

A GLIMPSED VALLEY, A CROWDED STREET



Peter Sirr

CHARLES TOMLINSON, *Selected Poems 1955–1997*.
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Variety can be a hard master. The fertile poet, giving scrupulous attention to the whole range of his experience, runs the risk of never acquiring the trademark style a more closely husbanded attention might produce. I had been finding it hard to write about this substantial selection of Charles Tomlinson's poems when a comment by Michael Schmidt in a brief tribute to Tomlinson's poems made me see why. Schmidt ascribed the relative neglect of Charles Tomlinson to "the particularity of his images", his avoidance of any kind of generalized rhetoric. More than with most poets, you are impelled to respond to specific poems, and this is bad news for the brief review. And yet this particularity is the chief pleasure Tomlinson's poetry affords. He has the kind of imagination whose governing principle is a kind of civilized hospitality, in which the world of perceived objects and responsive sensation is accommodated within a seamless discourse of attention and attentiveness. Reading him, you have the feeling that anything could prompt a poem, could draw forth the habitual painterly exactitude and the temperate tone quietly alert to surprise that are his most characteristic reflexes. The ocean, a Tuscan landscape, a glimpsed valley, a crowded street are fed to an intensely seeing eye and a constantly reflective habit of mind.

The result is a poetry that is easily missed because its quietness doesn't make large claims on us. If "the time is in love with endings", Tomlinson declines extremity for "Such treaties as only time itself / Can ratify, a bond and a test / Of sequential days..." The quietness has to do with tone, and, often the chosen subjects; the poetry isn't necessarily linguistically quiet. It's more likely to be noisily active, rhetorically adept, inventive, but if the discourse were more fractured we'd notice this more, as we might be surprised by his formal experiments. If the civilized rational discourse, the underlying structures of argument, all contribute to a sense of control, Tomlinson's poetry is still open to a range of influences and experiences in a way more sharply defined poets often aren't:

“I love”, I heard you say,
“To walk in the morning.” We were walking,
Spring light sharpening each vista,
Under the symmetrical, freshly-leaving trees,
by boulevard, bridge and quays the Douanier
Had painted into his golden age
Of a Tour Eiffel perpetually new.
I replied: “I trust the thoughts that come to me
When walking.”

These lines, from “Paris in Sixty-Nine”, with their outdoor scene, the love of walking, the literary companion—in this case Octavio Paz—the painterly observations melting into reflection on the painted cityscape, the temperateness of the tone, are characteristic. The sense of “a peopled landscape” is also typical. Tomlinson’s poems are social creatures, they take place one step back from the dinner table or the companionable county walk with an ally. Very often they’re addressed to particular individuals and they are always pitched in a tone of concentrated intimacy, as in these, the last lines in the book:

Searching my verse, to read what I’d once said,
It was the names on names of friends I read
And yours in every book, that made me see
How love and friendship nurture poetry. (“A Backward Glance”)

Formally there are two main modes: the tightly structured stanzaic or otherwise tautly orchestrated units, and a looser, visually more experimental approach, clearly influenced by American exemplars. This is really just a question of organisation rather than of opposing styles: there’s no sense of disjunction between one kind of Tomlinson poem and another. Even at his loosest he’s wed to an austere stately reflectiveness. He can achieve impressive effects in either manner. The bold rhetorical clamour of “Prometheus”, his response to Scriabin’s tone-poem, with its bleakly apocalyptic vision of history, shows him in full flight:

Summer thunder darkens, and its climbing
Cumulae, disowning our scale in the zenith,
Electrify this music: the evening is falling apart.
Castles-in-air; on earth: green, livid fire.

The poem lurches violently from its catalogue of death and buried hopes to a cooled world of incessant codas:

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, and at the city's
Stale new frontier even ugliness
Rules with the cruel mercy of solidities.

In a British context Charles Tomlinson is a relatively unusual poet and his career has often been conducted at a remove from his contemporaries. Resisting the insularities of the Movement, determined to go on hoisting the Modernist flag, he looked outward, to both Europe and the US, taking his cue from Williams, Pound, developing lifelong interests in Italian, Spanish and French poets, collaborating, notably with Octavio Paz, in joint poetry projects. Tomlinson has only slowly come to recognition in Britain. Yet he has always been a remarkably accomplished and sure-footed poet, with impressive technical skills, and a sharp, generous intelligence. The stylistic variety has the effect of making the poems of *Seeing is Believing* (1958) and *A Peopled Landscape* (1963), with the clear mark of poets like Williams and Moore, merge seamlessly with the later work. Had an editorial hand slipped and placed the opening poem of *Seeing is Believing*, "The Atlantic", at the end of this collection, few, I suspect, would notice. It has all the Tomlinson hallmarks; descriptive élan, the urge to respond with respectful exactness to the natural world, and a sort of ringing authority towards the close. That trajectory, between yielding and control, is one often travelled in his work, as he tries, without straining too hard, to put a human order on the world.