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**The Critical Study**

**CHARLES TOMLINSON: POET OF ENCOUNTER**

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## CHARLES TOMLINSON: POET OF ENCOUNTER

### 1. Introduction – the discovery of Tomlinson’s poetry

I first discovered Charles Tomlinson’s poetry in 1970 when reading the volumes *A Peopled Landscape* and *The Way of a World*.<sup>1</sup> To one whose reading of contemporary poetry had centred on Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, the poems contained in these books came as something of a surprise. They had a coolness and objectivity about them - the poet was allowing natural phenomena and objects their own ground, their own right of being, as it were. I noticed, too, how the poems frequently concentrated on relationships between phenomena and how those relationships changed with the shifting light, took on a new appearance: ‘an undulation of aspens along the slope / Is turning the wind to water and to light’.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, the shifting, changing world of phenomena that surrounds us is the only constant. In observing the world this way, the poet was free from the impositions of the dominating self. There was no thrusting forward of the poet, no ‘see here’ or ‘this is what I felt’. In these two volumes I had discovered a poet of encounter.

Tomlinson’s work does not explore his personal life - he does not place himself at the centre of his poetic universe. Preferring to engage the world about him, he explores its multifarious forms and shows us what it is like to encounter the world free of solipsism. He does not allow the private circumstances of his life to determine his response to what he sees. By observing and meditating upon phenomena, he turns the non-personal fact, the flux of the world, into a heightened quality of experience. In Tomlinson we have a genuine contemplative poet, one who eschews personality. His title *The Way of a World* is interesting here, with its use of the indefinite article, instead of the definitive ‘the’. Tomlinson’s themes are concerned with the way of a world, which include its chance interdependencies and contingencies. It is one man looking at *a* world, not the prescient poet with a complete – and controlling – overview of *the* world. Although I have long considered Eliot’s poetic use of the first person in a non-personal manner to be disingenuous, I nevertheless concur with his dictum about the need to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Tomlinson, *A Peopled Landscape* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963) and *The Way of a World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> ‘The View’, *The Way of a World*, p.16.

escape from personality.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not this is right, Tomlinson's poetry offers a detached response to the world, in the sense of standing apart, coupled with a welcome lack of self-regard. His poetry, free of self-awareness, exemplifies Eliot's point about poetry not being the expression of personality. This freedom from self-concern, from self-centredness, actually gives Tomlinson greater power by allowing his themes more freedom. He is able – as far as is possible in poetry - to let the world 'speak for itself', away from the narrowness of personality. As this essay will make clear, Tomlinson's themes are essentially celebratory and 'Edenic', even where he is dealing with environmental degradation and squalor, or pursuing difficult historical subjects, such as the French and Russian revolutions. It is possible to possess this Edenic vision and be critical at the same time; indeed, the urge to celebrate such a vision will probably, on occasion, encourage criticism of one's surroundings or events. An Edenic vision is not the same thing as a naïve vision.

In developing his themes throughout his many volumes, Tomlinson shows that by 'Eden' he means a quality of vision as well as habitation. He sees through, and not with the eye. This is quite unlike Hopkins, another Edenic poet with whom Tomlinson is compared in section 3. Whereas Hopkins (in his poetry, but not always in the Journals) sees everything interpreted by Christian dogma, Tomlinson allows phenomena as complete an independence as it is possible to achieve. His task is not one of possession or interpretation, a setting up of phenomena as examples of a larger meaning or significance. His coolness of tone and clarity of vision inform a poetics that is balanced and rational, but nonetheless passionate when the need arises. The knowing cynicism displayed by some of the 'Movement' poets is notably absent. In his *Lives of the Poets*, Michael Schmidt has noted how 'Tomlinson was hostile to what he saw as the narrowness of the Movement ... In poems like 'More Foreign Cities' [misquoted by Schmidt as 'No More Foreign Cities'] he answers that narrowness (one of Kingsley Amis's *obiter dicta*, that we want no more poems about foreign cities, was the provocation) from the exotic actuality of the wider world, of different cultures, climates

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<sup>3</sup> T S Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1960), p.58.

and lights'.<sup>4</sup> Part of Tomlinson's agenda, as it were, is to illustrate just how variegated and beautiful the world is, and Schmidt is right to point out the contrast between what Tomlinson was doing in his early volumes and the trend of English poetry at that time. Moreover, there is none of the violence in his work which seems about to break out of control in some of the poems of Plath and the earlier Hughes. Many contemporary poets, it seems to me, encounter the outside world only to seize on something as a parallel to their own violent or disturbed feelings. They are adept at *using* things for their own purposes, a practice I consider dubious. By comparison, I feel that, in Tomlinson, we have a poet whose patient observations amount to an originality of vision, a poet who has no need to refer continually to an all-knowing self. There is a distinct lack of proprietorial right over the observed - and a total lack of violence and hysteria. There is no doubt that Tomlinson's stance is moral in tone. He himself said 'The hardness of crystals, the facets of cut glass; but also the shifting of light, the energizing weather which is a result of the combination of sun and frost - these are the images for a certain mental climate, components for the moral landscape of my poetry in general'.<sup>5</sup> Although I endorse such sentiments - and I find his philosophy attractive - what stirs my immediate sympathies are the painterly qualities of his work and the variety of his forms and technique.

Tomlinson seems to realise his poems without weighty critical huffing and puffing and I noted that this may have been due to the influence of American poets such as Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, rather than Eliot, a poet-critic Tomlinson resisted, I was to discover later. So much seems to be achieved in so few words:

A whiter bone:  
the sea-voice  
in a multiple monody  
crowding towards that end.<sup>6</sup>

These lines from 'Sea Poem', written in 1957, clearly show the early influence of Carlos Williams. Tomlinson is a poet who obviously cares about the visual impression made by

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998) p. 749.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Tomlinson - Preface to 'Solo for a Glass Harmonica', *Poems in Folio 7* (San Francisco: Westerham, 1957), quoted on the dustcover of *Seeing is Believing* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> 'Sea Poem', *A Peopled Landscape*, p.33.

the shape of the poem on the page, the way poems can appear precisely drawn, carved out, sculpted – conveying the idea of poem as object. In *The Way of a World*, many poems have indented lines, which are used to heighten the effect of the movement of the verse:

How should the dreamer, on those slow  
Solidities, fix his wandering adagio,  
Seizing, bone-frail, blown  
Through the diaphanous air of their patrols,  
Shadows of fanfares, grails of melting snow?<sup>7</sup>

The indented line - an old form adapted to modern use – imposes structure but at the same time permits a fluidity of approach, its pattern facilitating the unity of content and form. Tomlinson uses a wide variety of forms and techniques, from the poems influenced by the Americans - Marianne Moore as well as Stevens and Carlos Williams – to fascinating prose poems which clearly reveal his appreciation of Mallarmé. Why is this interesting form used so infrequently? In the prose poem ‘Autumn’ there is an evocative image which tilts at Wagnerian romanticism:

Does Tristan lie dying, starred by the oak leaves? Tristan is  
on horseback, in search, squat, with narrow eyes, saddleless, burner of cities.

and the poem’s next paragraph continues:

The field mouse that fled from the blade, flattened by wheels,  
has dried into the shape of a leaf, a minute paper escutcheon whose  
tail is the leaf stalk.

How deftly and economically this transformation in death is achieved, so that the reader is hardly aware that the form is ostensibly prose. However, behind all these influences, underpinning the Americans and French symbolists such as Mallarmé, is the solid presence of the English Augustans, from Pope to Johnson. Tomlinson’s careful diction and balanced syntax owes a great deal to this period of English poetry:

Cars intersect the cardinal’s great dream,  
His parterres redesigned, gardens half-gone,  
Yet Pluto’s grasp still bruises Proserpine,  
Apollo still hunts Daphne’s flesh in stone,  
Where the Borghese statuary and trees command  
The ever-renewing city from their parkland.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Clouds’, *The Way of a World*, p.18.

The discovery of Tomlinson's poetry was a revelation, having much the same impact on me as the discovery of the art of Mondrian and Barbara Hepworth, and of Webern's music, years earlier. His work was always so fresh - it lacked monotony, avoided dry repetition. The lively engagement with the world, his 'poetry of encounter', helped me recharge my own perceptions, and it enabled me to see how I could bring such experience into my own work without smothering it with personality. Tomlinson showed me more about the marriage of content and form than any other contemporary poet.

## 2. Key Themes

The key themes that dominate Tomlinson's poetry arise from his distinctive quality of vision which is grounded in meticulous and painstaking observation. Throughout his work he is engaged in close observation of surfaces, densities and relationships between phenomena, and how appearances change with the changing of the light. It is no coincidence that he is also an artist and that two of his earliest influences were Ruskin and Cézanne. Water, clouds, snow, stone, the quality of light - all are themes found frequently in his poetry, which serve to underline a consistent and coherent philosophy. In using this phrase I am intending something specific here rather than as a weighty substitute for Tomlinson's 'attitude' or 'approach'. His poetry is marked throughout by a philosophy that is *phenomenological* and *anti-solipsistic*. Before going further, therefore, I shall say exactly what I mean by these terms when using them about Tomlinson.

As the title of my essay suggests, Tomlinson's poetry shows us what it is like to 'encounter' the world, how we, as subject, are able to enter fully into the world's 'otherness'. The entry on Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* is relevant, 'Merleau-Ponty emphasises the way in which our experience does not form a shut-off, private domain, but a way of being-in-the-world; we live our lives in the perceptual milieu of a human world ... irreducible to pure or private consciousness'.<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty came to mean a great deal to Tomlinson, although he anticipated much of the philosopher's views and concerns in his poetry before reading his essay *The Primacy*

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<sup>8</sup> 'In the Borghese Gardens' *The Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.239.

of *Perception* in 1964. Tomlinson focuses on the human encounter with the continual flux and play of phenomena, an encounter that minimises the intentional and rapacious self. He values the subject's *immersion* in natural phenomena, an immersion that involves a 'self-forgetting' as exemplified in his celebrated poem 'Swimming Chenango Lake'.<sup>10</sup> He is as far removed from the doctrine that only the self is knowable (solipsism), that only one's experience exists, as it is possible to be. This engagement, or *encounter* with the world is then both phenomenological and anti-solipsistic.

In pursuing his themes, Tomlinson explores in a deliberate and unhurried way his encounter with 'the way of a world'. As an observer, he is both 'objective' and involved. By 'objective' I mean that his poetry makes no proprietorial claim over phenomena – the world is self-sufficient and not here just for our use – but he is involved with what he sees through the very intensity of his observation.

Closely related to Tomlinson's themes is his extensive travelling. He worked and travelled in Italy in the early 50s and at the end of that decade travelled across the USA with his wife and daughter. In the early 60s he was Visiting Professor at the University of New Mexico. Since then he has never ceased to travel widely, often returning to the places of his former visits. These experiences have served to deepen and enrich his vision, and many of his principal poems relate directly to the Ligurian coast, Mexico, or the Arizona Desert. Tomlinson's philosophy of world-encounter, therefore, is not merely figurative, emanating from a narrow familiarity with his native landscape, but based on a first-hand knowledge of different countries and cultures.

One of the key words in Tomlinson's poetry is 'Eden' and this tells us – by its implying a fresh acceptance of the world - that he is essentially a poet of celebration, even where he is dealing with the neglect and dereliction of our environment. 'I see the world in all its variety as a cause for celebration, for exaltation. I detest the idea of symbols in a series of correspondences. Let things be what they are, and that is enough for me'.<sup>11</sup> When engaging with the world we articulate or 'name' what we see in

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<sup>10</sup> 'Swimming Chenango Lake', *The Way of a World*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Willard Spiegelman, interview with Charles Tomlinson, 'The Art of Poetry', *The Paris Review*, Vol. 149 (Winter, 1998) pp. 161-188 (p. 183).

describing our encounter. This is the theme of the poem 'Adam' from *The Way of a World*:<sup>12</sup>

Adam, on such a morning, named the beasts:  
It was before the sin. It is again.  
An openwork world of lights and ledges  
Stretches to the eyes' lip its cup:  
Flower-maned beasts, beasts of the cloud,  
Beasts of the unseen, green beasts  
Crowd forward to be named.

A fresh encounter with the objective world, one that is not dominated by a prescient and all-interpretative self, leads to a deepening of our humanity:

Are we the lords or limits  
Of this teeming horde? We bring  
To a kind of birth all we can name  
And, named, it echoes in us our being.

Although Adam recognises the 'perpetuity of Eden', he is not naïve. He knows that:

When you deny  
The virtue of this place, then you  
Will blame the wind or the wide air,  
Whatever cannot be mastered with a name,  
Mouth and unmaker, madman, Adam.

We, who so often 'deny the virtue of this place', despoil and destroy, make things 'gross with the poverty of utility', must recreate Eden, and this can be achieved only by seeing things afresh, and by relinquishing the claims of the ego.<sup>13</sup> Tomlinson is in no doubt that there is an 'ethic of perception': '... I wanted my poetry to take its ethic of perception from Cézanne, an ethic distrustful of the drama of personality ... an ethic where, by trusting to sensation, we enter being, and experience its primal fullness on terms other than those we dictate'.<sup>14</sup>

An authentic vision of Eden is created through freshness of perception. We must not create an Eden based on false nostalgia, on something entirely fictive – such as a pre-

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<sup>12</sup> 'Adam', *The Way of a World*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Ruin', *Seeing is Believing*, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> 'Poet as Painter', an address delivered 16 October 1975 by Charles Tomlinson to the Royal Society of Literature, published in *Charles Tomlinson, Man and Artist*, ed. by Kathleen O'Gorman (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988) p. 208.

industrial pastoral vision, for example. Eden is the here and now and Tomlinson reflects this in his poetry by giving rein to the play of phenomena. His approach is eidetic, recalling images from the natural world that are vividly clear. He is not concerned with an Eden stuffed with myth and symbol. Eden must also involve change. 'Is there no change of death in paradise? / Does ripe fruit never fall?' asks Wallace Stevens in 'Sunday Morning'.<sup>15</sup> Tomlinson, who was influenced by Stevens early on, recognises the potency of this question in his poem 'Eden' and makes it clear that it is a condition and not a static 'given': 'I have seen Eden. It is a light of place / As much as the place itself; not a face / Only, but the expression on that face'.<sup>16</sup> Change, for Tomlinson, is a welcome constant, the world changing through shifts in light, through changes in the weather.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is illustrated most clearly in Tomlinson's volume *The Way of a World*, which opens with 'Swimming Chenango Lake'. The poem concerns one of the poet's enduring themes, water. The swimmer:

reads the water's autumnal hesitations  
 A wealth of ways: it is jarred,  
 It is astir already despite its steadiness,  
 Where the first leaves at the first  
 Tremor of the morning air have dropped  
 Anticipating him, launching their imprints  
 Outwards in eccentric, overlapping circles.  
 There is a geometry of water  
 [...]
 But 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.

The swimmer not only engages with nature's 'otherness' through the element of water, he becomes an extension of its 'geometries' and at the mercy of its contingencies:

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.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Sunday Morning', *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955) p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> 'Eden', *The Way of a World*, p. 7.

In describing how the swimmer takes hold 'on water's meaning', Tomlinson produces a powerful image for a life that we both grasp and fail to grasp. 'Geometry' is an important word in this context, hinting at the wider design which draws the human figure into its pattern: 'There is a geometry of water'. In 'Rower', a parallel poem that appeared in Tomlinson's next volume, *Written on Water* in 1972, he says:

Out of the coherent chaos of a morning that refuses  
To declare itself, it [the tide] comes plunging in  
Expunging the track of his geometries.<sup>17</sup>

Both swimmer and rower engage with an element where the self is forgotten, absorbed by the water's geometries. If it is a 'plotless tale' it is because the self, although the initiator of action, is not the dominant feature, rather like Brueghel's picture of Icarus falling.<sup>18</sup>

And dominant features may not remain so for long, for all things change with the changing of light:

In the intensity of final light  
Deepening, dyeing, moss on the tree-trunks  
Glazes more green than the foliage they bear:  
Hills, then, have a way of taking fire  
To themselves ...<sup>19</sup>

In the poem 'Programme Note', from the volume *The Flood* (1981), he says 'But images lie - / Not the Ding-an-sich, but the light to see it by'.<sup>20</sup> The Ding-an-sich, the 'thing in itself' from Kantian metaphysics, cannot be known. It 'exists independently of us, unfiltered by the forms of sense'.<sup>21</sup> This relates to the transcendently ideal, or Kant's 'noumenon', things as they are in themselves, as opposed to things as they are for us, knowable by the sense (phenomena).<sup>22</sup> However, S. Körner has made the valuable point that Kant held 'that the *a priori* forms of perception are also subjective, and that we consequently cannot perceive the world as it is. We change it by perceiving it'.<sup>23</sup> The act of changing the world through our perception is fundamental to Tomlinson's poetry. He

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<sup>17</sup> 'Rower', *Written on Water* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> 'In the Intensity of Final Light', *The Shaft* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978) p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> 'Programme Note', *The Flood* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981) p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 106.

<sup>22</sup> Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 265.

<sup>23</sup> S Körner, *Kant* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1955) p. 38.

has even written the somewhat portentously named 'Four Kantian Lyrics'.<sup>24</sup> In the first Lyric, 'On a Theme of Pasternak', he says:

I stared, but not to seize  
the point of things: it was an incidental  
sharpness held me there,  
watching a sea of leaves  
put out the sun.

But if all Tomlinson's themes amounted to was an attempt to perceive phenomena objectively, a 'foundational aim of purging the mind of all presupposition so as to enable a return to "the things themselves"', then it would be a thin and dry poetry for his readership, even if the philosophy were consistent.<sup>25</sup> It is Tomlinson's delight in the natural world and his ability to portray vividly what he sees that bring his poetry to life.

Coupled with this delight is his abiding interest in history. Running throughout Tomlinson's historical poems is his central concern that a single-minded pursuit of an objective, an obsession driven by theory alone, one that excludes other people, contingencies, even objects, is finally a betrayal of life. This is illustrated by such poems as 'Assassin', which deals with the murder of Leon Trotsky, the 'French Revolution' poems and even by his delightful study of Descartes in the stove-heated room. We shall take the opportunity to examine these poems, along with some others, when we look at the development of themes in the following section.

These, then, are the key themes of Tomlinson's poetry, which offer a refreshingly objective view of the world, and a view of history that is balanced and driven by 'the play of the contingent and the unforeseen'.<sup>26</sup>

### **3. Development of Themes**

#### **3 (i) Eden: an Encounter with the World**

We have noted that 'Eden' is a key word in Tomlinson's poetry. I now wish to explore his concept of Eden further, and examine its thematic development more closely.

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<sup>24</sup> 'Four Kantian Lyrics', *A Peopled Landscape*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Clark, *Charles Tomlinson* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999), p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> H A L Fisher, *A History of Europe* (London: Collins, Fontana Library, 1960), p. 5.

The first use of the word Eden in Tomlinson's poetry occurs in 'Glass Grain', published in *Seeing is Believing*.<sup>27</sup> It is appropriate, because this poem shows traces of one of his early influences, Gerard Manley Hopkins, another Edenic poet, though one that possessed a very different philosophy from Tomlinson. A 'molten pane' of glass is examined closely, its 'Cast on the wall with red light burning through':

Like combed-down hair. Like weathered wood, where  
Line, running with, crowds on line and swaying  
Rounding each knot, yet still keeps keen  
The perfect parallel. Like ... in likes, what do we look for?  
Distinctions? That, but not that in sum. Think of the fugue's  
theme ...

The rhythmic pattern, the clustered stresses assisted by alliteration, remind the reader of Hopkins' almost breathless impatience. The use of internal rhyme – which becomes a hallmark of Tomlinson – helps speed up the rhythmic impact of the first line quoted here. I count five stresses in this line, the first three crowded into 'combed-down hair'. It reminds me slightly of the second line of Hopkins' sonnet 'Spring', which also achieves its effect by alliteration, 'When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush'<sup>28</sup>. But whereas Hopkins uses the sestet in the traditional sonnet form to ask a question and slow the poem down - 'What is all this juice and all this joy?' - Tomlinson is more daring, pulling up in the middle of a line: 'Like ... in likes, what do we look for?'. He is looking for parallels and, in so doing, brings in the musical parallel of the fugue, which reminds him of Eden returning. 'Eden comes round again, / the motive dips // Back to its shapely self'. In 'Spring', Hopkins answers his question by saying that 'all this juice and all this joy' is a 'strain' of 'Eden garden', but, as I have said, the philosophy is different from Tomlinson's. Hopkins' Eden is now fallen and needs redeeming:

What is all this juice and all this joy?  
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning  
In Eden garden. – Have, get, before it cloy,

Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning ...

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<sup>27</sup> 'Glass Grain', *Seeing is Believing*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> 'Spring', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 67.

For Tomlinson, however, Eden is continually present and in no need of redemption. In his poetry, Eden is a way of seeing and a way of knowing. We must trust to our 'Apprehensions':

Think of the fugue's theme:  
After inversions and divisions, doors  
That no keys can open, cornered conceits  
Apprehensions, all ways of knowledge past,  
Eden comes round again ...

Michael Kirkham has suggested that 'Eden' for Tomlinson is 'what Hopkins meant by *inscape*, an inner form that constitutes the sharply individuated 'self' of the thing'.<sup>29</sup> The poem 'Glass Grain' 'is about analogical thought'. I find this convincing. 'Eden', as 'a way of seeing and therefore a way of knowing', provides for our deeper encounter with the world. In the poem 'At Holwell Farm', also published in *Seeing is Believing*, Tomlinson says

Rooted in more than earth, to dwell  
Is to discern the Eden image, to grasp  
In a given place and guard it well ...<sup>30</sup>

Tomlinson must have realised how important the Eden motif was to become early on, when writing the poems for *Seeing is Believing* in the 1950s. 'Eden' is a metaphor for our encounter with the world, an encounter where the self is immersed so that we can 'experience its primal fullness on terms other than those we dictate'. In philosophical language, this encounter is anti-solipsistic. Hopkins, too, was far from being solipsistic, but Tomlinson's position differs totally from that of Hopkins, which allowed his delight in the natural world to be tainted by the Fall, where the natural world must await the second coming of Christ:

Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:  
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is ...<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Kirkham, *Passionate Intellect – The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999) pp. 108-9.

<sup>30</sup> 'At Holwell Farm', *Seeing is Believing*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection', *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* p. 105.

The overriding Christian dogma, which Hopkins sometimes allowed to swamp his poetry as in this example, probably acted as a brake on his influence over Tomlinson. However, Tomlinson was greatly attracted by the Journals. This point is well illustrated by Richard Swigg's observation that the Hopkins Journals are 'less bound by the urge to celebrate ...[He] is altogether more penetrative and tenacious in tracking the changes of phenomena'.<sup>32</sup> Swigg continues by saying that Tomlinson's 'sympathies were less with Hopkins's eccentricity ... than with the attentive adventure of the Journals ...'.<sup>33</sup>

In the previous section we saw that Adam, in his encounter with the world, articulates what he sees, as the beasts 'Crowd forward to be named.' In this poem, Tomlinson metaphorically encapsulates what happens when we cleanse our perceptions, look at things as though for the first time. Thus, Eden is a way of seeing which leads to knowledge. However, what happens, what can we do, if we have already 'denied the virtue of the place' – despoiled our surroundings and become blind to what we have done? Do we 'blame the wind or the wide air, / Whatever cannot be mastered with a name' – in other words, blame anyone or anything rather than ourselves? Hopkins would see the consequences of the Fall, and our sorrowful Eden in need of Christ's redemption – an option not open to Tomlinson. In a moment of insight, how can we find our way back and recapture the Edenic vision authentically? Tomlinson raises this question of 'dispossession' in the poem 'Eden' which comes immediately before 'Adam' in *The Way of a World*:

'Tell us', we say  
 'The way to Eden', but lost in the meagre  
 Streets of our dispossession, where  
 Shall we turn, when shall we put down  
 This insurrection of sorry roofs? Despair  
 of Eden is given, too: we earn  
 Neither its loss nor having. There is no  
 Bridge but the thread of patience, no way  
 But the will to wish back Eden ...

Tomlinson did not grow up in an idyllic rural landscape, but in the harsh industrial environment of Stoke-on-Trent, which probably made his appreciation of natural beauty

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Swigg, *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1994) p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 34.

all the more intense. He knew at first hand an 'insurrection of sorry roofs' and describes the environment of his boyhood in a later volume, *The Way In*:<sup>34</sup>

I have lived in a single landscape. Every tone  
And turn have had for their ground  
These beginnings in grey-black: a land  
Too handled to be primary – all the same,  
The first in feeling.<sup>35</sup>

One senses the struggle to maintain both clarity and integrity of vision in the very next poem printed in *The Way In*:

This milky sky of a dragging afternoon  
Seems a painter's sky – the vision of a lack,  
A thwarted possibility that broods  
On the meanness and exclusion.<sup>36</sup>

Angst and despair caused by a degraded and despoiled environment could have resulted in the poetry taking a very different turn, but Tomlinson is well aware of where these processes are leading him. In the title poem of the book, 'The Way In', he says

It will need more than talk and trees  
To coax a style from these disparities.

William Empson was one of those poets rejected by Tomlinson when searching for a suitable mode of expression for what he wanted to say, yet one wonders whether Empson's memorable line 'And learn a style from a despair' actually made an impression on him.<sup>37</sup>

So where did the encounter with the world take him? How does Tomlinson answer the question posed by our dispossession, our loss of 'Eden'? The single prose poem in *The Way In*, 'The Insistence of Things (paragraphs from a journal)', opens like this:

At the edge of conversations, uncompleting all acts of thought, looms the insistence of things which, waiting on our recognition, face us with our own death, for they are so completely what we are not. And thus we go on trying to read them, as if they were signs, or the embodied message of oracles. We remember how Orpheus drew voices from the stones.

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Tomlinson, *The Way In* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974)

<sup>35</sup> 'At Stoke', *The Way In*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> 'Hokusai on the Trent', *The Way In*, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> William Empson, 'This Last Pain', *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955) p. 32.

This is a striking development for Tomlinson. The use of the phrase 'face us with our own death' is, up to this point, quite unlike him. The darker mood is deepened throughout the volume. In the penultimate poem 'Melody', which bears the subtitle *Song is being* (*Gesang Ist Dasein*) from Rilke, Tomlinson says that 'Song' (i.e., art)

is the measure, rather,  
Of being's spread and height, the moonrise  
That tips and touches, recovering from the night  
The lost hill-lines, the sleeping prospects:  
It is the will to exchange the graph of pain  
Acknowledged, charted and repeated, for the range  
Of an unpredicted terrain.<sup>38</sup>

A way to perpetuate the Eden vision then is to 'exchange the graph of pain ... for the range / Of an unpredicted terrain'. In other words, to move on, to accept change, for change is the only constant - there must be a 'change of death in paradise', to answer Stevens' question.

This acceptance of change while staying true to the Eden vision is not wishful thinking. Tomlinson believes in keeping his senses clear but remains aware of the cost, the 'graph of pain' that so marks human life. As Michael Kirkham says when writing about the volume *The Way In*, 'The way of 'daily discontent' is the poet's 'way in' to the modern city, the 'way in' to our daily condition'.<sup>39</sup> A further recognition of this is found in the next volume *The Shaft*, in the poem 'In Arden', which opens with these lines:

Arden is not Eden, but Eden's rhyme:  
Time spent in Arden is time at risk  
And place, also: for Arden lies under threat:  
Ownership will get what it can for Arden's trees<sup>40</sup>

But all things change and fuse. The poem ends

... it brims its surfaces  
In runes and hidden rhymes, in chords and keys  
Where Adam, Eden, Arden run together  
And time itself must beat to the cadence of this river.

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<sup>38</sup> 'Melody', *The Way In*, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Kirkham, *Passionate Intellect*, p.211.

<sup>40</sup> 'In Arden', *The Shaft* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978) p. 47.

In these times of heightened consciousness about environmental damage and the risks humankind has brought to nature, it would be quite easy to read Tomlinson's poetry, to absorb his vision of Eden, using the benefit of hindsight. But this would be a gross misreading. First, because Tomlinson is the least likely of poets to write with a consistent 'political' message in mind, to engage in what would virtually be propaganda. Second, his broad and encompassing view of the world was expressed in volumes that were written a long time before there was a proper awareness of the widespread and long-lasting effects of pollution and environmental degradation. He closes the early poem 'On the Hall at Stowey' with

Five centuries. And we? What we had not  
Made ugly, we had laid waste –  
Left (I should say) the office to nature  
Whose blind battery, best fitted to perform it  
Outdoes us, completes by persistence  
All that our negligence fails in.<sup>41</sup>

Caring for where we live, striking roots, keeping our vision clear – these are the elements that compose Tomlinson's Edenic vision. This anti-solipsistic view of the world allows the self, the ego, only limited jurisdiction, where we have few rights of possession.

Before leaving this section, and given the numerous volumes of poetry published by Tomlinson over the last 40 years, it is worth asking if he has responded more recently in any way to the threat to the environment, if his later poetry does carry, if not a 'message', then a recognition. The answer is yes, it does, but only incidentally. In the volume *The Return*, published 1987, there is a sequence of four poems under the title which gives the book its name.<sup>42</sup> He is visiting an old friend, Paolo Bertolani, who first appeared in 'Up at La Serra', a poem published in *A Peopled Landscape* (1963). It was an impoverished district and in the earlier poem his socialist friend is unemployed, writing poetry. In the 1987 sequence, Bertolani's wife is dead. Tomlinson reflects at the close of the second poem, 'Between Serra and Rocchetta':

We have lived into a time we shall not cure.  
But climbing to La Rocchetta, let there be

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<sup>41</sup> 'On the Hall at Stowey', *Seeing is Believing*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Return', *The Return* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987) p. 7.

One sole regret to cross our path today,  
That she, who tempered your beginning pen  
Will never take this road with us again  
Or hear, now, the full gamut of your mastery.

'We have lived into a time we shall not cure'. This lament, although generalised and abstracted, is immediately given a personal context for his poet-friend and is notably Wordsworthian in its reach and tone.

In Tomlinson's latest volume, *The Vineyard Above the Sea*, he opens the poem 'Shorelines' with the irony of 'the certainty of land':

Here where the certainty of land begins,  
The ocean writes and rewrites its margins:  
You can read along the rippling of the sand  
The script advancing in its cursive hand ...

The poem is written in a single unbroken block and is structured in rhyming couplets, until the last (seventeenth) line is reached which, in having no rhyme, possesses greater impact:

The approaching breath of ocean that you hear  
Says that the world won't end in ice or fire,  
But lost to the tidal trickeries of water.<sup>43</sup>

And so the reader is left with the 'tidal trickeries of water' for which there is no satisfying, concluding rhyme.

### 3 (ii) Histories

Tomlinson's poems with historical/political themes are concentrated in two volumes, *The Way of a World* (1969), and *The Shaft* (1978), with just one published in *Written on Water* (1972). The volumes are not consecutive – *The Way In*, Tomlinson's most 'industrial' volume, was published in 1974, that is, between *Written on Water* and *The Shaft*. What appears to have happened is that Tomlinson turned to historical/political themes in the late 60s and early 70s and turned to them again at the end of that decade after revisiting Stoke-on-Trent in *The Way In*.

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<sup>43</sup> 'Shorelines', *The Vineyard Above the Sea* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1999) p. 36.

The foundational philosophy behind these poems does not differ from that which lies behind Tomlinson's perceptual, or observant, poems of phenomena. This may be summarised by the epigraph at the beginning of *The Way of a World* by Jorge Guillén from *Perfección*:

Y tanto se da el presente  
Que el pie caminante siente  
La integridad del planeta

which a friend has translated:

And the present is so strongly felt  
that the walking foot  
senses the wholeness of the world.<sup>44</sup>

This vein of thought also underpins his historical poems. When looking at the key themes of Tomlinson's work, I referred to his treatment of historical subjects, to how a single-minded pursuit of an objective, to the point of obsession where people, contingencies and even objects are excluded, is a betrayal of life.

In the poem 'Assassin', Trotsky's murderer, Mercader, is suffering from an extreme form of solipsism when he commits the crime and, at the very moment of the action, realises his awful mistake, 'objects betray me, / Objects are my judge'.<sup>45</sup> Taking Mercader's voice, Tomlinson speaks in the past tense in the first four stanzas, before the act is committed. In a defensive soliloquy Mercader says how he foresaw blood and how Trotsky's room had 'shrunk to a paperweight of glass and he / To the centre and prisoner of its transparency'. Fully confident, he sees Trotsky at his work, 'He rasped the pages. I knew too well / The details of that head'. Mercader sees himself as an instrument of history and, as he strikes, he switches into the first person, which is retained throughout the rest of the poem, 'I strike. I am the future and my blow / Will have it now'. Far from being a determinant factor of the future, however, he is both blind and deaf. He is prepared for the blood that must issue from Trotsky – 'This I can bear' he says – 'But papers / Snow to the ground with a whispered roar'. This is his undoing, the claiming of his humanity by the outside world of objects, the flux of phenomena. It is not a cataclysmic event that stops him short and thrusts self-knowledge upon him but a mere

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<sup>44</sup> Translated by Maxine Smith.

<sup>45</sup> 'Assassin', *The Way of a World*, p. 10.

sifting of papers to the ground, a casual drift that in other circumstances a secretary or clerk might correct in a moment. The sound of these papers recalls to him a more balanced and objective view of life, restores in him a just perspective, but it is too late, Trotsky is staggering about, dying horribly, and Mercader sees into the full horror of what he has done:

A dying body that refuses death,  
He lurches against me in his warmth and weight,  
As if my arm's length blow  
Had transmitted and spent its strength  
Through blood and bone; and I, spectred,  
The body that rose against me were my own.

This has a slightly awkward syntax but is extremely powerful. As the dying Trotsky lurches against his assassin, Mercader feels as though his arm, in striking, had cost him all his strength. He feels 'spectred' as though it were he, in fact, that was dying. The assassin realises his error in a sudden encounter with the world:

But the weight of a world unsteadies at my feet  
And I fall into the lime and contaminations  
Of contingency; into hands, looks, time.

And we may recall that it was into lime pits that murderers were traditionally buried following execution.

If Mercader could not succeed in grasping and controlling the future by murder, nor can we transform the future by music and rite. The attempt to do so by the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin is examined in the poem 'Prometheus', also published in *The Way of a World*.<sup>46</sup> As the poet listens to the music on the radio the weather outside is in sympathy with its apocalyptic vision:

Summer thunder darkens, and its climbing  
Cumulae [*sic*], disowning our scale in the zenith,  
Electrify this music: the evening is falling apart.  
Castles-in-air; on earth: green, livid fire.  
The radio simmers with static to the strains  
Of this mock last-day of nature and of art.

'Mock' is a telling adjective here and the whole passage is heavy with irony. In the first line of the next stanza Tomlinson observes 'We have lived through apocalypse too long'

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<sup>46</sup> 'Prometheus', *The Way of a World*, p. 4.

– there is no humanity or mercy in this overreaching. Recognising the composer's designs to be ineffective, he speaks to Scriabin thus:

Alexander Nikolayevitch, the events  
Were less merciful than your mob of instruments.

Scriabin's orchestral clamour is a foretaste of the 'mob' that thinks it can overturn an established order and rule in its stead. Tomlinson's radio reception continues to suffer from the effects of the volatile weather conditions, 'Too many drowning voices cram this waveband' he says and he is mindful of those whose lives have been wrecked in the wake of a 'strong man':

In the beginning, the strong man reigns:  
Trotsky, was it not then you brought yourself  
To judgement and to execution, when you forgot  
Where terror rules, justice turns arbitrary?  
Chromatic Prometheus, myth of fire,  
It is history topples you in the zenith.

[ ... ]

Scriabin, Blok, men of extremes,  
History treads out the music of your dreams  
Through blood ...

And Scriabin's piece singularly fails to transform the world:

Hard edges of the houses press  
On the after-music senses, and refuse to burn,  
Where an ice-cream van circulates the estate  
Playing Greensleeves ...

The contingencies of weather also play a decisive part in 'Descartes and the Stove'.<sup>47</sup> Without seeming to belittle or diminish Descartes' achievement, Tomlinson shows how such a single-minded approach can exclude all that adds variety, texture and interest to life. Tomlinson considers the winter landscape at dusk outside Descartes' door:

Now  
The last blaze of the day was changing  
All white to yellow, filling  
With bluish shade the slots and spoors  
Where, once again, badger and fox would wind

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<sup>47</sup> 'Descartes and the Stove', *The Way of a World*, p. 14.

Through the phosphorescence. All leaned  
Into that frigid burning ...

Tomlinson, using one of his favourite devices, is working by means of contrast, not just in the phrasing, as in 'frigid burning', but in the larger comparison of the frozen beauty of the landscape with Descartes, sitting, thinking and not noticing it. Descartes, in seeking his theory of knowledge, locates certainty in the self. What Tomlinson points to is an instance, a crucial moment in the history of Western philosophy, when a 'great mind' singularly fails to encounter the world:

The great mind  
Sat with his back to the unreasoning wind  
And doubted ...

The story of Niccolò Machiavelli may have attracted Tomlinson because of the variance between the legend – Machiavelli was portrayed as diabolical in the Renaissance – and the actual life of the man. He found himself on the wrong side of the political fence when the Medici returned to Florence in 1512 and was imprisoned and tortured. Subsequently released, he retired to his farm at San Casciano from where 'he could just see the buildings of Florence ... and wonder what was going on'.<sup>48</sup> In his poem 'Machiavelli in Exile' Tomlinson portrays Machiavelli as a man of wisdom, living quietly among 'Such men as endure history and not those / Who make it'.<sup>49</sup> After the abrupt end to political life and following his personal misfortunes, Machiavelli is moving 'into the impersonal and communal'.<sup>50</sup>

Where, for his day's companions, he must choose  
Such men as endure history and not those  
Who make it: with their shadows magnified  
And spread behind them, butcher, publican,  
Miller, and baker quarrel at their cards ...

Here, a mature and wise encounter is born of suffering and patience:

that he whom history forsook  
Should for no random principle forsake  
Its truth's contingency, his last defeat  
And victory, no battle, but a book.

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<sup>48</sup> George Bull in his introduction to Machiavelli's *The Prince* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961) p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> 'Machiavelli in Exile', *Written on Water*, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> Swigg, *Objective Tradition*, p. 209.

And we note how the key word 'contingency' is employed here, as a property of truth. Whereas Trotsky's assassin Mercader failed miserably, falling into 'the lime and contaminations / Of contingency', Machiavelli's action is timely as he embraces 'truth's contingency', turning defeat into victory.

The first section of Tomlinson's volume *The Shaft* (1978) is 'Histories' which contains 11 poems. Three of these concern the French Revolution, two on the death of Jean-Paul Marat and a third on Georges Jacques Danton. The three poems are the most significant in the section and are among the strongest in the volume.

The first poem is called 'Charlotte Corday' and the second 'Marat Dead', being 'The Version of Jacques Louis David'. Readers may recall the painting by David, which features in both poems. In 'Charlotte Corday', Marat is transposed directly from David's canvas: 'The towelled head next, the huge batrachian mouth ...' As he moves 'aside to write her victims down' she moves in for the kill. Like Mercader in 'Assassin', Corday strikes with a single blow:

She struck from above. One thrust. Her whole  
Intent and innocence directing it  
To breach through flesh and enter where it must,

Tomlinson points to her innocence, to a girl misled into fanaticism. Both Corday and Mercader believed that their action would help control the future. The poems make an interesting pair. Corday commits her murder in the knowledge that she will probably be caught, judged and sent to the guillotine:

- You think that you have killed all Marats off?  
- I think perhaps such men are now afraid.  
The blade hung in its grooves. How should she know  
The Terror still to come, as she was led  
Red-smocked from gaol out into evening's red?

The reddening sky at sunset and her red execution smock not only foretell the spilling of her blood, but the appalling blood lust of 'The Terror still to come'. She thought that she would bring peace – 'It was to have brought peace, that faultless blow'. It was not to be:

She loomed by in the cart beneath the eye  
Of Danton, Desmoulins and Robespierre,  
Heads in a rabble fecund with insult ...

Both Mercader and Corday were unable to see the consequences of their action.

Tomlinson closes the poem with

But the blade  
Inherited the future now and she  
Entered a darkness where no irony  
Seeps through to move the pity of her shade.

In 'Marat Dead', Tomlinson stays close to David's picture:

They look like fact, the bath, the wall, the knife,  
The splintered packing-case that served as table;  
The linen could be priced by any housewife,  
As could the weapon too, but not the sable  
Suggestion here that colours all we feel ...

In this poem, Tomlinson offers a different slant on the theme of Charlotte Corday. Corday entered Marat's house with a message designed to trick him so that she would gain admittance, 'Citizen, it is enough that I should be / A most unhappy woman to have right / To your benevolence'. Marat accepts the note, so dramatically displayed in the David painting, and is murdered as a consequence. Tomlinson pounces on this use of language intended to deceive:

Words in this painting victimize us all:  
Tyro or tyrant, neither shall evade  
Such weapons: reader, you grow rational  
And miss those sharp intentions that have preyed  
On trusting literacy here ...

Marat, in the painting, is no longer the tyrant:

She worked in blood, and paint absolves the man,  
And in a bathtub laves all previous stains:  
She is the dark and absence in the plan  
And he a love of justice that remains.  
Who was more deft, the painter or the girl?  
Marat's best monument with this began,  
That all her presence here's a truthless scrawl.

Although 'Marat Dead' shares the same subject as 'Charlotte Corday', the two poems are very different. As I have said, 'Charlotte Corday' is really a companion piece to the earlier 'Assassin'. 'Marat Dead' is concerned with the threat we face when language is

deliberately misused and it is also about the transforming properties of art – Marat is absolved by paint.

In 'For Danton', Tomlinson is once more viewing a 'man of history' in the context of time and contingency. The poem starts with an almost Heraclitean question:

Who is the man that stands against this bridge  
And thinks that he and not the river advances?

The river always advances and is never the same, echoing Heraclitus' statement that you cannot step into the same river twice. Water is a strong theme in Tomlinson's work. He used to go fishing a great deal when young and once said that 'he who looks into water, and into the changing world of perception that water represents, looks into the heart of time'.<sup>51</sup> This important personal statement is thematically representative of much of his poetry.

In the autumn of 1793, the year he had instituted the Revolutionary Tribunal, Danton went back to his birthplace, Arcis-sur-Aube. Later, in November, he was arrested, tried and condemned. Tomlinson follows with a second question, 'Can he not hear the links of consequence / Chiming his life away? Water is time'. Danton 'fronts the parapet / Drinking the present with unguarded sense'.

The stream comes on. Its music deafens him  
To other sounds, to past and future wrong  
The beat is regular beneath that song.  
He hears it in a pulse that is his own.

Tomlinson is portraying Danton as a man beginning to enjoy the wholeness of life - 'seeings, savourings', the grape harvest - and elicits our sympathies. Danton's late encounter with the world is delicately handled. We are watching, at last, a broad humanity developing, but it is too late, 'He must come back to rule and Robespierre'. He 'has no time to live' his 'lingered, snatched maturity':

Before he catches in the waterchime  
The measure and the chain a death began,  
And fate that loves the symmetry of rhyme  
Will spring the trap whose teeth must have a man.

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<sup>51</sup> Tomlinson, *Poet as Painter*, p. 208.

A self-consciousness is noticeable in this poem, and also in 'Marat Dead', as if the poet himself were somehow complicit. Tomlinson shows a human sympathy with these two giant figures of the French Revolution – Marat and Danton – both destroyed, one already murdered and the other facing imminent death.

In looking at these seven historical-political poems, I have tried to bring out Tomlinson's common theme, that the wholeness of life is to be found in an active encounter with phenomena. Objects, changes in weather, the shifting waters of ocean and river – all have their place among the wider contingencies of truth and should not be wilfully ignored. Sometimes this is lightly done, as in *Descartes and the Stove*, where the philosopher is merely self-absorbed, and sometimes a crank (however gifted) like Scriabin is at work, furiously trying to transform the whole world by music and rite. However, darker and more harmful forces are often released, such as those let loose during the French Revolution. Here, the obsessive pursuit of an ideological intent is destructive of human life and values.

### **3 (iii) Influences and Development of Technique**

We have already discussed how Tomlinson was influenced early on by Gerard Manley Hopkins, although probably more by the Journals than by the poetry, as noted by Richard Swigg. Tomlinson obviously recognised in Hopkins a writer to whom precise observation and noting of detail was crucial to his way of thinking, to the way he responded to the natural world. The affinity with Hopkins then related more to the need for objective observation than it did to the actual poetry. Apart from the felt presence of Hopkins in 'Glass Grain' there are very few poems which betray his direct influence.

The question of influences can be difficult and even misleading. An apparently straightforward account of the influences on Tomlinson's poetry could be made along the following lines. He had the poet-critic Donald Davie as his tutor in his final year at Cambridge (1948) and shared Davie's enthusiasm for eighteenth-century verse,

particularly the Late Augustans. One could therefore reasonably expect his early poetry to show influences from this period, if not in the tight verse forms exactly, then in balanced 'Augustan' sentence structures and perhaps in moral judgements. Then in 1959 (a year after the volume *Seeing is Believing* was first published in the United States) he and his young family travelled across the USA on a fellowship from the Institute of International Education. During his time there he met William Carlos Williams, Yvor Winters and Marianne Moore. This experience would have made a considerable impression on him and his poetry could have been expected to reflect the influence of the Americans.

Such a consideration of Tomlinson's influences would be a clear-cut and straightforward matter but the dating of his poems shows the question of influence to be more complex. His first volume *The Necklace* (not counting the youthful pamphlet *Relations and Contraries* in 1951) was published in 1955, with a valuable Introduction by Davie.<sup>52</sup> Towards the end of the Introduction, Davie says 'Tomlinson's morality is sternly traditional, classical, almost Augustan', and the epithet 'Augustan', with justification, has stuck. However, some of the poems in the 1955 volume (four years before Tomlinson went to America) show the powerful influence that Wallace Stevens had on his poetry at this time. Some of the titles themselves - such as 'Nine Variations in a Chinese Winter Setting' and 'Eight Observations on the Nature of Eternity' - are revealing in their reminiscence of such Stevens poems as 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'. Tomlinson acknowledges this in his Author's Preface to the 1966 reprint of the volume where he pays a deft homage to Stevens, 'The conditions of the realisation lay in according objects their own existence. This was what complicated the debt to Wallace Stevens: the poems were both a dialogue with and a departure from him'.<sup>53</sup> In the poem 'The Art of Poetry' Tomlinson plays with Stevens' poem 'The Snow Man':

There must be nothing  
Superfluous, nothing which is not elegant  
And nothing which is if it is merely that.

This relates to the following lines from Stevens' poem:

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<sup>52</sup> Donald Davie, Introduction to *The Necklace* (London, Oxford University Press, 1966 reprint), pp. xii-xvi.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Tomlinson, Preface to the 1966 edition of *The Necklace* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.<sup>54</sup>

*The Necklace* even carries an epigraph from Stevens' *The Auroras of Autumn*: 'The Necklace is a carving not a kiss'.<sup>55</sup>

Tomlinson's discovery of the poetry of Wallace Stevens, therefore, predated his visit to America and meeting up with American poets. In the interview with Willard Spiegelman, Tomlinson says, 'So I finally discovered "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and that became my talisman and my way out of the romantic jungle'.<sup>56</sup>

It was about this time that Tomlinson also discovered the poetry of Marianne Moore: 'I discovered Marianne Moore's 'The Jerboa' that 'makes fern-seed / foot-prints with kangaroo speed' and started to see what rhyming might be'.

A later volume that clearly shows the influence of William Carlos Williams throughout is *A Peopled Landscape* (1963). This contains a number of poems using Williams' three-ply line, including 'Sea Poem' which, however, was written in 1957, just three years after Williams invented the form in his volume *Desert Music* in 1954 (*Journey to Love*, which also uses the three-ply line, followed in 1955). This means that, as a reader, Tomlinson must have been among the first to appreciate the deployment of the three-ply line on this side of the Atlantic. By the time he went to America on his fellowship he was well prepared to meet not only Carlos Williams, but the other American poets as well.

What I wish to argue here is that Tomlinson perceived eighteenth-century verse – especially the poetry of the second half of the century – as possessing qualities that could lead a way out of the 'romantic jungle'. He absorbed the Augustan values of reticence and control and achieved a balance of syntax, as demonstrated by the longer poems in *Seeing is Believing*. He then shortened the line, and reflected 'consciously on the use of rhyme'.<sup>57</sup> But it is in the volume *The Way of a World* (1969) that all these things are first brought together in a powerful, mature poetry which Tomlinson has mastered, and where there is no hint of any undigested influence.

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<sup>54</sup> 'The Snow Man', *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955) p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> 'The Auroras of Autumn', *Ibid.* p. 411.

<sup>56</sup> Spiegelman, 'The Art of Poetry', p. 182.

In speaking of his volume *Seeing is Believing*, which followed *The Necklace*, Tomlinson said ‘To carry the longer poems of *Seeing is Believing*, I invented a mainly four-stress line that would work me free of the track of the iambic pentameter though permit me to modulate towards that if I must. This has lasted me for many years and gave the formal scaffolding for political poems like the one on the death of Trotsky, ‘Assassin’’.<sup>58</sup> I believe this to be Tomlinson’s central statement about the way he crafts his poems. ‘The line is what matters: it must be supple and it must be lucid’ he said, with reference to another early American influence, the Ezra Pound of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*.<sup>59</sup>

Tomlinson was first influenced by the Augustans while studying under Donald Davie – Davie’s book of criticism *Articulate Energy* certainly had an impact – and he then used the stylistic and formal practices of American poets to shape and free up his verse, although the Augustan attributes of balance and control never left him. In talking to Richard Swigg, Tomlinson said ‘So what critics call ‘Augustanism’ in my case is probably the attempt to situate all I’ve learned from romanticism – and this means not just Wagner and Mahler, but Wordsworth, Coleridge (particularly the conversation poems), Constable, Turner – within reach of a distrust of the ego ... you want an awareness of things that is both passionate and balanced.’<sup>60</sup> And one could add Ruskin to this list.

A line of stylistic influence and thinking can be traced clearly through the first five volumes (excluding the pamphlet *Relations and Contraries*):

1955	<i>The Necklace</i>	(Wallace Stevens)
1958/60	<i>Seeing is Believing</i>	(Augustans, Marianne Moore and also the French Symbolists)
1963	<i>A Peopled Landscape</i>	(Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams)
1966	<i>American Scenes</i>	(Use of shortened lines, development of dialogue, the Objectivists and Black Mountain poets)

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p. 181.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Tomlinson at Sixty’, an interview with Richard Swigg in 1987, recorded at the University of Keele and published in *Charles Tomlinson, Man and Artist*, Ed. by Kathleen O’Gorman (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988) p. 231.

Looking back, Julian Stannard has said that *The Way of a World* is Tomlinson's 'most emphatically phenomenological of collections'.<sup>61</sup> The closing of the first poem in *The Way of a World*, 'Swimming Chenango Lake', demonstrates how well Tomlinson's 'formal scaffolding' works, The swimmer is moving

Frogwise across the all but penetrable element.  
Human, he fronts it and, human, he draws back  
From the interior cold, the mercilessness  
That yet shows a kind of mercy sustaining him.  
The last sun of the year is drying his skin  
Above a surface a mere mosaic of tiny shatterings,  
Where a wind is unscaping all images in the flowing obsidian,  
The going-elsewhere of ripples incessantly shaping.<sup>62</sup>

It comes as a surprise to realise that the lines are *not* in iambic pentameters. It has the feel, the sense of that particular ictus, although Tomlinson's flexibility of line perhaps gives the game away. The poetry is relaxed but formal at the same time, a consummate marriage of content and form.

Tomlinson says that '... bit by bit [I] did the hard work ... Once the diction of these poems appeared as heightened speech, then I could somehow begin to span the gap between the conceptual qualities of Augustan poetry and the kinetic qualities of a Hopkins, without losing my way in the over-clotted effects that could have been a real danger from that quarter, and evidently were for Dylan Thomas (another influence to avoid, as I soon realised)'.<sup>63</sup> It was Davie who awoke him 'to what he already knew – the power of the sustained sentence in Wordsworth, Coleridge ...'.<sup>64</sup> And Wordsworth is the great link, the last of the Late Augustans and the first of the nature-poet Romantics. Interestingly enough, Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' is the last poem in

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<sup>61</sup> Julian Stannard, Review: 'Charles Tomlinson: *The Vineyard Above the Sea*', (London: Agenda, vol. 37 No.4), p. 73

<sup>62</sup> 'Swimming Chenango Lake', *The Way of a World*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>63</sup> Spiegelman interview, *The Paris Review*, Winter, 1998, p. 182.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. 175.

*The Late Augustans*, an anthology edited by Davie with assistance from Tomlinson in 1958.<sup>65</sup>

I agree with Paul Mariani's comment in his essay, 'Tomlinson's Use of the Williams Triad' when he says 'Paradoxically, then, it may well be Tomlinson's contact with American free verse that has helped him to 'hear' the voices of his own English fathers – Marvell and Pope and Wordsworth – more clearly'.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Perhaps one reason why Tomlinson has not received the critical acclaim (and relative popularity) that is his due is because of the presence of the American influence in his work. In general, English readers have been slow to take American poets to heart, especially the High Modernists. American poets that have found favour have tended to be either those that were distinctly non-modernist such as Robert Frost or 'Confessional', such as Robert Lowell, to name the obvious examples. (Sylvia Plath is a special case, both because she adopted England as her home country and because she too was a Confessional.) Even the larger bookshops reveal a paucity of volumes by William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, never mind Charles Olson, George Oppen or Robert Creeley. And among Tomlinson's English forebears, the Late Augustans are hardly riding on a crest of high esteem with the reading public, particularly Johnson and Cowper (a poet much admired by Tomlinson). Tomlinson's poetry may be too refined an instrument to appeal to a broader public at present. It lacks sensation, anecdotal prurience and the luridly confessional. It is not the stuff of which cults are made. The public will always be more familiar with Hughes' *Birthday Letters* than with *The Vineyard Above the Sea*.

Coupled with this neglect by the public is the more damning neglect of critics. Tomlinson has hardly even managed to stir up hostility, although we have had the occasional unthinking remark such as 'I cannot see the difference between these poems

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<sup>65</sup> *The Late Augustans*, Ed. Donald Davie (London: Heinemann, 1958) p. 99.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Mariani 'Tomlinson's Use of the Williams Triad' in *Charles Tomlinson, Man and Artist*, ed. by Kathleen O'Gorman (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988) p. 57.

and prose'.<sup>67</sup> This paper is of course an effort to help correct the balance, an attempt to bring Tomlinson's work to the attention of those who are concerned with poetry. In 'A Doggerel for My Seventieth Birthday' Tomlinson wonders wryly whether 'critics will grow kinder to my verse, / Since they can see the shadow of the hearse / Creeping across my pages ...'<sup>68</sup> However, Stannard thinks that the recent critical works on Tomlinson (those by Swigg, Kirkham and Clark) suggest that this poet 'is at last coming home to a more positive reception'. One can only hope so. Let Tomlinson himself have the last word:

### Verse

The pause at the turn, however infinitesimal,  
Is there to ensure we do not run ahead  
Of the heartbeat, the knowledge in the blood  
That will not be hurried beyond a present good  
Before it has fed on it. Where are you going  
And towards what beyond, asks the pulsation  
To which everything is bound: time to return  
To the paced-out path for those who raced it.<sup>69</sup>

## 5. Coda – how Charles Tomlinson has influenced my own work

I started experimenting with poetic forms used by Tomlinson – such as the indented line - in the early 70s. What attracted me to his verse was its variety and immediacy. As well as the indented line, there was Carlos Williams' three-ply line and the long thin 'strips' of accentual verse, with internal rhyme used at important stressed points. Only a few of my early poems were at all successful, however (this is not a reflection on using Tomlinson's forms but more a comment on learning my craft). Some of the poems, such as 'Sufficiency – a letter' and 'Italian Garden', found their way into a published volume.<sup>70</sup>

In the mid-80s, I experimented with some prose poems, using a similar form to those used by Tomlinson in section IV of *The Way of a World*. The art of Vermeer and

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<sup>67</sup> C. Day Lewis quoted in 'Words and water', an interview with Charles Tomlinson by Alan Ross in *Charles Tomlinson, Man and Artist*, ed. by Kathleen O'Gorman (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988) p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> Stannard review: 'Charles Tomlinson: *The Vineyard Above the Sea*', *Agenda*, vol. 37, No.4, p. 78.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Tomlinson, 'Verse', *The Vineyard Above the Sea* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999) p. 9.

other Dutch genre artists interests me greatly, so I attempted what I called 'Vermeer Music'. It opens with a phrase which was to form the second part of the title of my first collection, *The Appetites of Morning, the Languor of Afternoons*:

The languor of afternoons. We call this silence poise ... the accumulating dust, the interminable sunlight.<sup>71</sup>

Tomlinson's 'Oppositions (debate with Mallarmé)' showed me what could be achieved by using the suggestiveness and 'distances' of objects, without going over completely to an esoteric symbolism:

If the skull is a memento mori, it is also a room, whose contained space is wordlessly resonant with the steps that might cross it, to command the vista out of its empty eyes.<sup>72</sup>

I wanted to suggest the quality of stillness and silence that one finds in Vermeer's paintings, and the sudden evocation of childhood, using a similar approach to that used by Tomlinson in 'Oppositions':

These are the rooms of childhood. While talking to the servants we finger the coolness of the jug, follow with exactitude the line of its lip; surreptitiously we plait the tapestry tassels beneath the table.  
Stillness. Years pass. What is the allegory? What is the code? The days of our lives are a string of necklace beads, each picked into light.

Readings of Baudelaire and Mallarmé obviously widened my knowledge and added to my appreciation of what could be achieved, but I still considered that Tomlinson had mastered this form in English, a form that was not being attempted much elsewhere.

Tomlinson's use of Carlos Williams' three-ply line also impressed me. I thought that it could be used to mirror the physical movement of the poem's subject and so I wrote 'The Double Bass Player' (published in *The Appetites of Morning*). It is intended to be a light-hearted look at the musician's task:

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<sup>70</sup> Alex Smith, *Kayserling* (Salcombe: Oversteps Books, 1997), p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> Alex Smith, *The Appetites of Morning, the Languor of Afternoons*: (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1996), p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> 'Oppositions (debate with Mallarmé)', *The Way of a World*, p. 49.

A Herculean task  
  begun: this dancer  
      or wrestler  
with slender bow  
  has come to tame and coax  
      subterranean depths ...

The poem has probably as much of Williams in it as it does of Tomlinson, although it follows my own phrasing and method. Despite having written very few poems in this form I intend to add to their number.

On looking at poems written during the M. Phil. course at Glamorgan, I can see several which still show the influence of Tomlinson through certain mannerisms. This does not surprise me because I still prefer, overall, a cool, non-personal approach to poetry. There are exceptions to this, of course, and one does not write poetry to precepts, but as a general statement, I prefer poetry that is observant and analytical rather than emotional. Examples of poems which seem to me to have something about them of Tomlinson, and were written during the course at Glamorgan, are 'Monk, playing', 'Doorways', 'Agraphia', 'At the Glazier's' and 'Thirteen Deer at Littlebury Green'.

'Monk, playing' attempts to capture the movement of the jazz pianist's music in a similar way to how Tomlinson evokes the movement of a street procession in his poem 'Portobello Carnival 1973', although I was unaware of this at the time of writing.<sup>73</sup>

Tomlinson starts his poem thus:

A malleability  
                  a precision  
with which they keep the beat  
                                  their bodies  
overflowing to the house-doors  
                                  dancing

'Monk, playing' starts with

feet  
                                  are paddles  
                                  jabbing

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<sup>73</sup> 'Portobello Carnival 1973', *The Shaft* p. 15.

and steering

tormented rapids

I hoped that anyone who has listened to Monk, let alone actually watching him, would know what I was getting at.

My poem 'Doorways' is a description of some remarkable postcards I bought while on holiday in Rhodes. They are each a photograph of a doorway or entrance, caught in the brilliant colours of the Aegean sunshine. The fourth 'postcard' seems to me to have something of the Tomlinson flavour about it:

Plain doors and windows are cut-out shapes  
across the scabbed surface of the wall –  
the street door is pegged wide open.  
Geraniums placed by whitened steps offer  
minimal colour, their heraldic red  
summoning the absent occupier  
who will return at any moment.

'Agraphia' and 'At the Glazier's' are indebted to Tomlinson in different ways. The former uses an indented line and alliteration for its effect, describing a poplar tree caught in a heavy wind. It occurred to me that the 'leaves' of the tree were voicing its grief, but lacked words, hence the 'agraphia' of the title. I end the poem with

It flexes, like a girl shaking  
her hair free in the shower,  
then returns to upright  
only to be twisted  
in a parabolic wave, a gush  
of grief flying through the leaves  
of its book without words.

'At the Glazier's' was written because I once queued at a glazier's and became fascinated by the rituals of caution that accompanied the glass cutting:

They move without speaking,  
crunching splinters  
in Doc Marten boots  
with a steady tread.

Their arms extended,  
they hold onto nothing  
but a blue-tinged edge  
caught by the light;

Carrying glass panes with outstretched arms was clearly dangerous and I observed that:

... it is a form of slow dance  
in which they engage  
as they cross the shop  
meeting face to face,

a ritual observance  
forbidding touch,  
pane moving clockwise  
parallel to pane.

Without making any claims for the poem, I think it has something of the steady, watchful eye of Tomlinson about it, perhaps even a hint of the 'Augustan' atmosphere that some of his poems so markedly possess.

Finally, 'Thirteen Deer at Littlebury Green' may not appear to be particularly influenced by Tomlinson but I think that it would not have been written in this way had I not read Tomlinson in-depth over all these years. My attempt at a lightness of touch and the use of the distant metaphor 'heraldic' both point to lessons learned from the poet:

It is heraldic: the raised heads,  
the deliberate planting  
of each foot. They share  
a vigilance, a sprung tension

and shift as one, leaving nothing to chance.

Looking forward, I shall continue in my attempt to write poems that accord phenomena and objects their own space and presence, without the imposition of an omniscient, over-interpreting self. However, I am under no illusion that poetry can be purely objective – the poet is too powerful an agent for that – but I shall at least strive for a clarity of vision, an equivalent of the artist being true to his/her materials. To my mind, this represents 'artistic' truth or authenticity for, as Tomlinson says in 'A Meditation on John Constable', 'The artist lies / For the improvement of truth. Believe him'.<sup>74</sup>

Various verse forms continue to interest me, forms which – to my ear – help convey the cadences of contemporary speech and syntax. For this reason, I find syllabics

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<sup>74</sup> 'A Meditation on John Constable' *Seeing is Believing*, p. 29.

and accentual verse more suitable. I shall continue to use the indented line, with alliteration and assonance informing the rhythmic flow – the ictus – of the poem, and will also use internal rhyme, with the occasional end rhyme, to highlight pivotal or structural points. I find that the indented line provides both a supple flexibility – affording a quick change of ‘voice’ where needed - as well as the formal structure for a poem.

I hope to continue to write poems about landscapes, natural phenomena and music and also on historical subjects (several of my poems in the volume *Histories* owe a debt to Tomlinson).<sup>75</sup> When I do write on historical themes, the personages involved will not be at the mercy of some spurious historical inevitability, mere pawns of determinism. The personages that feature in my work will continue to be creatures of contingency that fall ‘into hands, looks, time’.<sup>76</sup>

*Alex Smith*

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<sup>75</sup> Anne Born and Alex Smith, *Histories*: (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1998).

<sup>76</sup> ‘Assassin’, *The Way of a World*, p.10.

## **Appendix A**

### **Poems by Charles Tomlinson**

## **The Art of Poetry**

At first, the mind feels bruised.  
The light makes white holes through the black foliage  
Or mist hides everything that is not itself.

But how shall we say so? –  
The fact being, that when the truth is not good enough  
We exaggerate. Proportions

Matter. It is difficult to get them right.  
There must be nothing  
Superfluous, nothing which is not elegant  
And nothing which is if it is merely that.

This green twilight has violet borders.

Yellow butterflies  
Nervously transferring themselves  
From scarlet to bronze flowers  
Disappear as the evening appears.

...

*(The Necklace)*

## Glass Grain

The glare goes down. The metal of a molten pane  
Cast on the wall with red light burning through,  
Holds in its firm, disordered square, the shifting strands  
The glass conceals, till (splitting sun) it dances  
Lanterns in lanes of light its own streaked image.  
Like combed-down hair. Like weathered wood, where  
Line, running with, crowds' on line and swaying  
Rounding each knot, yet still keeps keen  
The perfect parallel. Like ... in likes, what do we look for?  
Distinctions? That, but not that in sum. Think of the fugue's theme  
After inversions and divisions, doors  
That no keys can open, cornered conceits  
Apprehensions, all ways of knowledge past,  
Eden comes round again, the motive dips  
Back to its shapely self, its naked nature  
Clothed by comparison alone – related. We ask  
No less, watching suggestions that a beam selects  
From wood, from water, from a muslin-weave,  
Swerving across our window, on our wall  
(Transparency teased out) the grain of glass.

...

*(Seeing is Believing)*

## On a Theme of Pasternak

*(The first of Four Kantian Lyrics)*

I stared, but not to seize  
the point of things: it was an incidental  
sharpness held me there,  
watching a sea of leaves  
put out the sun. Spark  
by spark, they drew it slowly down  
sifting the hoard in glints  
and pinheads. Rents of space  
threatened to let it through  
but, no – at once, the same  
necessity that tamed the sky  
to a single burning tone  
would drag it deeper. Light  
was suddenly beneath the mass  
and silhouette of skirts and fringes,  
shrinking to a glow on grass.  
With dark, a breeze comes in  
sends staggering the branches'  
blackened ledges till they rear  
recoiling. And now the trees are there  
no longer, one can hear it climb  
repeatedly their sullen hill  
of leaves, rake and rouse them,  
then their gathered tide  
set floating all the house on air.

...

*(A Peopled Landscape)*

## Sea Poem

A whiter bone:  
the sea-voice  
in a multiple monody  
crowding towards that end.  
It is as if  
the transparencies of sound  
composing such whiteness  
disposed many layers  
with a sole movement  
of the various surface,  
the depths, bottle-glass green  
the bed, swaying  
like a fault in the atmosphere, each  
shift  
with its separate whisper, each whisper  
a breath of that singleness  
that 'moves together  
if it moves at all',  
and its movement is ceaseless,  
and to one end –  
the grinding  
a whiter bone.

...

*(A Peopled Landscape)*

## **Fruit, for Sculpture**

A half pear, cool  
finial finger  
of lute-shaped  
abiding fruit.

To eat it?  
Who would stir  
the white, lit  
fallen citadel of its flesh

Without (first)  
the thirst of mind and hand  
had slaked on  
the perfect collusion  
of light, knife and tone?

Only  
in Eden, does there  
ripen a pear of stone.

...

*(American Scenes)*

## Swimming Chenango Lake

Winter will bar the swimmer soon.  
He reads the water's autumnal hesitations  
A wealth of ways: it is jarred,  
It is astir already despite its steadiness,  
Where the first leaves at the first  
Tremor of the morning air have dropped  
Anticipating him, launching their imprints  
Outwards in eccentric, overlapping circles.  
There is a geometry of water, for this  
Squares off the clouds' redundances  
And sets them floating in a nether atmosphere  
All angles and elongations: every tree  
Appears a cypress as it stretches there  
And every bush that shows the season,  
A shaft of fire. It is a geometry and not  
A fantasia of distorting forms, but each  
Liquid variation answerable to the theme  
It makes away from, plays before:  
It is a consistency, the grain of the pulsating flow.  
But 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.  
He reaches in-and-through to that space  
The body is heir to, making a where  
In water, a possession to be relinquished  
Willingly at each stroke. The image he has torn  
Flows-to behind him, healing itself,  
Lifting and lengthening, splayed like the feathers  
Down an immense wing whose darkening spread  
Shadows his solitariness: alone, he is unnamed  
By this baptism, where only Chenango bears a name  
In a lost language he begins to construe –  
A speech of densities and derisions, of half-  
Replies to the questions his body must frame  
Frogwise across the all but penetrable element.  
Human, he fronts it and, human, he draws back  
From the interior cold, the mercilessness  
That yet shows a kind of mercy sustaining him.  
The last sun of the year is drying his skin

Above a surface a mere mosaic of tiny shatterings,  
Where a wind is unscaping all images in the flowing obsidian,  
The going-elsewhere of ripples incessantly shaping.

...

*(The Way of a World)*

## Assassin

The rattle in Trotsky's throat and his wild boar's moans  
*Piedra de Sol*

Blood I foresaw. I had put by  
The distractions of the retina, the eye  
That like a child must be fed and comforted  
With patterns, recognitions. The room  
Had shrunk to a paperweight of glass and he  
To the centre and prisoner of its transparency.

He rasped pages. I knew too well  
The details of that head. I wiped  
Clean the glance and saw  
Only his vulnerableness. Under my quivering  
There was an ease, save for that starched insistence  
While paper snapped and crackled as in October air.

Sound drove out sight. We inhabited together  
One placeless cell. I must put down  
This rage of the ear for discrimination, its absurd  
Dwelling on ripples, liquidities, fact  
Fastening on the nerve gigantic paper burrs.  
The gate of history is straiter than eye's or ear's.

In imagination, I had driven the spike  
Down and through. The skull had sagged in its blood.  
The grip, the glance – stained but firm –  
Held all at its proper distance and now hold  
This autumnal hallucination of white leaves  
From burying purpose in a storm of sibilance.

I strike. I am the future and my blow  
Will have it now. If lightning froze  
It would hover as here, the room  
Riding in the crest of the moment's wave,  
In the deed's time, the deed's transfiguration  
And as if that wave would never again recede.

The blood wells. Prepared for this  
    This I can bear. But papers  
Snow to the ground with a whispered roar:  
    The voice, cleaving their crescendo, is his  
Voice, and his the animal cry  
    That has me then by the roots of the hair.

Fleshed in that sound, objects betray me,  
    Objects are my judge: the table and its shadow,  
Desk and chair, the ground a pressure  
    Telling me where it is that I stand  
Before wall and window-light:  
    Mesh of the curtain, wood, metal, flesh:

A dying body that refuses death,  
    He lurches against me in his warmth and weight,  
As if my arm's length blow  
    Had transmitted and spent its strength  
Through blood and bone; and I, spectred,  
    The body that rose against me were my own.

Woven from the hair of that bent head,  
    The thread that I had grasped unlabyrinthed all –  
Tightrope of history and necessity –  
    But the weight of a world unsteadies my feet  
And I fall into the lime and contaminations  
    Of contingency; into hands, looks, time.

...

*(The Way of a World)*

## Eden

I have seen Eden. It is a light of place  
As much as the place itself; not a face  
Only, but the expression on that face: the gift  
Of forms constellates cliff and stones:  
The wind is hurrying the clouds past,  
And the clouds as they flee, ravelling-out  
Shadow a salute where the thorn's barb  
Catches the tossed, unroving sack  
That echoes their flight. And the same  
Wind stirs in the thicket of the lines  
In Eden's wood, the radial avenues  
Of light there, copious enough  
To draft a city from. Eden  
Is given one, and the clairvoyant gift  
Withdrawn, 'Tell us,' we say  
'The way to Eden', but lost in the meagre  
Streets of our dispossession, where  
Shall we turn, when shall we put down  
This insurrection of sorry roofs? Despair  
Of Eden is given, too: we earn  
Neither its loss nor having. There is no  
Bridge but the thread of patience, no way  
But the will to wish back Eden, this leaning  
To stand against the persuasions of a wind  
That rings with its meaninglessness where it sang its meaning.

...

*(The Way of a World)*

## Descartes and the Stove

Thrusting its armoury of hot delight,  
Its negroid belly at him, how the whole  
Contraption threatened to melt him  
Into recognition. Outside, the snow  
Starkened all that snow was not –  
The bough's nerve-net, angles and gables  
Denting the brilliant hoods of it. The foot-print  
He had left on entering, had turned  
To a firm dull gloss, and the chill  
Lined it with a fur of frost. Now  
The last blaze of day was changing  
All white to yellow, filling  
With bluish shade the slots and spoors  
Where, once again, badger and fox would wind  
Through the phosphorescence. All leaned  
Into that frigid burning, corded tight  
By the lightlines as the slow sun drew  
Away and down. The shadow, now,  
Defined no longer: it filled, then overflowed  
Each fault in snow, dragged everything  
Into its own anonymity of blue  
Becoming black. The great mind  
Sat with his back to the unreasoning wind  
And doubted, doubted at his ear  
The patter of ash and, beyond, the snow-bound farms,  
Flora of flame and iron contingency  
And the moist reciprocation of his palms.

...

*(The Way of a World)*

## Autumn

The civility of nature overthrown, the badger must fight in the roofless colosseum of the burning woods.

The birds are in flight, and the sky is in flight, raced by as many clouds as there are waves breaking the lakes beneath it.

Does Tristan lie dying, starred by the oak leaves? Tristan is on horseback, in search, squat, with narrow eyes, saddleless, burner of cities.

The field mouse that fled from the blade, flattened by wheels, has dried into the shape of a leaf, a minute paper escutcheon whose tail is the leaf stalk.

Yet the worm still gathers its rings together and releases them into motion ... You too must freeze.

The horses of Attila scatter the shed foliage under the splashed flags of a camp in transit.

A truce: the first rime has not etched the last oak-shocks; the rivermist floats back from the alders and the sun pauses there.

Peace? There will be no peace until the fragility of the mosquito is overcome and the spirals of the infusoria turn to glass in the crystal pond.

These greens are the solace of lakes under a sun which corrodes. They are memorials not to be hoarded.

There will be a truce, but not the truce of the rime with the oak leaf, the mist with the alders, the rust with the sorrel stalk or of the flute with cold.

It will endure? It will endure as long as the frost.

...

*(The Way of a World)*

## Machiavelli in Exile

A man is watching down the sun. All day,  
Exploring the stone sinew of the hills,  
For his every predilection it has asked  
A Roman reason of him. And he has tried  
To give one, tied to a dwindling patrimony  
And the pain of exile. His guileless guile,  
Trusted by nobody, he is self-betrayed.

And yet, for all that, Borgia shall be praised  
Who moved and, moving, saved by sudden action:  
The Florentines, despite their words, will have  
Faction and the blood that comes of faction:  
The work of France and Spain others begin –  
Let him who says so exercise his powers  
With dice and backgammon at a country inn;

Where, for his day's companions, he must choose  
Such men as endure history and not those  
Who make it: with their shadows, magnified  
And spread behind them, butcher, publican,  
Miller, and baker quarrel at their cards,  
And heights and hill-roads all around are filled  
With voices of gods who do not know they're gods

Nor are they, save for a trick of light and sound:  
Their fate is bound by their own sleeping wills.  
Though lateness shadows all that's left to do,  
*Tarde non furon mai grazie divine:*  
The sun that lit his mind now lights the page  
At which he reads and words, hard-won, assuage  
What chance and character have brought him to.

He enters that courtly ancient company  
Of men whose reasons may be asked, and he,  
Released from tedium, poverty, and threat,  
Lives in the light of possibility:  
Their words are warm with it, yet tempered by  
The memory of its opposite, else too soon  
Hopes are a mob that wrangle for the moon.

Adversity puts his own pen in hand,  
First torture, then neglect bringing to bear  
The style and vigilance which may perfect  
A prince, that he whom history forsook  
Should for no random principle forsake  
Its truth's contingency, his last defeat  
And victory, no battle, but a book.

...

*Tarde non furon mai grazie divine: Divine graces were never late.*

*(Written on Water)*

## The Way In

The needle-point's swaying reminder  
Teeters at thirty, and the flexed foot  
Keeps it there. Kerb-side signs  
For demolitions and new detours,  
A propped pub, a corner lopped, all  
Bridle the pressures that guide the needle.

I thought I knew this place, this face  
A little worn, a little homely.  
But the look that shadows softened  
And the light could grace, keeps flowing away from me  
In daily change; its features, rendered down,  
Collapse expressionless, and the entire town

Sways in the fume of the pyre. Even the new  
And mannerless high risers tilt and wobble  
Behind the deformations of acrid heat –  
A century's lath and rafters. Bulldozers  
Gobble a street up, but already a future seethes  
As if it had waited in the crevices:

A race in transit, a nomad hierarchy:  
Cargoes of debris out of these ruins fill  
Their buckled prams; their trucks and hand-carts wait  
To claim the dismantlings of a neighbourhood –  
All that a grimy care from wastage gleans,  
From scrap-iron down to heaps of magazines.

Slowing, I see the faces of a pair  
Behind their load: he shoves and she  
Trails after him, a sexagenarian Eve,  
Their punishment to number every hair  
Of what remains. Their clothes come of their trade –  
They wear the cast-offs of a lost decade.

The place had failed them anyhow, and their pale  
Absorption staring past this time  
And dusty space we occupy together,  
Gazes the new blocks down – not built for them;  
But what they are looking at they do not see.  
No Eve, but mindless Mnemosyne,

She is our lady of the nameless metals, of things  
No hand has made, and no machine  
Has cut to a nicety that takes the mark  
Of clean intention – at best, the guardian  
Of all that our daily contact stales and fades,  
Rusty cages and lampless lampshades.

Perhaps those who have climbed into their towers  
Will eye it all differently, the city spread  
In unforeseen configurations, and living with this,  
Will find that civility I can only miss – and yet  
It will need more than talk and trees  
To coax a style from these disparities.

The needle-point's swaying reminder  
Teeters: I go with uncongealing traffic now  
Out onto the cantilevered road, window on window  
Sucked backwards at the level of my wheels.  
Is it patience or anger most renders the will keen?  
This is a daily discontent. This is the way in.

...

*(The Way In)*

## Melody

Song is being ... *Rilke*

That phrase in the head – that snatch repeated  
    Could have led nowhere, but for the will  
To hear the consequence of it – the reply  
    To ‘I am dying, I am denying, I, I ...’  
A shred of the self, an unease: its pleasure  
    Would not please the hearer long who heard it  
Only within: a violin carries it  
    To surrounding air, letting it meet  
That first and silent pressure, come  
    To test its setting out, its hovering  
Over a spun doubt, its own questioning.  
    Through a second instrument it flows,  
But a third goes counter to it, and a fourth  
    Derides both the pride and pains  
It has taken to stay proud; and forces,  
    Frees it to a singing strength  
Until that thread of song, defied,  
    Gathering a tributary power, must find  
The river course, winding in which  
    It can outgo itself – can lose  
Not the reality of pain, but that sense  
    Of sequestration: the myth of no future  
And no ancestry save ache. *Gesang*  
    *Ist Dasein?* Song is the measure, rather,  
Of being’s spread and height, the moonrise  
    That tips and touches, recovering from the night  
The lost hill-lines, the sleeping prospects:  
    It is the will to exchange the graph of pain  
Acknowledged, charted and repeated, for the range  
    Of an unpredicted terrain. Each phrase  
Now follows the undulations of slope, rise  
    And drop, released along generous contours  
And curving towards a sea where  
    The play of light across the dark immensity,  
Moves in a shimmering completeness. The tide  
    Ridden in unexulting quiet, rides  
Up against the craft that sails it  
    Tossed and tried, through the groundswell  
To the dense calm of unfathomable silence.

...

**Marat Dead**

The Version of Jacques Louis David  
*Citoyen, il suffit que je sois bien malheureuse  
pour avoir droit à votre bienveillance.*

Charlotte Corday to Marat

They look like fact, the bath, the wall, the knife,  
The splintered packing-case that served as table;  
The linen could be priced by any housewife,  
As could the weapon too, but not the sable  
Suggestion here that colours all we feel  
And animates this death-scene from the life  
With red, brown, green reflections on the real.

Scaled back to such austerity, each tone  
Now sensuous with sadness, would persuade  
That in the calm the ugliness has gone  
From the vast mouth and from the swaddled head;  
And death that worked this metamorphosis  
Has left behind no effigy of stone  
But wrought an amorous languor with its kiss.

‘Citizen, it is enough that I should be  
A most unhappy woman to have right  
To your benevolence’: the heeded plea  
Lies on his desk, a patch of blooded white,  
Taking the eye beside the reddening bath,  
And single-minded in duplicity,  
Loud in the silence of this aftermath.

Words in this painting victimise us all:  
Tyro or tyrant, neither shall evade  
Such weapons: reader, you grow rational  
And miss those sharp intentions that have preyed  
On trusting literacy here: unmanned  
By generosity and words you fall,  
Sprawl forwards bleeding with your pen in hand.

She worked in blood, and paint absolves the man,  
And in a bathtub laves all previous stains:  
She is the dark and absence in the plan  
And he a love of justice that remains.  
Who was more deft, the painter or the girl?  
Marat's best monument with this began,  
That all her presence here's a truthless scrawl.

...

*(The Shaft)*

## **Appendix B**

### **Poems by Alex Smith**

## Vermeer Music

The languor of afternoons. We call this silence poise... the accumulating dust, the interminable sunlight.

The rooms are littered with yesterdays: stringed instruments, needlework, fruit. Stillness. Who are these ghosts that read letters, play virginals, open casements?

These are the rooms of childhood. While talking to the servants we finger the coolness of the jug, follow with exactitude the line of its lip; surreptitiously we plait the tapestry tassels beneath the table.

Stillness. Years pass. What is the allegory? What is the code? The days of our lives are a string of necklace beads, each picked into light.

The bass viol is laid aside. Objects have now disowned us, have become merely part of the manifestation of light. We must relinquish everything we touch, except for the afternoon sunlight, which is interminable.

So the past has led to this: the heaviness of tapestries, the innocence of silverware; and we have learned the tragedy of absences.

We turn to pace the measured distance of chequered tiles; no noise: our hand upon the door. Already we are elsewhere, among the presences of weather.

...

## The Double Bass Player

A Herculean task  
begun: this dancer  
or wrestler  
with slender bow  
has come to tame and coax  
subterranean depths  
to yield a velvet tone  
from the massive  
resonant chamber  
he confronts.  
He declines  
to grapple but  
with light embrace inclines  
his head  
to the curvature  
of body  
and scroll-furled neck  
and whispers  
(we must guess)  
his desire. He draws  
the bow (so finely  
balanced and yet  
so secure between  
the fingers)  
across its belly  
and elicits, not  
the grunting of giants,  
but a deep singing  
and sighing as though  
forests everywhere  
responded with release  
of joy, reverberating  
to the skies.

...

## Monk, playing

feet

are paddles  
jabbing

and steering

tormented rapids

of an angular tune  
hands

impatient flippers

poised  
ready to slap

a stubborn keyboard

until it sings

*Off Minor*

we hold our breath

but

he is laying out

this splash-chord genius

in the nodding fur hat

and the tenor

out front

has just stepped back  
into

an empty

lift shaft

...

## Doorways

### *Six postcards from Rhodes*

1

Closed but inviting, the handled edge  
worn from the island green of its paint  
to shiny black, the wood polished by years  
of unconsidered pushing, of welcome.

2

An underwater cavern hollowed out  
from turquoise light where the climber struggles  
up the steps to reach the lobsterpot-  
linenbasket beside a grainy door  
like a ship's hold, hinged and bolted.

3

The obligatory earthenware jar –  
asymmetrical, the neck aslant –  
set next a sun-baked portal. Behind the chair  
an ancient vine python-twists fawningly.

4

Plain doors and windows are cut-out shapes  
across the scabbed surface of the wall –  
the street door is pegged wide open.  
Geraniums placed by whitened steps offer  
minimal colour, their heraldic red  
summoning the absent occupier  
who will return at any moment.

5

Sunlight maps fresh continents across  
this red ochre wall filtered through foliage  
lost to our view. But the inner courtyard  
resists the heat and maintains its coolness  
which is located in the Aegean blue  
of the house door, reserved but no less plush.

6

A purple bag slung over a hook  
contrasts with orange and green vegetables.  
This casual assemblage is contrivance,  
the photographer reaching  
for a painter's palette, the stairway  
and rickety balustrade going unnoticed.

...

## Agraphia

The poplar, a moment ago  
all firm outline and dignity,  
clear and constant against the sky,  
now arcs and shivers,  
shakes its leaves in an orchestration  
of lament at the gusts  
that presage autumn.

It flexes, like a girl shaking  
her hair free in the shower,  
then returns to upright  
only to be twisted  
in a parabolic wave, a gush  
of grief flying through the leaves  
of its book without words.

...

### **At the Glazier's**

We queue by the door,  
not wishing (and not allowed)  
to venture further  
on this threshing floor.

They move without speaking,  
crunching splinters  
in Doc Marten boots  
with a steady tread.

Their arms extended,  
they hold onto nothing  
but a blue-tinged edge  
caught by the light;

and it is a form of slow dance  
in which they engage  
as they cross the shop  
meeting face to face,

a ritual observance  
forbidding touch,  
pane moving clockwise  
parallel to pane.

...

### **Thirteen Deer at Littlebury Green**

They try the edge of the wood,  
nose the air. It is almost  
as though they are not there  
but printed on the receding mist.

It is heraldic: the raised heads,  
the deliberate planting  
of each foot. They share  
a vigilance, a sprung tension

and shift as one, leaving nothing to chance.

...

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