the true scholar—though mercifully he will also exercise, what few scholars possess, a deft and graceful feeling for form.

The clue to Tomlinson's originality lies in the apparent incongruity between his chosen subject and his temperament. In part, the subject is all the opulence of the visual world—jewelled glass, golden gossamers, fiery clouds. The temperament, by contrast, is strict and chaste, not far from sternness, flourishing only in an atmosphere of "fecund chill," of "temperate sharpness." It is akin to that grain of wheat which, unless it die, cannot bring forth fruit. Ordinarily, of course, men of such temperament turn to God, to the State, to the poor, to science, to learning. They would no sooner turn to the sensual earth than the pious would turn to the Devil. Or if they did, they would bring a scourge, not a strict curiosity indistinguishable from the most discrete and delicate love. A nature of which there is no "point" to seize, as the first of the "Four Kantian Lyrics" suggests, exists, after all, only to the senses; and the senses are notorious panders to the self, tributary streams of the torrential Ego. And yet what the chaste temperament desires is, precisely, to be selfless. Men of such mold would fall to the ground and emerge—something else, something richer. An anti-hedonist who cultivates his senses, an ascetic of

the steady roar of evening,
Withdrawing in slow ripples of orange,
Like the retreat of water from sea-caves . . .

—these are patent contradictions in terms. Tomlinson, politely denying the contradiction, steps in among the hullabalooers and coolly and dedicatedly clears serious ground of his own in the region of the senses, in the forests and "further fields" of nontranscendent space. The result is a nature poetry as unique in its classical temperateness as in its consecration to the Being of Space, to the face and actions of our natural environment.

Tomlinson looks outward, and what he sees becomes, not himself exactly, but his content. Seeing discovers his limits—but they are the limits of a vase or a

window, not of a prison. Indeed, to Tomlinson it is a happy circumstance that the world is "other"; were it identical with the self, there would be no refuge from solitude, nothing to touch as one reaches out.

Out of the shut cell of that solitude there is
One egress, past point of interrogation.
Sun is, because it is not you; you are
Since you are self, and self delimited
Regarding sun.

Observer and observed stand apart, then, as the necessary poles of a substantiated being. The eye is the first of philosophers; seeing turns up the soil of ontology. Beholding thus applies to the spirit a metaphysical balm. The "central calm" of appearances, their very thereness, gives a floor to the world. So Tomlinson walks and looks, and he finds it enough. Philosophically, he begins in nakedness—in nakedness, not in disinheritance; for the scrutinizing eye detects no twilight of past dreams of transcendence, only a present wealth of finite particulars, an ever shifting but sharply focused spectacle. In Tomlinson, the spirit, as if ignorant of what once sustained it—Platonic forms, Jehovah, the Life Force, the whole pantheon of the metaphysical mind—finds bliss in trees and stones that are merely trees and stones. And doubtless this implies an especially fine, not a particularly crude, capacity for wonder. Tomlinson is one of the purest instances in literature of the contemplative, as distinct from the speculative, mind. No poet has ever before regarded the intricate tapestry of Space with such patient and musing pleasure, with so little dread or anxiety to retreat through a human doorway or under the vaulted roof of a church. On the other hand, neither has any poet been less inclined to eat of the apples in his Eden. Tomlinson holds up to the tapestry a magnifying glass: he is all absorption, but, courteously, he keeps his place. And evidently his reward is a sense of answered or multiplied being. Let others—Dylan Thomas, D. H. Lawrence, E. E. Cummings—mount nature in ecstatic egoism. They will not really see her, except distortedly, through the heat waves of their own desire for union; they will not be companioned. Let still others—Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, Philip Larkin—suspect the worst of her, dread her, hint at wrinkled flesh beneath the flowered dress. They, too, will be left with only themselves. Tomlinson, putting himself by, will gain the world.

What Tomlinson values in human beings is a similar facing-away from the self, a rock-like, disciplined submergence in *being*. For the most part, the people in his poems are either models of subservience to task or tradition, as in "Return to Hinton," "The Farmer's Wife," "The Hand at Callow Hill Farm," "Oxen," "Geneva Restored," "Maillol"—or examples of the discontent of desiring: the ambitious castellan of "The Castle," the Symbolists of "Antecedents," the "Black Nude" who is sullen until she learns the "truce" of the eye, the restless poet in "Up at La Serra," and "Mr. Brodsky," the American "whose professed and long / pondered-on passion / was to become a Scot." Like the hills and seas of his poems, Tomlinson is conservative through and through. If he could, one feels, he would bring all the world to a halt: to the "luminous stasis" of contemplation. The dread he

conveys is not of nature, nor even of human nature, but of the “rational” future and its present busy machines—of what is happening to the earth, our host, and to the distinctively human source of our contentment, the filaments of custom that hold us lovingly to place. Better a contented poverty, he believes, than a standardized prosperity:

No hawk at wrist, but blessed by sudden sun
And with a single, flaring hen that tops the chair
Blooming beside her where she knits. Before the door
And in the rainsoaked air, she sits as leisurely
As spaces are with hillshapes in them. Yet she is small—
If she arrests the scene, it is her concentration
That commands it, the three centuries and more
That live in her, the eyes that frown against the sun
Yet leave intact the features’ kindliness, the anonymous
Composure of the settled act. Sufficient to her day
Is her day’s good, and her sufficiency’s the refutation
Of that future where there’ll be what there already is—
Prosperity and ennui, and none without the privilege
To enjoy them both . . .

(“Portrait of Mrs. Spaxton”)

No doubt this leaves much to be said; but there is wisdom, passion, and sting in it, as well as beauty. In Tomlinson, the present as the latest and brimming moment of the past has both a first-rate poet and an able defender. “Farm-bred certainties,” “ancestral certitude,” or, as here, “three centuries and more”—these, to him, have the same sanctifying use as a beech tree or a mood of light: all are alike, for human beings, the conditions of an “anonymous / Composure.” All conduce to, all are food for, a contemplative life.

The Tomlinson of these portrait poems beholds not so much his subjects’ individuality as their fine or fumbled relation to time and place: he beholds, in other words, their beholding. He is thus himself once removed—though, in another sense, also himself twice over. In the remainder of his poems he beholds natural objects directly and minutely—standing back only so far as will allow him to reflect on the virtue of the eye. In either case, he is the poet of contemplation. It is this that gives him his strong and peculiar identity. The atmosphere of his work is that of a calm and cherishing attention. It is an atmosphere in which the objects of this world suddenly stand forth as part of the beautiful mystery of the founded. Whatever can be apprehended as the locus of a fine relation, dwelt on with intent devotion—whether gossamers slung in a haze, or a woman knitting in the rain-soaked air—becomes, to this poet, an “Eden image”; at once pristine and permanent, it radiates being. Tomlinson’s sensibility homes to everything well established, and alights, and broods. And though it comes for grace, it comes also like a grace. It consecrates. This rare and valuable quality, never in excess but always temperate and chaste, is the essence of almost every Tomlinson poem.

It is this patient intention to consecrate that saves Tomlinson from the rapids of the senses. Indeed, it is doubtless a fear of the sensual and gluttonous Ego that gives thrust to the intention to consecrate. Accordingly—at least until lately—beholding in Tomlinson has seemed as much a discipline as a delight. In such recent poems as “Clouds” and “In the Fullness of Time,” Tomlinson comes through as impressively equal to what he contemplates—a large, gracious, and answering stability. In many of his early poems, by contrast, he seems a trifle *determined* to see chastely and feel calmly. Indeed, so little excitement, so little spontaneous joy do these poems convey that their seeing seems rather more a discipline than a delight. The description never blurs, but neither does it glow, with enthusiasm; no sentiment ever spills over the detail into a general, joyful reference. Not that Tomlinson’s sensibility appears ever to have been in great need of restraint. Though exquisite, it is far from being abundant. But disciplined it nonetheless is. Adding its own kind of intensity to Tomlinson’s poems is the reactive force of a self-rejection. Here contemplation is, in Tomlinson’s own word, a shriving. Light, this poet says in “Something: A Direction,” is split by human need: accept the light, and you heal both the light and your need. At each dawn the sun is recovered

in a shriven light
And you, returning, may to a shriven self
As from the scene, your self withdraws.

So it is that Tomlinson would make of beholding an *ascesis*, a chaste, chill atmosphere to cool the hot and clouding Ego.

In consequence, Tomlinson’s poems have something of the severity of a religious cell. Whitewashed of the self, chill, close-packed as stone walls, they are rooms for intense and selfless meditation. Austerity marks both their language and their movement. The diction has the dryness of exposure to mental weather—though the dryness of living bark, not of stones. Learned and exact, it joins the concrete with academic abstraction: in “Gossamers,” for example, the sun is said to *claim* the spaces that *rock* in the leafage; and if the gossamers *ride* and *plot*, they are *certainities* that do so. Tomlinson’s descriptions, accordingly, both feed and ration the eye. Seeing passes somewhat difficultly into thought and stops just short of an easy clarity. At the same time, the depictions give out only so much emotional warmth as they counter with the chill of a rational diction. Even when almost entirely concrete, this poet’s delineations remain anatomy:

A trailed and lagging grass, a pin-point island
Drags the clear current’s face it leans across
In ripple-wrinkles. At a touch
It has ravelled the imaged sky till it could be
A perplexity of metal, spun
Round a vortex, the sun flung off it
Veining the eye like a migraine—it could
Scarcely be sky . . .

Like a window that allows vision through only one side, this looks out lucidly toward surfaces, is blind and indifferent to the inner life. Concrete with respect to spatial things, it is abstract to feeling. Not that it fails to touch feeling; for there is delight here—the delight of detected resemblance and, deeper still, the pleasure that comes from perceiving that a thing has escaped being simply itself—“it could / Scarcely be sky. . . .” And this is to say that there is considerable imaginative life in the description—an aspect of the poetry that we must return to. All the same, Tomlinson analyzes and photographs the current as one who stands over against it, alien though not estranged. He neither attempts to become the water, as any number of poets might have done, nor leaves chinks in his description for sentiment. With Robbe-Grillet, his passage declares that “to describe things . . . is deliberately to place oneself outside them, facing them,” and also that “there is in existence in the world something that is not man, that takes no notice of him.” So the stream is itself, and the words merely serve its being. While Tomlinson stands over against the water, his language, as it were, stands over against him and on the side of what faces him. Indeed, until recently, it has even turned a deaf ear to itself, avoiding all but the most discrete self-echoing—as here, for instance, the tucked-away rhyme of “lagging” and “drag.”

Meter is also, of course, a self-reference of sound, and Tomlinson’s verse logically eschews it, is “free.” It is not, however, free as the verse of D. H. Lawrence or William Carlos Williams is free: it is not free to empathize with its subjects. Empathic rhythm, like meter, awakens feeling: the difference, of course, is that where meter is emotionally introverted, empathic *vers libre* is extroverted. So the meter of Christina Rossetti’s

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water’d shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit . . .

turns feeling around and around, like a dancer in a music box, while the rhythm of Lawrence’s “Fish,”

Aqueous, subaqueous
Submerged
And wave-thrilled . . .

or Williams’ “Rain,”

the trees
are become
beasts fresh risen
from
 the sea—
water

trickles
from the crevices of
their hides . . .

sends feeling outward into objects. Tomlinson's rhythm, by contrast, is neither extroverted nor introverted, but emotionally suspended, stilled and poised in meditation. It springs free of the hypnotic spin of meter, but holds itself back from the emotional free-lancing of *vers libre*. It is free, not to dance new steps to the music of a vital happening, but free, precisely, from the tug and engulfing tide of feeling. Just as a rational element checks emotional participation in Tomlinson's descriptions, so an approximate accentual balance and a kind of sanity of isochronism reins in feeling in Tomlinson's rhythm—a rhythm that moves narrowly between the mind-lulling security of meter and the mind-dissolving fluidity of free verse:

Two stand
 admiring morning.
 A third, unseen as yet
 approaches across upland
 that a hill and a hill's wood
 hide. The two
 halving a mutual good,
 both watch a sun
 entering sideways
 the slope of birches . . .

Here the first two lines have an approximate quantity or length; they also balance in beat. The next three add a beat and balance one another. The sixth, though it drops an accent, keeps the length with its two long vowels and caesura. And in the last two lines, the rhythm quickens back to its initial measure. Reading Tomlinson, one comes instinctively to look for this sort of rough yet reliable recurrence. Like the next bead in a rosary, the accentual repetition provides a necessary sense of stability. On the other hand, shifting and uncertain as it is, it discourages complicities of the pulse. It leaves the mind strung, alert, and waiting.

This condition is heightened by the frequent breakage of the lines *against* phrasal expectations and unities. The lines end long or short, in mid air; and thus left jutting and jagged, they spur the mind to attention. So of the swan in "Canal" we read:

. . . Sinuously
 both the live
 bird and the bird
 the water bends
 into a white and wandering
 reflection of itself,
 go by in grace
 a world of objects . . .

Obviously the lines here work against any sharing of the swans' sinuous motion. The swans may be all grace, but the lines, as such, are all stiff angles. Typically fragmenting sentences down to phrases, then further fragmenting some of the phrases, omitting expected and interjecting unexpected commas, Tomlinson's lines retard and brake the mind, suspend and distance its grasp, so that when

full comprehension finally comes, it arrives, as it were, soundless and clear, unaccompanied by the resonant surge of an affective rhythm.

Altogether, then, there is in Tomlinson's slow, inorganic rhythm of stops and starts and precarious, uncertain balances no wave for imagination to surf on, no independence and autonomy of accent. And yet, for all that, it has character and charm; one acquires a taste for it. Toughly flexile, it introduces a new quality into verse, as if after centuries of beating the drum of the blood, a rhythm had at last been found for the mind. Anything more fluent and facile—so one feels while reading him—would be intolerably flaccid. Whether in short lines, as in "Canal," or in medium lines like these,

It happened like this: I heard
from the farm beyond, a grounded
churn go down. The sound
chimed for the wedding of the mind
with what one could not see,
the further fields, the seamless
spread of space . . .

or in the longer lines he has favored of late,

Cloudshapes are destinies, and they
Charging the atmosphere of a common day,
Make it the place of confrontation where
The dreamer wakes to the categorical call
And clear cerulean trumpet of the air . . .

the movement serves as a kind of stiffening, not only standing the lines up to the mind but constituting in its own right an aesthetic value, a virility like starch in a formal shirt.

So it is that, in both his relation to his subject and his poetic manner, Tomlinson is an original—and what is more, with an originality that counts, that comes to seem, while we read him, and the more we read him, the very intelligence of the eye, the very rhythm of a chaste beholding. And the mainspring of this originality, it has been suggested, lies in the singleness of Tomlinson's contemplative purpose, the rigor of his attempt to make of the observation of nature through the medium of poetry a shriving of the self—a naked, though not unthoughtful, encounter with appearances.

What makes Tomlinson an important poet is partly his originality; but of course it is not his originality that makes him a poet. If his poetry contained observation alone, it would be of no more interest—though of no less interest, either—than a camera set rolling in a snowy field or by the sea. Tomlinson is a poet, in part, because of a consistent, masculine elegance of language, and also in part because of his feeling for rhythm. But mostly he is a poet because he uses, and excites, imagination, and because this imagination is not of a light or gratuitous

kind, but steeped in feeling, organic, pregnant with a response to life. Deeply and richly conceived, Tomlinson's poems are neither the mere notations of a stenographic eye, nor cold slabs of reflection; they begin, they vault, and they conclude in feeling. "That art is selective," writes Dewey in *Art as Experience*, "is a fact universally recognized. It is so because of the role of emotion in the act of expression. Any predominant mood automatically excludes all that is uncongenial with it." And the unity of Tomlinson's poems is fundamentally the unity of a magisterial and imaginative mood.

To be sure, no magistrate was ever more humble or amenable while still retaining and exercising his proper powers. Tomlinson's imagination *attends* to observable reality with almost the patience that characterizes and gives distinction to his eye. Like a fine atmosphere, it can be gentle to the point of invisibility, so that objects and places, and not the poet himself, seem to be communicants of feeling. And when it does grow dense, it thickens as light thickens, making its objects as well as itself more vivid. Impossible to imagine a closer cooperation between the conceiving mind and the receiving eye, Tomlinson's imagination takes its cues, its colors, its composure, from the Persian carpet of the visual world itself.

From what has already been said, it will be seen at once that this delicate cooperation is a matter of strict principle. Indeed, it is largely the imagination—that genie and temptress of the self—that the straps of *seeing* are intended to confine. If Tomlinson's poems are imaginative, it is almost in their own despite. They are imaginative, so to speak, only because they must be in order to qualify as poetry. Granted their way, so it seems, they would be, instead, only a wondering silence. Nor does this principle of imaginative containment—so jealously adhered to—remain implicit. Several of the poems give a sharp rap to the skull of Romanticism, consistently conceived as an egoistic imagination bringing to birth frenzied and false worlds of its own. For example, "Distinctions" chides Pater for indicating that the blue of the sea gives way to "pinks, golds, or mauves," "Farewell to Van Gogh" patronizes that painter's "instructive frenzy," and "Maillol" glances at the "flickering frenzy of Rodin." Indeed, it is the fault of these, as well as of two or three other poems, that they seem to exist chiefly for the sake of their doctrine. Of course, all of Tomlinson is doctrinal—the bias toward passivity, receptivity, and self-effacement being as overwhelming as it is avowed, determined, and morally aggressive. But for the most part this doctrine proves unobjectionable, for the simple reason that poetry takes it over. In the anti-Romantic poems, however, the doctrine tends to tread the poetry down. And, left alone on the field, Tomlinson's vigilance against the self's excesses itself emerges as excessive. His strictures are too tight, they hold their breath in prim disapproval. "To emulate such confusion," he writes of a scuffle between wind and trees,

One must impoverish the resources of folly,
But to taste it is medicinal.

And just as the first line, here, drops a demolition ball on the point, so the tasting in the second seems a trifle too fastidious. Similarly, "The Jam Trap," which

glances at harmful egoistic hedonism in its picture of flies immersed “Slackly in sweetness,” comes through as so unfairly and extremely reductive that it makes Tomlinson, and not Romanticism, seem wrong-headed.

And yet, unobtrusive and stopped down as it is, Tomlinson’s imagination is, as was suggested, precisely the gift and power that makes his poetry poetic. Though obviously far from being ample, headlong, or richly empowering, neither, on the other hand, is it faint or apologetic. It is as active as it is attentive, as forceful as it is discrete. As procreative mood, it is the tension and coherence that keeps the poems brimming, and the still depth that moves the detail toward us, magnified. As subjective transmutation, moreover, it is the gold, the glaze, that makes the detail glitter. Subtract it from the poems, and only sorry fragments would remain. Of course, the farther Tomlinson stands off from objects, the more conspicuous the mediation of his emotional and imaginative presence becomes, increasing like the green of deepening waters. Thus bare lines like these from “The Hill,”

Do not call to her there,
but let her go
bearing our question
in her climb: what does she
confer on the hill, the hill on her?

are obviously tense with imaginative concentration: with the conceived drama of contemplation, and the conceived mystery of relationship. Yet, whether noticed or not, this controlling and conceiving element is nonetheless almost always present and always felt in Tomlinson’s poems. Even the largely “factual” poems resonate under imagination’s bow. Consider, for example, even so unambitious a poem as “Letter from Costa Brava”:

Its crisp sheets, unfolded,
Give on to a grove, where
Citrons conduct the eye
Past the gloom of foliage
Towards the glow of stone. They write
of a mesmeric clarity
In the fissures of those walls
And of the unseizable lizards, jewelled
Upon them. But let them envy
What they cannot see:
This sodden, variable green
Igniting against the gray.

In the knock and juxtaposition of these two glowing and gloomy landscapes, the one dryly sensual, the other soggly spiritual, what a fine effect is produced by the unexpected, proud, and loving preference—so deftly made understandable—for the puritanically passionate English scene. It was imagination that caught and conveyed both the similarity and the deep polarity of these scenes, their different registers in the life of the spirit. And of course it was imagination that pro-

duced here and there the fillip of metaphor, adding local intensities to the shaping tension of the whole: a stimulation felt most strongly in the adjectives and in the verbid *igniting*, so boldly yet so rightly qualifying the suggestion of *sodden*. And elsewhere in Tomlinson one finds equal felicities of the imaginative power of augmenting and interpreting appearances without denying them—for example, the rose in “Frondes Agrestes,” seen

Gathered up into its own translucence
Where there is no shade save colour . . .

or, in “Prometheus,” the trees that

Continue raining though the rain has ceased
In a cooled world of incessant codas . . .

However adverse Tomlinson may be to imagination, clearly there is no lack of it in his poetry.

By now it will have become apparent that Tomlinson is something less of the simple observer and something more of a poet than he himself seems inclined to believe. The view that he encourages of himself, through his poems, is neither accurate nor fully just. Listen to the poems and you will conclude that Tomlinson is but the servant or the guest of appearances. Experience the poems, on the other hand, and you will know that he is something more, and more difficult—namely, their abettor, their harvest, their fulfillment. And this is to say that there is a notable discrepancy, widening at times into a contradiction, between what the poems declare and what they are and do. They speak, as it were, in ignorance of themselves. Thus, though they recommend passivity, it is through their own activity. Though they would teach us to conserve, they themselves are creative and therefore innovative. As they urge us to silence before the multiple voices of space, they impress us with a distinctively human voice. And as they praise nature as our replenishment, they replenish us. So it is that what the right hand gives, the left hand takes away. In “Observation of Fact,” to cite a specific instance, Tomlinson cautions:

Style speaks what was seen,
Or it conceals the observation
Behind the observer: a voice
Wearing a ruff . . .

and meanwhile delights us, in the concluding image, by speaking what has never been and never will be seen.

I leave you
To your one meaning, yourself alone . . .

he says of an upended tree in “Poem”; but what his vehemently anthropomorphic description actually leaves in the memory is not a tree but a creature crouching “on broken limbs / About to run forward.” “Only we / Are inert,” Tomlinson writes in “In Defense of Metaphysics”—and then, in observing that “Stones are

like deaths. / They uncover limits," himself shows admirably more than inertia of mind. In "Chateau de Muzot," he says of the stone mass,

A shriven self
Looks out at it. You cannot
Add to this. Footholds for foison
There are none. Across stoneface
Only the moss, flattened, tightly-rosetted
Which, ignorant of who gives
Accepts from all weathers
What it receives, possessed
By the nature of stone . . .

Yet in so describing it, Tomlinson obviously and wonderfully adds to it, finding footholds not only for the imaginative "foison" of rosetted moss but for the whole parable-conceit of gift, acceptance, and possession. Examples could be multiplied.

Altogether, then, there is in Tomlinson a rebuke to the active, creative self that, coming from a poet, seems untutored. It is as if a Catholic priest were to celebrate, from the pulpit, with both passion and eloquence, the inward light: there is professional suicide in the sermon. What other poet is so insistently and recklessly forgetful of his own gift and its prerogatives? Virtually taking a giant erasure to his work, Tomlinson will write:

Those facets of copiousness which I proposed
Exist, do so when we have silenced ourselves.

Indeed, Tomlinson would thus erase more than his gift; he would erase human consciousness itself. For of course the only truly silenced human being is a dead one. Dewey is again to the point: as he observes, "nothing takes root in the mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving"; for "perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy," and though "the esthetic or undergoing phase of experience is receptive," an "adequate yielding of the self is possible only through a controlled activity that may well be intense." Though Tomlinson again and again salutes the "yielding," the "activity," as a rule, he leaves out of account. So in "A Given Grace" he commences:

Two cups,
a given grace,
afloat and white
on the mahogany pool
of table. They unclench
the mind, filling it
with themselves . . .

And several lines later he concludes:

you would not wish
them other than they are—
you, who are challenged

and replenished by
those empty vessels.

This is true, but only half true. For it is just as reasonable, and just as partial, to say that it is the empty vessels that have been filled, and filled by mind. Sophisticated poet though he is, Tomlinson yet falls into what Husserl calls “the natural unsophisticated standpoint” of consciousness, which assumes “an empty looking of an empty ‘Ego.’” Consciousness can indeed be invested, but only in so far as it invests; as Husserl observes, it is the ego that invests “the being of the world . . . with existential validity.” Apart from consciousness, after all, the world is but a sweep and waste of energy unseen, unfelt, unheard, and untasted. Of poets, moreover, it may be said that they invest appearances doubly—not only with their mind and senses but with their imagination as well. Thus in “A Given Grace,” while it is Tomlinson’s eye that perceives and invests the two cups, it is his imagination that sees them floating in a mahogany pool, making them something other than they are. Facets of copiousness do indeed exist, but only in a dialectic between the self and the objective world.

It should be noted, however, that though Tomlinson has emphasized and done more than justice to the passive aspect of the self’s liaison with space, he has managed to strike other notes of his theme as well. In fact, however unequally these may be pressed, the chord of his theme stands complete. Thus in a fairly recent poem, “The Hill,” Tomlinson celebrates at last—quite as if he had never doubted it (as perhaps he had not)—consciousness as itself a grace, a grace of giving. The female figure climbing the hill named in the title is a type of the being-investing consciousness:

She
alone, unnamed (as it were),
in making her thought’s theme
that thrust and rise,
is bestowing a name . . .

A still more recent poem, “Adam,” provides a partial gloss:

We bring
To a kind of birth all we can name . . .

So the hill stands forth, rounds out into being, through the generosity of the girl’s attention. The grace of consciousness consists in its active intentionality: the girl *makes* her thought’s theme that thrust and rise. It is, after all then, stones that are inert. Indeed, a recoiling spring, Tomlinson perhaps goes too far when, in “The Hill,” he adds:

. . . do not call to her there:
let her go on,
whom the early sun
is climbing up with to the hill’s crown—
she, who did not make it, yet can make
the sun go down by coming down.

In this instance, of course, the “making” is only a manner of speaking. And yet here Tomlinson, for one rare and indulgent moment, encourages a solipsistic illusion. Putting by the domestic uniform it usually wears in his poems, the mind steps forward as almost a demi-urge, capable of making, by a simple withdrawal of attention, a heavenly body slide out of the sky.

Of course the true grace of any and every relationship is neither a giving nor a receiving, but an interchange and balance of the two. And toward this inclusive reciprocity Tomlinson may be said to have ripened. His early attempts to render it do not quite come off, and are, perhaps, not quite sincere, the self having been made too hollow a counter-weight to space. For example, in “Reflections” Tomlinson writes:

When we perceive, as keen
As the bridge itself, a bridge inlaying the darkness
Of smooth water, our delight acknowledges our debt—
To nature, from whom we choose . . .

But this would seem, rather, an instance of being chosen, and the declaration of self-determination does not convince. In some of the more recent poems, by contrast, the self seems genuinely erect before the world it experiences. Perhaps no statement and evocation—for the poem is both—of a pristine and yet not unsophisticated encounter with environment, the mind and space meeting as two equal and mysterious realities, could be at once more justly delicate and soberly beautiful than “Swimming Chenango Lake.” Here, as in “The Hill,” the anonymous human figure is a type of consciousness—not, in this case, however, of consciousness as the only proud Climber of Creation, but as Creation’s Swimmer, active in a dense, merciless element that “yet shows a kind of mercy sustaining him”:

. . . he has looked long enough, and now
Body must recall the eye to its dependence
As he scissors the waterscape apart
And sways it to tatters. Its coldness
Holding him to itself, he grants the grasp,
For to swim is also to take hold
On water’s meaning, to move in its embrace
And to be, between grasp and grasping free.

Not only the mutuality of two alien orders of being, but the simultaneous doing and undergoing in human experience, finds in this poem a crystal paradigm. So it is that, here and there in Tomlinson, the self has come into its own. And still more is this true in a few of the poems addressed to art. Despite his animadversions against Romanticism, Tomlinson has shown himself quite ready to think of art—especially music—as a spiritual flowering beyond anything offered by reality. Thus in “Flute Music” he notes:

Seeing and speaking we are two men:
The eye encloses as a window—a flute
Governs the land, its winter and its silence.

An early poem, "Flute Music" may perhaps be written off as an accident of ventriloquism—the result of a saturation in Wallace Stevens. But in a later and more impressive poem, "Ode to Arnold Schoenberg," the same theme sounds again. "Natural" meaning, according to the ode, does not suffice: art satisfies by pursuing "a more than common meaning." The "unfolded word" not only renews "the wintered tree" of previous art, but creates and cradles space, filling it with verdure. Is space ordinarily, then, a winter and a silence? Decisively, persuasively, the other poems answer "No." And yet the very fact that they were written bespeaks a painful and reluctant "Yes." The truth is that, beyond the discrepancy between what the poems say and what they are, yawns the still greater discrepancy between what they say and the fact that they are. Let them set nature before us as a sufficient spiritual end; still, their very existence as poetry, their very excess over nature, suggests that it is art, and not nature, that cures the ache of being. As both the beholder and the poet of nature, Tomlinson is the contemplative twice over; and just in that apparent superfluity, it seems, lies the fullness that the spirit requires. The poems confess that "those empty vessels" of space whet as much as they replenish; and what nature prompts, art concludes. Not so humble or subservient after all, the spirit relives its experiences, but recreates them from itself alone—positing, retrospectively, the space that once had nourished it. The hill it climbs becomes a subjective space, memory worked over by imagination. The essential confession of Tomlinson's art is, I believe, the essential confession of all art: that man is forced to be, and also needs to be, his own replenishment, perpetually renewed out of himself. So it is that, merely by existing, Tomlinson's poetry completes the real but limited truth—namely, the gratefulness of the world to the senses—whose thousand faces the poems seek out and draw.

□

Tomlinson, born in 1927, is still, it may be hoped, in mid-career. It is likely that he will deepen—indeed, he has already begun to do so; it is also likely that he will diversify his canon by throwing out more "sports," such as his recent, delightful poem on a personified "Rumour"; but it is not at all likely that he will alter his course. Nor, I think, is it desirable that he should; for Tomlinson strikes one as a poet who has finally won through to himself, and were he now to become someone else, it would seem almost an act of violence.

It was in his third volume, *Seeing is Believing* (1960), that Tomlinson first became both the distinct and the distinguished poet that he is today. His first volume, *Relations and Contraries* (1951), is haunted by Yeats and Blake, and though brilliant in patches, is not of much consequence. Tomlinson next moved a good deal nearer to himself in *The Necklace* (1955), which ranks, at the least, as a prologue to his real achievement. It zeroes in on the great Tomlinson theme, but vitiates it by a kind of enameled elegance; it has Stevens's epicurean quality, but not his saving gusto and bravura. Precious in both senses of the word, *The Necklace* is a book to be valued, but—too beautiful, too exquisite—not to feel at

home in: you must park your muddy shoes at the door. The very title of the third volume, *Seeing is Believing*, suggests a homely improvement over *The Necklace*. Here the earth takes on some of the earthiness that, after all, becomes it; and the manner is more gritty, rubs more familiarly with the world. In the subsequent two volumes, *A Peopled Landscape* (1962) and *American Scenes* (1966), the same manner—at once meticulous, prosaic, and refined (for Tomlinson's early elegance is roughened rather than lost)—is extended, as the titles indicate, to new subjects if not exactly to new themes. It is largely to the Tomlinson of these three volumes and of a fourth that is now, as I write, in the press, that I have addressed my remarks, and it is this Tomlinson who, as I began by declaring, has produced the most considerable body of poetry, to date, of any postwar English poet.

With the exception of Donald Davie—who, however, turns out more verse than poetry—no other English poet of Tomlinson's generation so strongly gives the impression of being an artist modestly but seriously at work—a poet equally intense about his message and his craft. Tomlinson's dedication is deep and unmistakable; and joined with his rare if quiet talent, it has created not only poetry of the highest quality, but success after success, in a period when the successes of more striking and seductive poets—Ted Hughes, R. S. Thomas, Philip Larkin—have seemed haphazard. Of all these gifted poets, it is Tomlinson who best survives the rub and wear of repeated readings; indeed, only Tomlinson's poetry improves under such treatment, like a fine wood under polish.

Part of the reason that Tomlinson tells slowly is that he has gone farther than any of his contemporaries—though Ted Hughes and Thomas Kinsella follow close—in outstaring and outmaneuvering facility. He waits in advance, as it were, of his readers, who, burdened with aging notions of what makes up poetic appeal, must labor to come abreast. In consequence, until Tomlinson is admired, he must be tolerated. His meticulous descriptions, so often hard to seize with the eye, his laconic meditations, his uncertain, demanding rhythms, his frustrations of expectations of various kinds—these one must struggle through as if through scrub, until one emerges, pleased and surprised, into the clearings that, in reality, the poems usually are. Because of both an increased dynamic clarity and a more definite music, Tomlinson's latest poems are probably his most readily accessible; they still, however, constitute a language to be learned, a flavor to be found, and to care about Tomlinson is to approve of this difficulty. Just as the later Yeats makes the early Yeats seem somewhat facile and obvious, so Tomlinson, asceticizing poetry as he has, gives one a new sense of what the art can be. His is the sort of modification of poetry that ultimately makes it incumbent on other poets to change, to make it new, to work passionately at their craft.

As for the sensibility that Tomlinson's poetry expresses, its value, I think, should be self-evident. The truth it has seized upon, indeed the truth that seems native to it, is the lesson implicit in art itself—that contemplation is the fulfillment of being. Of course we have always to know what needs to be changed; but we also do well to praise and reverence what is sufficient for the day and the vast design that, though it impinges on us, ultimately lies beyond our human agency.

For without this reverence we can scarcely be committed to the value of being; it is the secret of what Pasternak called "the talent for life." Tomlinson is certainly out of season to recall us to the life of the moment conceived as an end in itself; and yet it is just this unseasonableness that puts him in harmony with what is lasting in our relations with the world.

Charles Tomlinson

Three Bagatelles

THE NIGHT-TRAIN

composed
solely of carbon and soot-roses
freighted tight
with a million
miniscule statuettes
of La Notte (Night)
stumbles on
between unlit halts
till daylight begins
to bleed its jet
windows white, and the night-
train softly
discomposes, rose
on soot-rose,
to become—white
white white—
the snow-plough
that refuses to go.