The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson

by Ian Brinton



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Scope of Topic

This Bookmark provides a close reading of four of the poems of Charles Tomlinson and thence a window through which readers can see a way of entering Tomlinson's beautifully complex world.

BOOKS TO READ

The poems discussed are included in this Bookmark, and may also be found with the rest of Charles Tomlinson's poetic output in

Charles Tomlinson, *Collected Poems* (OUP 1985)

Charles Tomlinson, *Selected Poems* (OUP 1997)

NOTES

> 'When I first read one of Charles Tomlinson's poems, over ten years ago, I was struck by the powerful presence of an element which, later, I found in almost all his creative work, even in the most reflective and self-contemplating: the outer world, a presence at once constant and invisible.'
>
> *The Graphics of Charles Tomlinson: Black and White* by Octavio Paz.

> 'Charles Tomlinson is a poet of many places, or simply of one.'
>
> *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition* by Richard Swigg.

> 'Wedded to this outward frame of things
> In love.'
>
> *Home at Grasmere* by William Wordsworth.

Charles Tomlinson is one of the most prolific and important poets writing in English today. Much of the beauty and skill of his poetry is centred around his ability to allow his reader to perceive things. He doesn't just see the objects around us but sees through them in order to bring out a fine mixture of the personal and the eternal. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, written in 1790, William Blake said 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is – infinite' and when Charles Tomlinson sees with his mind, through his eyes, a world of infinite detail, beauty and relationship is discovered. The artist is the opener of doors and it is no accident that many of Tomlinson's poems use the images of gates, gaps, stone cromlechs, and the eye, itself a window to the soul, Janus-like reflecting upon the self through studying intricacies of form in the natural world. Another great twentieth-century poet of the self and the landscape, Basil Bunting, wrote that is worth dwelling on 'things' and that it was Wordsworth who made clear 'their worth and necessity'. Bunting went on to point out that 'suckling poets should be fed on Darwin till they are filled with the elegance of things seen or heard or touched'. Tomlinson's concern for accurate and precise awareness of the world is testimony to an eye that sees and believes.

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1. *Winter Encounters*

House and hollow; village and valley-side;
The ceaseless pairings, the interchange
In which the properties are constant
Resumes its winter starkness. The hedges' barbs
Are bared. Lengthened shadows
Intersecting, the fields seem parcelled smaller
As if by hedgerow within hedgerow. Meshed
Into neighbourhood by such shifting ties,
The house reposes, squarely upon its acre
Yet with softened angles, the responsive stone
Changeful beneath the changing light:
There is a riding-forth, a voyage impending
In this ruffled air, where all moves
Towards encounter. Inanimate of human,
The distinction fails in these brisk exchanges –
Say, merely, that the roof greets the cloud,
Or by the wall, sheltering its knot of talkers,
Encounter enacts itself in the conversation
May lean at ease, weighing the prospect of rain, tares
And their progress though a field of wheat –
These, though of moment in themselves,
Serve rather to articulate the sense
That having met, one meets with more
Than the words can witness. One feels behind
Into the intensity that bodies through them
Calmness within the wind, the warmth in cold.

(*Seeing is Believing*, 1960)

The 'encounters' here are a mixture of the permanent and the transient and are perhaps best captured by the phrase 'shifting ties'. Ties are those connections we feel towards each other as well as the way one thing is linked by complement to another. The solidity of 'House' is tied with the vaguer and more echoing 'hollow' and the human group of habitations in 'village' is tied with the landscape of 'valley-side'. The way everything is linked together in this poem is held by the pairing of one thing with another and although the 'properties are constant' the way the pairing is perceived is dependent upon the fluctuating and shifting quality of light and season. The tie of one thing to another is seen as a parcelling and a meshing, itself a criss-cross weave of connections. At the heart of the poem there is a steady permanence with the phrase 'The house reposes'. That reliable permanence of peaceful existence is delightfully caught by the relaxed meaning of repose and is given a solidity of structure by the geometrical presence of 'squarely upon its acre' and yet even this solidity is shown as dissoluble by the effect of 'the changing light' and one is aware that all the landscape is moving 'towards encounter'. Distinctions fail because of course they don't remain static and the ever-shifting encounters register life moving. However, even in this world of movement there are those reliable certainties which allow the mind to 'lean at ease' and one becomes aware of the attractive repetitive conversation between farmers as to the likelihood of rain, of the effects of tares growing wild in the field of wheat. 'Calmness' taking up from 'repose' has a settled strength which throughout the poetry of Charles Tomlinson becomes a matter of expressing a dearly held set of moral values, a code of mutual dependencies between man and his landscape which owe something to that measured world of urbane generosity which one comes across in Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' or 'To Sir Robert Wroth'.

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2. *The Farmer's Wife: at Foston's Ash*

Scent
from the apple-loft!
I smelt it and I saw
in thought
behind the oak
that cupboards all your wine
the store in maturation
webbed
and waiting.
There
we paused in talk
the labyrinth of lofts
above us and the stair
beneath, bound
for a labyrinth of cellars.
Everywhere
as darkness
leaned and loomed
the light was crossing it
or travelled through
the doors you opened
into rooms that view
your hens and herds
your cider-orchard.
Proud
you were
displaying these
inheritances
to an eye
as pleased as yours
and as familiar almost
with them. Mine
had known
had grown into the ways
that regulate such riches
and had seen
your husband's mother's day
and you had done
no violence to that recollection,
proving it
by present fact.
Distrust
that poet who must symbolize
your stair into
an analogue
of what was never there.
Fact
has its proper plenitude
that only time and tact
will show, renew.
It is enough
those steps should be
no more than what they were, that your
hospitable table
overlooked the cowshed.
A just geography

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completes itself
with such relations, where
beauty and stability can be
each other's equal.
But building is
a biding also
and I saw
one lack
among your store of blessings.
You had come
late into marriage
and your childlessness
was palpable
as we surveyed
the kitchen, where four unheraldic
sheep-dogs kept the floor
and seemed to want
their complement of children.
Not desolateness
changed the scene I left,
the house,
manning its hill,
the gabled bulk
still riding there
as though it could
command the crops
upwards
out of willing land;
and yet
it was as if
a doubt
within my mood
troubled the rock of its ancestral certitude.

(*A Peopled Landscape*, 1963)

Here Tomlinson richly celebrates a quality of life. The poem opens with the directness of 'Scent' with its punning movement: action and odour are mingled. Interestingly, the first edition has the word in capitals perhaps emphasising the directness even more. The pervading sense, with its Keatsian undertones of richness, becomes a door: a scent, 'smelt', leads to vision and the poet sees 'in thought' a still-life picture of the wine

webbed
and waiting.

There is a delightful play upon 'webbed' which refers not merely to the cobwebbed bottles but also to the labyrinth of rich associations which surround this farm and its heritage. The three-ply verse structure, inherited from Tomlinson's reading of the American William Carlos Williams, serves to slow the cadence so that there is a measured fullness, almost stateliness, enhanced by the alliteration in those two lines. This quiet measure is taken up then:

There
we paused in talk
the labyrinth of lofts

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above us and the stair
beneath, bound
for a labyrinth of cellars.

It is almost as though the poet and the woman stand at the centre of a web of meanings: above, the labyrinth of lofts suggest a network which is paralleled by the labyrinth of cellars. The apples, the scent of which opened the poem, find their counterpart in the cellars, a traditional home of cider or wine. This interlacing of meaning is given a further enrichment with the use of 'bound'. In the lines that follow the sense of a web is continued in 'leaned and loomed' where the alliteration echoes the criss-crossing of fabric on a loom and the light 'crossing it' reveals, when a door is opened, those elements of a farm which are an inheritance: hens, herd and cider-orchard. The value of this inheritance is noted by the poet who had seen the farm in the days of this woman's mother-in-law and who recognises that a tradition has been continued without resorting to the violence of a change. The 'just geography' which follows, the labyrinthine and webbed lines of which constitute a map of human conduct, is completed by the balancing of beauty and stability. This stability echoes the sense of tradition and inheritance which is taken up in the next few lines along with a note of foreboding. The word 'building' acts both as a noun and a verb, the latter suggesting a continuance of traditional values centred around the settled sense of 'biding'. However, with no children to take over the farm, the interweaving of human domestic value and the natural environment may be coming to an end. It is here that one might usefully look at Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' where we see nature's willingness to provide for man's sustenance:

Each banke doth yeeld thee conyes; and the topps
Fertile of wood, ASHORE and SYDNEY's copp's,
To crowne thy open table, doth provide
The purpled pheasant, with the speckled side:
The painted partrich lyes in every field,
And, for thy messe, is willing to be kill'd.
And if the highswolne Medway faile thy dish,
Thou hast thy ponds, that pay thee tribute fish,
Fat, aged carps, that runne into thy net.

This finds a counterpart in Tomlinson's poem where the house stands 'manning' its hill:

the gabled bulk
still riding there
as though it could
command the crops
upwards
out of willing land

However, whereas Penshurst's future is seen as safeguarded because of its lady's fruitfulness and the sense that her children will continue the inheritance of a true dwelling, this poem ends more bleakly and 'a doubt / within my mood' troubles the seemingly everlasting 'rock' of the farm's 'ancestral certitude'.

3. *At Stoke*

I have lived in a single landscape. Every tone
And turn have had for their ground
These beginnings in grey-black: a land

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Too handled to be primary – all the same,
The first in feeling. I thought it once
Too desolate, diminished and too tame
To be the foundation for anything. It straggles
A haggard valley and lets through
Discouraged greenesses, lights from a pond or two.
By ash-tips, or where the streets give out
In cindery in-betweens, the hills
Swell up and free of it to where, behind
The whole vapoury, patched battlefield,
The cows stand steaming in an acrid wind.
This place, the first to seize on my heart and eye,
Has been their hornbook and their history.

The Way In and Other Poems, 1974

Like Wordsworth's mountainous Lake District or more recently Bunting's Quaker Meeting House at Briggflatts, Tomlinson's connection with the Potteries and Stoke-on-Trent has been a cornerstone for his experiences. As Richard Swigg points out in his indispensable recent book, *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition*, the Stoke-on-Trent where Tomlinson grew up in the 1930s and 1940s has remained very deeply 'the first in feeling'. Despite its blocked horizons, it was the starting point for a verse more open than that of any other English poet of his generation to the varied world – to Italy, France, the British Isles, Canada, America and Mexico. Now that one can see the full range of the poetry produced by Tomlinson over nearly forty years, from 1951 to 1995, it becomes more evident that his internationalism has been not so much an escape from his native Midlands as a growing acknowledgement of its innate capacity to educate the mind, eye and feelings. "This is not a matter of nostalgia or class, but of primary realisations won, at first unconsciously, in a North Staffordshire town of 'grey-black' fact that tempered even as it sharpened the sensibility."

The fact that this land is 'the first in feeling' is the important point. Wordsworth's *Prelude* records how a landscape, explored as a boy, informs the growing mind of the poet and although Tomlinson writes that the area around Stoke may have appeared 'Too desolate, diminished and too tame / To be the foundation for anything' the vivid re-creation of the scene shows how the lessons learned so early from this landscape have lived with him. As readers we can see the place through the artistry of the poet. As the seventh line ends 'It straggles' we are held for a moment before being taken with the harshness of the next line's opening 'A haggard valley' into a world of exactness.

By ash-tips, or where the streets give out
In cindery in-betweens, the hills
Swell up and free of it . . .

Just as the growth of the poet's mind is dependent upon the landscape of his youth the releasing quality of the words 'Swell up and free' move us from the particular to an estimation of its importance. A 'hornbook' is a leaf of paper containing the alphabet (often, also, the ten digits, some elements of spelling, and the Lord's Prayer) protected by a thin plate of translucent horn, and mounted on a tablet of wood with a handle. Of course he has 'lived in a single landscape': lessons learned early remain with us for life.

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4. *Song*

To enter the real,
how far
must we feel beyond
the world in which we already are?

It is all here
but we are not. If we could see
and hear only half
the flawed symphony,

we might cease
nervously to infer
the intentions of
an unimaginable author

and stand,
senses and tongues unbound,
in the spaces of that land
our fathers brought us to,

where, what will be well
or not well,
only time
or time's undoing can tell.

(*The Door in the Wall*, 1992)

In this delightful later poem, so reminiscent of the reflective and quiet tone of Edward Thomas, Tomlinson makes us aware that although there is 'a single landscape', that can never be a question of parochialism but only of a quality of vision. Charles Tomlinson's landscapes include Italy, America, Mexico and Spain; they include translations from Antonio Machado, Octavio Paz and Attilio Bertolucci; they include his own paintings. In this 'Song' we can hear that reaching out for understanding of the world around us: that short second line which slows the process of the questioning. In the fourth verse we can similarly hear the realisation of where we are in the definite cadence of the opening two words which themselves allow our senses to become 'unbound' (another Blakean concept!). The quiet undertone of the paternoster in the reference to the 'spaces of that land / our fathers brought us to' is overlaid by the more impressive sense of tradition and history, the landscape of which has been charted so meticulously and movingly by Charles Tomlinson for half a century.

FURTHER READING

Two excellent short books of prose by Tomlinson to look out for are the Clark lectures of 1982, *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (CUP) with substantial and challenging essays on both Eliot and Pound, and the piece of autobiography, *Some Americans: A Personal Record* (Quantum Books, 1981).

CRITICISM

Richard Swigg, *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition* (Bucknell University Press, 1994)

Agenda Vol. 33 no. 2 (1995): a wide-ranging appreciation of Tomlinson's work including essays by Hugh Kenner, Michael Schmidt and Henry Gifford

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Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (RKP, 1973): an interesting piece of comparison between Tomlinson's vision of England and that of Philip Larkin

Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts* (Fulcrum Press, 1966)

Roy Fisher, *Poems 1955 - 1987* (OUP, 1988)

The Pelican Guide to English Literature, ed. Boris Ford (Penguin, 1983)

Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Blackwell, 1990)

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The English Association
University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 252 3982
Fax: 0116 252 2301
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

Potential authors are invited to contact the following at the address above:

Series Editor
Victor Hext

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