

A Modernist Dialectic: Stevens and Williams in the Poetry of Charles Tomlinson

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I. INTRODUCTION

CHARLES TOMLINSON WAS one of the most “Americanized” of the British poets to come to prominence in the twenty or so years following the Second World War. As he describes in his book *Some Americans: A Period Record* (1981), his first full-scale collection (*Seeing Is Believing*, 1958) was published in New York after English publishers had rejected it (SA 13), and some feel Americans still take him to heart more readily than do the British. His relationship with American poetry is not easy to categorize, however. Most would agree with Alan Young’s assessment that Tomlinson’s poetry comes out of a productive tension between English and American, an “assimilation of some characteristics and qualities of American literary modernism to help shape a distinctively personal yet essentially English voice and vision” (67). But if the role of American modernism in Tomlinson’s poetry is generally recognized, less readily acknowledged is the extent to which his poetry is informed, indeed haunted, by the contradictions that are still being played out in the wake of that tradition. For this poet in “a state of mental emigration” (SA 12), America has provided the imaginative space to explore his own aesthetic allegiances. Nowhere is this more evident than in the presence in his poetry of those two opposed representatives of American poetic modernism, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.

Albert Gelpi has argued that Stevens and Williams, as representatives, respectively, of Symbolist and Imagist tendencies, enacted a dialectic central to modernist poetics. The Imagist Williams saw the work of art as assuming a place within nature, whereas the Symbolist Stevens was more concerned with the imagination’s power over external objects. This dialectic, which reflects “an ambiguity in the philosophic and linguistic assumptions of Modernism itself,” is “still unsettled” (21). It is for this reason that Tomlinson’s career is both intriguing and representative, at any rate from a British point of view, for in his poetry that dialectic is unsettlingly

present. The common view of Tomlinson, fostered by Tomlinson himself, is that an early, mistaken allegiance to Stevens gave way to a more fruitful reading of Williams. But the picture is less simple and more interesting, for one way of looking at Tomlinson's poetic career is as an attempt to exorcize the ghost of Stevens. Tomlinson's poetry demonstrates a Bloomian desire to suppress a strong Stevensian and Symbolist inclination toward an "interior" poetry that "live[s] in the mind" (*CPP* 728) in favor of a Williamsite and Imagist poetry of accurate perception.

II. TOMLINSON AND STEVENS

Not all of Tomlinson's statements about Stevens should be taken at face value. In particular, the effect of *Some Americans: A Personal Record* is to downplay the part Stevens has played in his poetic development in favor of Williams. Tomlinson "muffed the thing badly," he writes, in discovering Stevens before Williams. The implication of his account is that the kind of lesson he learned from Stevens he could have got more readily from Williams, namely an alertness to sensory perception, getting the "sharpness" of "sense experience" into his writing. This was perhaps inevitable, since at the time the only readily available collection of Stevens' poems was *Harmonium* (lent him by "an American friend")—Stevens' British *Selected Poems* was not published until 1953, two years after the time Tomlinson is describing. Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," writes Tomlinson, "led me for a while to look from different angles at separate instances of the meticulous" in poems (in his short collection, *The Necklace*, 1955) with titles like "Nine Variations in a Chinese Winter Setting," "Eight Observations on the Nature of Eternity," and "Suggestions for the Improvement of a Sunset" (which contains the line "Six points of vantage provide us with six sunsets") (*SA* 5, 9–10).

Richard Swigg, in his book *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition*, follows Tomlinson's cue by downplaying Stevens' presence in Tomlinson's poetry, implying that the British poet somehow outgrew the American: in Tomlinson's poetry "[t]he human presence coexists with a changing world. But Tomlinson's way of presenting the relation without diminishing the solidity of either shows how he increasingly differs from Stevens" (44). Certainly this statement indicates the essential difference between the two poets. But, on the one hand, the difference has existed from the beginning of Tomlinson's career, and, on the other, Tomlinson has continued to feel the pull of what he thinks of as his opposite. Throughout there has been a continual fascination with Stevens, who has always been an important participant in what Michael Edwards calls Tomlinson's "passionate epistemological exploration" (144).

One can sense Stevens being warded off even where Tomlinson is more forthcoming than he is in *Some Americans*. In an interview with Ian Hamilton in 1964 he said, "It was a case of being haunted [by Stevens] rather than of cold imitation. I was also a painter and this meant that I had

far more interest in the particulars of a landscape or an object than Stevens. Stevens rarely makes one *see* anything in detail for all his talk about a physical universe" (83). In his Author's Preface to the 1966 reprint of *The Necklace*, Tomlinson regards some of the poems it contains as "both a dialogue with and a departure from" Stevens: "Stevens' sense of the complex relation of observer and environment fascinated me, but was there ever a poetry which stood so explicitly by a physical universe and against transcendence, but which gives so little account of that universe, its spaces, patterns, textures, 'a world of canon and fugue,' such as Hopkins spoke of seeing before him." Stevens' "supreme fiction," according to this Preface, is symptomatic of a solipsism whereby reality is dependent on perception. Tomlinson, by contrast, wants a poetry that "accord[s] objects their own existence" (5).

Both the "dialogue with and departure from" Stevens are evident in the poem "The Art of Poetry," which, as Tomlinson recalls in another interview (some twenty-five years after the poem's publication in *The Necklace*), questions even as it echoes Stevens' "The Snow Man": "I was . . . arguing with one of my mentors and with a certain aspect of his elegance" (qtd. in Ross 25):

There must be nothing
 Superfluous, nothing which is not elegant
 And nothing which is if it is merely that.
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 11)

These lines, says Tomlinson, are "a playful demur phrased after" Stevens' lines about the listener who "nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (*CPP* 8):

I was worried that this kind of thing could lead to rather self-conscious writing, and Stevens himself didn't always avoid that. In arguing for words to earn their keep, I was arguing for a kind of exactness in face of the object, which meant an exactness of feeling in the writer. It meant that you must enter into a relationship with things, that you must use your eyes and see what they were offering you—what, at first, you might not notice. (qtd. in Ross and Tomlinson 25)

But "enter[ing] into a relationship with things" sounds like what Stevens thought he was doing when he explained in a letter, in somewhat abstract terms, that "The Snow Man" is "an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand it and enjoy it" (*L* 464). The breathtaking achievement of the poem, which is in Stevens' most persuasive "decreative" mode, is the apprehension of a reality that is utterly un-anthropomorphic. The poem moves from despondency in emptiness to

an exhilaration of self-voiding; it wins through to a delight in the realization of total otherness, of the not-me. Tomlinson's account does not hear this, does not hear the poem's rhetoric, its registering of the effort not, precisely, to indulge in "self-conscious" imposition. That effort involves the syntax that unravels through the poem's single extended sentence. In resisting the human tendency to anthropomorphize, the poetry finds itself, with haunting seduction, uttering the "sound" it would ward off, conjuring the emotion it would repress. By such means the poem achieves Tomlinson's desired "exactness of feeling in the writer," even if the exactness is not that of descriptive accuracy "in face of the object."

There is perhaps a programmatic refusal by Tomlinson here to meet Stevens on his own ground. The words of "The Snow Man" *do* "earn their keep": theirs is not superfluous elegance, but elegance that serves a purpose. The poem mimes an emotional progression by moving through and thus beyond that very self-consciousness of which Tomlinson accuses Stevens. The poem listens to, even relishes, its own sound in order to exorcize it, to resolve its cadence. If the writing is self-conscious, that is because the subject of the poem is the terror of self-consciousness. The poem shows what it feels like to achieve "a mind of winter," a mind that in the end so abnegates the self as to achieve a triumphant stoicism that refuses to indulge despair. Stevens aims for "an exactness of feeling" by resisting inexact ways of feeling. The resistance is audible in the poem's haunting accumulation of negatives, culminating in the final phrase "the nothing that is." Its way of "enter[ing] into a relationship with things" is an engaged avoidance of a false relationship with things. The more "elegant" the word-play, the more meaningful. Most significant, the move from "nothing" to "the nothing" at the end is not elegance for elegance's sake, but encapsulates the poem's progression from despondency to affirmation. But for the astringent Tomlinson, Stevens' style here conceals more than it reveals. In a poem called "Observation of Facts," written about the same time as "The Art of Poetry," Tomlinson writes: "Style speaks what was seen, / Or it conceals the observation / Behind the observer: a voice / Wearing a ruff" (Tomlinson, *CP* 12). Tomlinson evidently has Stevens in mind here.

If for Tomlinson solipsism was Stevens' temptation, then Tomlinson would resist it with due attention to all that is "bodied over against" the ego (Tomlinson, *CP* 11). His theme is the way of perceiving and what is perceived, "relations and contraries" between self and world (Tomlinson's first pamphlet of poems was called *Relations and Contraries*). Calvin Bedient writes that *The Necklace* "zeroes in on [this] great Tomlinson theme, but vitiates it by a kind of enamelled elegance" (21)—that very elegance of which Tomlinson accuses Stevens. It is true that Tomlinson's early poetry has a fastidiously elegant self-consciousness that comes from the anxiety to shun "exaggeration." The lines preceding the ones already quoted from "The Art of Poetry" read:

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

Matter. It is difficult to get them right.

(Tomlinson, *CP* 11)

The “how” of this “saying” is self-consciously artful. The apparently throwaway phrase “the fact being” gets highlighted in the context of a poem that is about the essential otherness, the “being” of “facts.” The emphatic break, across stanza as well as line, in the two-word sentence “Proportions / Matter” throws into relief the double sense of “matter”: what “matters” is that we attend to the appearance of “matter,” how the phenomenal world exists in space and time. That sentence’s weight and balance is a verbal enactment of how, centrally for Tomlinson, getting things in “proportion” involves the observing eye, seeing the right relationship between self and world. The act of perception involves proportion both moral and spatial, what Tomlinson calls “right feeling” (*SA* 11). The nervous line-break between “nothing” and “superfluous” in the lines quoted earlier (“There must be nothing / Superfluous”) negotiates between total absence and superfluity of presence, between lack of imagination and over-imagination, until the poem comes to rest, almost tranquilly, on its isolated, one-line statement of elegant descriptive fact, which by this time has been earned: “This green twilight has violet borders.” The achievement of this observed fact gives the poet license to conjure up a fleeting “elegance,” not quite a superfluity but not quite a nothing either, in the final four lines about the butterflies, which nevertheless are not held present longer than their dissolving vision allows, “Disappear[ing] as the evening appears.” That achievement, in its art of poetry, acts as a salve to the mind’s initial bruising: “At first, the mind feels bruised” (Tomlinson, *CP* 10–11).

A fascination with “Stevens’ sense of the complex relation of observer and environment” involves Tomlinson’s insistence on self-definition and self-limitation. At about the time he was imitating Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” he was expressing his approval of how Crispin in “The Comedian as the Letter C” “did not attempt to lose identity in the ocean, but rather to allow himself to be changed by the experience of it—to see the world afresh rather than take off into the absolute” (*SA* 11). Being changed by the experience of nature self-evidently has implications for the people who live in a landscape, as well as implications for the landscape itself. For Tomlinson, to see is to become. This epistemological fascination informs the “dialogue with and departure from” Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways” behind Tomlinson’s “Nine Variations in a Chinese Winter Setting,” a poem that also recalls Stevens’ remark, “The proliferation of resemblances extends an object” (*CPP* 691). Yet the fastidious

manner of Tomlinson's synaesthetic resemblances (flute music "counterpointing" various images) is as anxious to confine likeness as to extend it; his "separate instances" are more "meticulous" than Stevens'. Both poems concern "mood," how it is evoked and in what or whom it inheres.

This is Stevens' sixth way of looking at a blackbird:

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause. (*CPP* 75)

Compare this with Tomlinson's sixth variation, where the "mood" is expressed in a fastidiously negative formulation that delimits as much as it likens ("is not . . . as that" is a way of putting it also found in variations IV and V):

The outline of the water-dragon
Is not embroidered with so intricate a thread
As that with which the flute
Defines the tangible borders of a mood.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 4)

Tomlinson's poem wants the "borders" of mood to be more "tangible," more firmly fixed in the world of "spaces, patterns, textures," less impressionistic, than Stevens' "Icicles" and "barbaric glass," the "cause" of the mood more "decipherable." "Defin[ing] the tangible borders of a mood" is a locution that wants to resist imposing a mood, to locate feeling with "exactness in face of the object." It confines emotion even as emotion is expressed: borders promise boundaries as well as prospects. Stevens' ninth way of looking, on the other hand, promises an infinity of prospects, of imagined horizons:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles. (*CPP* 76)

No doubt for Tomlinson, Stevens' poem is in danger here of "tak[ing] off into the absolute."

Yet the self-reflexivity of Stevens' poetry makes Tomlinson's "solipsist" label too easy. Here is Stevens' eighth way:

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know. (*CPP* 75–76)

To know that the blackbird is involved in what you know is to know that, in the words of one of Stevens' adages, "The real is only the base. But it is the base" (*CPP* 917). On the other hand, "involved" is a way of putting it that implicitly acknowledges the compromise entailed in this aesthetic. Reality is complicit in "what I know," rather than clarified by the knowing. So knowing that things are involved in what you know has its solipsistic pain, but if that knowledge constitutes poetry (the "accents" and "rhythms"), then poetry can be a means of discovering self in the world and is therefore an escape from solipsism. Stevens' poetry is not merely of the mind, it is self-consciously of the mind. Its realities are things as they seem, because for him how they seem cannot be differentiated from "things as they are" (*CPP* 135), as we know from "The Man with the Blue Guitar." It may be that, in the words of Brian John, "Tomlinson recognized early that a Stevensian aesthetic" entails "the solipsism of the self and that self's need to deny the otherness of things" (67), but "Thirteen Ways" itself implicitly acknowledges the solipsistic dangers of which Tomlinson is so fearful.

More enduring because less programmatic, more complex and deeply felt, more embedded in the poetry's verbal texture is the presence of Stevens in Tomlinson's later work. By this time, according to Tomlinson's account, the ghost of Stevens had been fully exorcized, although, as I shall argue, this is far from the case. The "antecedents" of the poem-sequence "Antecedents: A Homage and Valediction" (from *Seeing Is Believing*) belong to Stevens' French Symbolist poetic inheritance, and the sequence culminates with an implicit acknowledgment of Stevens' place at the end of that tradition. However strong the valedictory note sounded by this homage, it is informed by Tomlinson's conviction that the important European poetic development of our times has moved to America. In an interview he argues that

the thing about American poets is that they realize that they have simply got to read the poetry of other languages, they have simply got to read French poetry, whereas so many English poets are so pleased with the parish pump it doesn't seem to concern them that they ought to know what happened in French Symbolism from, say, 1870 to round about 1920: from Rimbaud up to Valéry. All that phase interests me immensely, and I think it has obviously fed the American poets as well. . . . (qtd. in Orr 252)

As one of the American poets fed by that phase, Stevens informs the dialogue and departure at the end of "Antecedents," in the sixth poem of the sequence, "Something: A Direction." The sequence progresses from a Symbolist solipsistic and interior dusk—"He bows to the looking-glass. Sunsets" ("II. Praeludium"; Tomlinson, *CP* 51)—to the possibility of an outer and actual sunset.

The syntax of "Something: A Direction" is driven by the prospect of what the poem calls "relation / With all that is other." It begins:

Out of the shut cell of that solitude there is
One egress, past point of interrogation.
Sun is, because it is not you; you are
Since you are self, and self delimited
Regarding sun. It downs? I claim? Cannot
Beyond such speech as this, gather conviction?
Judge, as you will, not what I say
But what is, being said. It downs
Recovered, coverless, in a shriven light
And you, returning, may to a shriven self
As from the scene, your self withdraws.

(Tomlinson, *CP* 54)

This reads as though it is one stage, or several stages, on from another poem about the sun, the last in Stevens' *Collected Poems*, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself." Stevens' title represents desire rather than achievement. The poem recognizes the "egress" but does not in the end get much beyond the "point of interrogation." The poem's waking consciousness begins by confusing exterior with interior world: "a scrawny cry from outside / Seemed like a sound in his mind" (*CPP* 451). The self's "shut cell" is broken in upon by the dawning sun ("The sun was rising at six" [*CPP* 452]). But however much the poet resists metaphorical elaboration for the sun ("No longer a battered panache above snow"), the fact that he repeatedly has to insist on its exteriority gives rise to doubts ("It would have been outside"; "The sun was coming from outside"). Even the poem's triumphant affirmation of "the colossal sun" is downplayed by the tacked-on phrase "Still far away." This is very much a poem of "preceding" ("A chorister whose c preceded the choir") rather than of achievement. It concludes not with "new knowledge" but with an approximation of it: "It was like / A new knowledge of reality" (*CPP* 452; emphasis added).

In taking its "direction" out of or away from Stevens, Tomlinson's poem begins with an implicit reply to "Not Ideas About the Thing." Tomlinson's sun exists by reason of its being other than human consciousness; conversely, human consciousness exists by reason of its being other than sun. For the poet the "relation / With all that is other" takes the form of language, a matter intimated by the apparently stiff locution, "Regarding sun."

"Regarding" is a kind of pun, meaning "as concerns the sun" and also "when you look at the sun." The pun raises the issue of language directly: "It downs? I claim? Cannot / Beyond such speech as this, gather conviction?" The poem goes on to delineate the division between self and world, a division that, while maintaining you "at your proper bounds," yet entails the knowledge of the pain of exclusion, an understanding of "the textures of your pain." Out of this acknowledgment comes an ability to enter the (poetic) terrain anew, "a country, natural and profuse / Unbroken by past incursions" (Tomlinson, *CP* 54). You are "released" from your solipsistic "prison," the "shut cell of that solitude," into a "new-found" neighborhood now that you have "earned" that "relation / With all that is other."

Both poem and sequence end in a state of suspended determination with a remarkable image for a kind of secular dying into a new life:

Still you must wait,
 For evening's ashen, like the slow fire
 Withdrawn through the whitened log
 Glinting through grain marks where the wood splits:
 Let be its being: the scene extends
 Not hope, but the urgency that hopes for means.
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 54–55)

In troping Stevens' poem "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" here, Tomlinson characteristically both echoes and questions his mentor. "Let be its being" is both like and unlike "Let be be finale of seem" (*CPP* 50) in Stevens' poem. "Still you must wait": the waiting is attendant upon exploring the world that has been opened up by the sequence and by this poem, a world of "relations and contraries" that is respected for its "otherness," where "its being" is "let be." "Let be be finale of seem" says the same sort of thing, but with a flourish—and that is the important difference, for "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" implies that since mortality is commonplace, since it is, unremarkably, the absolute condition of existence, we should not be disconcerted by it, but should allow pleasure to govern the commonplace and everyday. In aesthetic terms this means that art and poetry are related to life insofar as they provide a diversion from it; their relation to existence is antithetical. The corpse is "cold" and "dumb," but meanwhile "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream"—said with an assertive flourish, twice. Tomlinson's unflourishing version, "Let be its being," asks that life's mortal condition be allowed its full "being" in the poetry, that it acquire a full presence there, as it does in the arresting but patiently attentive (rather than flourishing) image of the "whitened log": a poetic demonstration of an "earned relation / With all that is other." For Stevens, poetry and art are compensation for the gap between self and world; for Tomlinson, they are the way to bridge that gap. Thus, in Tomlinson's poem

"Cézanne at Aix," the mountain of Cézanne's painting is "a stone bridge-head / To that which is tangible" (Tomlinson, *CP* 37).

Secular dying into a new life: my phrase gestures at the numinous sense often felt at the end of a poem by Tomlinson, following on from an attentive contemplation of nature. Significantly, it is in religious terms that Tomlinson came to think about Stevens, in a deeply considered essay, "Wallace Stevens and the Poetry of Scepticism," which has not received the attention it deserves. Its year of publication, 1988, testifies to Tomlinson's continuing interest in Stevens. The essay discusses Stevens in terms of a poet living in a secular age who hankers for spiritual certainty: "there is a loneliness in Stevens's poetry which places him close to the European scepticism of Nietzsche" (399).

In Tomlinson's view this state of affairs has positive as well as negative consequences for Stevens' poetry and for the direction poets might take following him. On the one hand, at least Stevens' example offers the possibility of fresh contact with the world, unlike the inventions of conventional religion: some of his poetry "finds a way of telling us that the fiction of the poem, by clearing a space for meaning and fresh apprehension, can reconcile us to a world of fact in a way that the fictions of religion no longer can" (397). On the other hand, "Stevens's leanings towards religion" (405) account for his notion of a "supreme fiction," which, according to Tomlinson, is a backward-looking Arnoldian substitution of aesthetic for religious satisfaction. As Tomlinson reminds us, poetry as "the supreme fiction" first appeared in the poem "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," in which the poet "tells her that now the church has failed our imaginations, poetry must do the job for us" (397). The vacuum felt by the absence of religious belief ("the intellectual and emotional need which resulted in [Stevens' alleged] deathbed conversion to Catholicism") was filled by the poet's own imaginative structures: "In such a universe, nature reflects back at man the order his imagination has projected on it" (400) (this is about "Evening Without Angels"). To Tomlinson this situation is always a dangerously solipsistic state of affairs. In this context he refers to "old-fashioned romantic excess" and states that one of Stevens' most important themes, "the alliance of Death and Beauty," "had been run ragged by romantics and decadents alike" (394). However, being post-romantic, Stevens "is self-conscious about his themes in a way romantics and decadents were not" (394), a convincing observation and one that is notably absent from Tomlinson's earlier dealings with Stevens.

But this self-consciousness elicits from Tomlinson in his "Poetry and Scepticism" essay a curious blend of insight and myopia when responding to some of Stevens' poetry. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," he argues, ironically ventriloquizes "the kind of middle-aged romantic poetry his uncle might have written" (394). This is fairly said, but for Tomlinson the poem triumphs in spite of not because of its ironizing style. He quotes the second stanza:

A red bird flies across the golden floor.
 It is a red bird that seeks out his choir
 Among the choirs of wind and wet and wing.
 A torrent will fall from him when he finds.
 Shall I uncrumple this much-crumpled thing?
 I am a man of fortune greeting heirs;
 For it has come that thus I greet the spring.
 These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell.
 No spring can follow past meridian.
 Yet you persist with anecdotal bliss
 To make believe a starry *connaissance*. (CPP 11)

Tomlinson then comments: "To the apparently stale topic and into the apparently unusable idiom Stevens brings new life, an awareness of nature that is fresh and individual in this evocation of wet woods, the sounding of bird-song through wind and rain" (395). Tomlinson's is a way of commenting that wants to be deaf to the self-reflexivity of Stevens' medium. There is an element of wish-fulfillment in Tomlinson's response: here, he feels, is one of those rare occasions when Stevens makes the reader "see" something. But even the lines about the red bird are more abstract and removed from their subject than this praise for a fresh "awareness of nature" acknowledges. How does the speaker "uncrumple this much-crumpled thing," the well-worn subject of Spring's awakening and its attendant angst? "For it has come that thus I greet the spring" alerts the reader to the way of greeting, where "red" against "golden" takes on an emblematic air, and where "floor" and "choir" conjure up an amphitheater of the imagination more than they do "new life." This writing is closer to Yeatsian dancing floors than to a fresh awareness of nature.

That said, it is clear that, however affecting Tomlinson finds what he takes to be Stevens' poetic "evocation," this is not enough for Tomlinson's own "passionate epistemology" (in those words by Michael Edwards), his desire for poetry to cleave close to cognition. For Tomlinson in this essay, Stevens has a "power of sensuous evocation," but he lacks "the sensuous particularizing of shapes and substances of the kind one finds in (say) Hopkins" (395)—and note once more the contrast with Hopkins. Stevens is above all for Tomlinson a preparation for the sort of poetry he, Tomlinson, would write: "Stevens's conviction that 'The great poem of earth remains to be written' does not quite carry him sufficiently far to write it" (397). If, for Tomlinson, Stevens represents the culmination of romanticism's solipsistic cul-de-sac, he also pointed the way out, even if he could not quite take it himself. Thus, Tomlinson is most convinced by the poems of Stevens that "clear a space," less so by those that try to fill that space: "Stevens is a poet whose imagination warms to the cold. He wanted to write a 'poetry of earth' and to be the poet of 'a physical universe,' praising 'total satisfaction, the moment of total summer.' Yet 'total

summer' seems to yield little but rhetoric to Stevens's wintry temperament" (396). In this Tomlinson is following Yvor Winters, to whom his essay appeals on several occasions, the Winters who praised such poems as "The Snow Man" and "The Course of a Particular," but dismissed, as hedonist, poems such as "Credences of Summer." When the latter poem insists, "Let's see the very thing and nothing else. / Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight" (CPP 322), Tomlinson would complain that this is merely voicing a desire to see, not doing the seeing.

But the thrust of the essay is sympathy for someone whom Tomlinson sees as a figure of spiritual desolation and desire. He describes as "acute" but "harsh" Helen Vendler's comment on "The Idea of Order at Key West" in her book *On Extended Wings*: "'Stevens' self seems to have presented him with a world excessively interior, in which the senses, with the exception of the eye, are atrophied or impoverished'" (403). Tomlinson takes the force of "excessively interior," but stresses the lack of "impoverishment" in the lines about the woman singing beside the sea:

And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. (CPP 106)

But, significantly, Tomlinson wants to hear in the poem a suspicion of its own imaginative inventiveness: "His words, like her notes, spilling out over nature or 'reality,' annex it to human needs. Here her music virtually compels it into ordered significance. Yet, curiously, Stevens himself stands apart with 'pale Ramon,' as if he cannot quite believe in the woman's opulent solipsism" (404). Thus, in spite of Tomlinson's habitually reiterated suspicion of Stevens' latter-day romantic ego—what in this essay he calls "the lyric accord" (404)—he is anxious to credit Stevens with a similar wariness, even if there is a degree of wish-fulfillment in Tomlinson's reaction here to "The Idea of Order": the last lines acknowledge that the woman's song has temporarily transformed not only her apprehension of the world, but the poet's as well.

Evidently, this particular dialogue with Stevens had started some twenty or so years earlier, in Tomlinson's less opulently phrased poem "The Hill" (*American Scenes and Other Poems*, 1966), where, as in "The Idea of Order," the poet observes a woman in a landscape while addressing a third person, thus allowing a similarly distanced, assessing perspective. Like Stevens in his poem, Tomlinson sets up an interrogatory relationship between poet and woman, though withholding the lyric expansiveness of this sort of Stevensian questioning:

Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang. (CPP 105)

"The Hill" begins with its rather different kind of questioning:

Do not call to her there,
but let her go
bearing our question
in her climb: what does she
confer on the hill, the hill on her? (Tomlinson, *CP* 114)

The poem goes on to delineate this mutual dependence and independence of woman and landscape, the "contraries" as well as the "relations," and ends with words that sound like a deliberate dialogue with and departure from Stevens:

So, do not call to her there:
let her go on,
whom the early sun
is climbing up with to the hill's crown—
she, who did not make it, yet can make
the sun go down by coming down. (Tomlinson, *CP* 114)

These lines playfully resist the "opulent solipsism" of the woman in "The Idea of Order at Key West." A punning play on the first "make," ("she did not make it to the summit," and "she did not create the sun") introduces a playful, complementary hyperbole centered on the second "make" (she "can make / the sun go down," that is, "she can outshine the sun"). This calls to mind, even as it wards off, Stevens' "she was the maker," the Stevensian notion that, in Tomlinson's words about "The Idea of Order at Key West," the woman "compels [nature] into ordered significance." If that possibility is allowed in Tomlinson's poem, it is also tonally qualified. For Tomlinson, the relationship between nature and art is a constant "negotiation," not an antithesis, neither a "supreme fiction" nor a "rage for order." "Nature is hard," this poem says, "but, held on the giant palm, one may negotiate / and she, rising athwart it, is showing the art" (Tomlinson, *CP* 114). Part of that negotiation here is the anthropomorphic vision of the hill as a "giant palm": a bold metaphor, but one that does not stray far from the physically and visually present.

In the "Poetry of Scepticism" essay, then, Tomlinson likes the poetry by Stevens where "there is a resistance involved" (*CPP* 460, to quote Stevens' "The Course of a Particular"), where "interiority" acknowledges its opposite. He approves of the fact that in "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" the "world excessively interior" "is once more beset from beyond itself" (404), as he puts it. He welcomes the poems at the end of Stevens' career that, instead of striving to create a myth, are content to rest in their own uncertainty, poems such as "The World as Meditation," which

demonstrate a Keatsian “negative capability,” “a scepticism that nourishes rather than undermines” (408).

But for all that, Stevens represents the end of a line for Tomlinson, who sums up:

His hope was that [the supreme fiction] was a mask of the real. But so often the real seemed illusively distant and difficult to situate within the body of the universe. . . . Stevens is a poet of evocations rather than patterned inscapes. He hovers above and about his subjects rather than entering into their life co-extensive with his own. “The American Sublime” may complain of “The empty spirit / In vacant space,” yet no square inch of American space is really empty or unpatterned. Desert or forest will both give back to the eye enough particulars to nourish and sustain if the demands of subjectivity are not exorbitant. (405)

These sentences provide an instructive way into Tomlinson’s “Swimming Chenango Lake,” a poem with a markedly American—a Native-American—title and setting. Despite this poem’s awareness that it constitutes a “new knowledge of reality,” in which knower and known are in perpetually altering relationship, it impressively succeeds in situating itself “within the body of the universe.” For all its epistemological knowingness, it maintains a physical precision, “give[s] back to the eye enough particulars” to conjure the actual. Although the poem intimates the possibility of infinite readings and countless ways of “looking” (“He reads the water’s autumnal hesitations / A wealth of ways” [Tomlinson, *CP* 155]), and although therefore the poem is necessarily a partial reading, excluding as well as including (“There is a geometry of water, for this / Squares off the clouds’ redundances” [Tomlinson, *CP* 155])—although all this is so, the poem works deliberately, ostentatiously even, for its Hopkinsian “patterned inscapes.” Stevens’ poetry invariably knows that “*It Must Change*” (*CPP* 336); but Tomlinson’s would find that apprehension embodied:

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.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

The “play” with which the musical metaphor is here elaborated signifies poetic deliberation, where the phrase “Liquid variation” brings together concept and physical description (though some may feel that the poet overplays the deliberation with the insistent abstraction of such words as “theme”).

If Stevens “hovers above and about his subjects rather than entering into their life co-extensive with his own,” the protagonist of “Swimming Chenango Lake” does not remain hovering above and about for long, but takes the plunge in order (punningly) to “grasp” and be grasped by its meaning, to realize his “dependence” (another pun) on what he sees, that to define one’s environment is to define the self:

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.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

The poem registers—as Tomlinson acknowledges that “The Idea of Order at Key West” likewise registers—that this is a temporary accommodation between self and world, that there is a time to apprehend (to grasp), and a time to let go, which is the note on which the poem ends. “[A] geometry of water” at the start has, by the end, given way to

a mere mosaic of tiny shatterings,
Where a wind is unscaping all images in the flowing
obsidian,
The going-elsewhere of ripples incessantly shaping.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 156)

Here the poem unmakes itself, “unscaping” its achieved “images” (“unscaping” significantly inverting those Hopkinsian “inscapes”), as the world goes on its way, “incessantly shaping” itself in a continuum that goes elsewhere, leaving poem and poet behind.

One way of responding to “Swimming Chenango Lake” is as a counter to the bleak Stevensian scepticism and lonely disbelief Tomlinson finds in “Sunday Morning.” In the “Poetry of Scepticism” essay, in a reading much influenced by Winters, Tomlinson argues that “Sunday Morning” ends on a note of “unappeasing tragedy” (398) because it remains unconvinced by the myth it has presented as an alternative to moribund Christianity:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (*CPP* 56)

"This world drifts on," writes Tomlinson, "with no divinely sanctioned purpose, through space, an 'island solitude,' and the poem with its 'casual flocks of pigeons' enacts the movement 'downward to darkness' and annihilation" (399), although "annihilation" is an unwarrantably bleak reading of Stevens' final phrase, "on extended wings." The emotions elicited are more "ambiguous" than that, his lines posing and poisoning their opposites in an impressive rhetorical balance: "wings" balances "sink"; "extended" balances "downward"; and "casual" is poised with and against the rhetorical symmetry of these lines.

Be that as it may, "Swimming Chenango Lake" sounds as if it would answer the close of "Sunday Morning," or at any rate Tomlinson's sense of it:

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. . . .
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

Stevens' wings of darkness are present here, not as an image of existential solitude, but as part of a process of transformation, of searching, knowing, and defining. The poetry embodies a condition of perpetual change. For Tomlinson, "Sunday Morning" laments the passing of an old dispensation, an outmoded system of belief, only to fall back on a reality without meaning, "an old chaos of the sun." But "Swimming Chenango Lake" welcomes a new dispensation, in which a condition of ignorance is the perpetual potential for renewed apprehension. The new dispensation is intimated in the reverse "baptism" of "unnaming." The perpetual definings and redefinings of language, of poetry, should be at one with the perpetual transformation, the continual process, which is "the great poem of the earth."

In its characteristic merging of abstract and concrete, mental and physical, the diction of "Swimming Chenango Lake" intimates that identity can only be sought in relationship with the world:

A speech of densities and derisions, of half-
 Replies to the questions his body must frame
 Frogwise across the all but penetrable element.
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

"[D]ensities" conjures up the element water, "derisions" somehow keeps it at bay. "Penetration," like "grasping," can be mental as well as physical. But the poem cleaves to its element: sensation rather than evocation—"unappeasing" adventure, not tragedy. The adventure of sensation is con-

tinuous and ever-changing: "The going-elsewhere of ripples incessantly shaping"—where the phrase "the going-elsewhere" impressively combines abstract and physical, description and action, noun and verb, perception and phenomenon.

Tomlinson's most characteristic poetry wants to capture a moment of contemplation in the ceaseless going-elsewhere, the "wave, interminably flowing" (from Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" [CPP 74], quoted approvingly by Tomlinson in "The Poetry of Scepticism"), which is Being. However, perhaps this is to take him too much at his own word. For a contemplative such as Tomlinson, only art can capture the ceaseless going-elsewhere—and so, however much he wants to write the poetry of earth, poetry will always be of the mind. This is the paradox described by Calvin Bedient:

Despite his animadversions against Romanticism, Tomlinson has shown himself quite ready to think of art . . . as a spiritual flowering beyond anything offered by reality. . . . Let [the poems] set nature before us as a sufficient spiritual end; still, their very existence as poetry, their very excess over nature, suggests that it is art, and not nature, that cures the ache of being. (20)

Hence it is that, in Bedient's words, Tomlinson's "painstaking descriptions" are "so often hard to seize with the eye" (22), a curious paradox indeed. Moreover, there is considerable irony in the fact that Bedient's response to Tomlinson accords with Tomlinson's to Stevens, although Stevens' poetics never sets as much store by a Hopkinsian "hæcceity" (Hopkins' term, derived from Duns Scotus, for "thisness") as does Tomlinson's. But for all the insistence of Tomlinson's poetics on exteriority, his poetic "descriptions" are interior worlds: landscape becomes mindscape by the act of poetic encompassing. Often the poems glut with their pictorial excess, their worrying away at visual precision, their moments of perceptual alteration. The poem "Clouds," for instance, is by turns concerned with and consoled by the fact that the dreamer-poet cannot "fix" the miracle of cloudscape. Yet are we not more beguiled by the poem as dreamscape, as "the image of an interiority" (to quote Tomlinson on Stevens' "The World as Meditation"), than by the implicit, Wordsworthian injunction at the end that "the dreamer [should] wak[e] to the categorical call" of "a common day" (Tomlinson, *CP* 170)? It is an entrancing poem about nothing, or, to put it another way, about a state of mind. The ghost of Stevens is never exorcized.

III. TOMLINSON AND WILLIAMS

Of the great roll call of American modernist poets, Williams was one of the last to gain a reputation in England. That he eventually did so, as late

as the 1970s, was largely owing to the efforts of Tomlinson, who edited *William Carlos Williams: A Critical Anthology* and *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*, published in 1972 and 1976, respectively. In the Introduction to the *Critical Anthology*, Tomlinson draws attention to an article on Williams by Denis Donoghue that states that Williams “had no interest in the kind of thing that interested Stevens: philosophy, ontology, epistemology, gorgeous nonsense of the mind. . . . If he saw a blackbird, he had no interest in the thirteen ways in which Stevens saw it: one way was enough, given reasonable lucidity. This is to say that Williams was a moralist, not a philosophic poet” (CA 383). Hence in declaring that Donoghue’s article is “the first piece of real criticism to appear on Williams in a significant English review” (CA 208), Tomlinson was no doubt adding to the armory he would use to protect himself against the allure of Stevens, and undoubtedly also the figure of Williams became part of that armory. Furthermore, it is true that, for all his advertised epistemological preoccupations, Tomlinson too is a moralist, not a philosophical poet. For himself he would probably not want to make the distinction: the epistemology is founded on right perception. But there is a moral insistence in the reiterated concern with achieving a balance between self and world.

If for Stevens each poem is “like / A new knowledge of reality” (CPP 452), for Williams it is a part of reality. Hence Tomlinson’s interest in Williams’ obsessive preoccupation with poetic form. As Tomlinson emphasizes—an emphasis central to his aesthetics—poetic form for Williams is a perceptual event. The introductions to Tomlinson’s *Critical Anthology* and his *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems* both highlight this statement—one of Williams’ “finest aperçus”—from Williams’ Prologue to *Kora in Hell*: a poem is “‘tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from the attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance by giving them thus a full being’ ” (CA 35; SP 16). This statement reveals “Williams’s dissatisfaction with ‘pure imagism,’ ” and it prepares one “for the jagged asymmetries of *Spring and All*” (CA 34, 35).

As a painter himself, Tomlinson pays close attention to the influence of cubism on Williams’ early poetry. Quoting this pivotal sentence from *Spring and All* (about Shakespeare), “‘He holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature’s composition with his own,’ ” Tomlinson comments, “Shakespeare, too, could be made to belong to the moment of cubism” (SP 15). Williams’ “sense of a form” places him “close to the cubist spirit which prevails in the ‘brokenness’ of composition of *Spring and All*,” a book of “cubist fragmentations” (CA 35, 29). Tomlinson writes that “the imagination for Williams was identified with the cubist re-structuring of reality: modern poetry with its ellipses, its confrontation of disparate, its use of verbal collages . . . provided direct analogies” (SP 15). The modern poet, like the cubist painter, should not be mimetic, but should participate in the world as becoming.

This aesthetic wants each poem to be a unique event that avoids pre-determined and predetermining formal procedures such as iamb and quatrain. Tomlinson's letter-poem to Williams maintains that in England

they are deaf to everything
 except the quatrain
 which is virtually

as useless as the couplet.

But, the poem goes on to say, Williams has

 enlivened a discipline
 by a propriety of cadence

that will pass
 into the common idiom
 like the space

of Juan Gris
 and Picasso—
 invented to be of use

and for the rearticulation
 of inarticulate facts. (CA 364–65)

Paul Mariani has argued with some justification that although Williams' three-ply line is a good instrument for registering "a voice twisting its slow way to its fitful conclusions, discovering flashes of resolution in the very process of the poem's unfolding" (this about "Address" from *Journey to Love*), in Tomlinson's hands "what strikes the ear are the older verse forms deeply embedded in the new, more flexible lines," a point he demonstrates by rearranging lines from "The Picture of J. T. in a Prospect of Stone" into heroic and loose octosyllabic couplets (66–67). However, as Brian John has pointed out, this argument ignores the poetry's visual component, which can also mime the act of perception: Mariani "fails to note that the cadence is also visual and intellectual, capturing the rhythms of a perception, and that his own rearranging of Tomlinson's tercets with Marvellian couplets loses the sense of space which the three-ply line creates" (101). Hence, in Tomlinson's letter-poem the configuration of the Williamsite three-ply line is explicitly compared to the spatial alignments of cubist painting.

Moreover, Tomlinson likes Williams' attempt to define poetic form through the metaphor of "dance" because it allows the notion of formal unity to co-exist with that of the poem as perceptual activity without do-

ing violence to the contingent nature of the world perceived: "The form, once it comes, is free of the fact, is a *dance above* the fact" (SP 16). The dance metaphor comprehends the agility of Williams' poetry at its characteristic best, the poem as surprising event: "the vivacity arises . . . from the unexpectedness of Williams' apparently wayward forms" (SP 19). In this context Tomlinson rightly questions J. Hillis Miller's argument in *Poets of Reality* that Williams' "work sees the disappearance of all dualism," for it is "from a duality that much of the interest of his work arises: the words 'accurately accompany' a perception of the forms of reality, they dance over or with these forms, but it is the gap between words and forms that gives poetry its chance to exist and to go on existing" (SP 17). The slippage here in Tomlinson's use of the word "form" from its earlier meaning of poetic form (implicit in that phrase "the form . . . is a *dance above* the fact") is significant: it allows both that forms are out there to be perceived (forms of, belonging to, reality) and that their presence depends on their being discovered in the act of poetry. As Williams argues in *Spring & All*, nature "is not opposed to art but apposed to it" (53).

Tomlinson's sense of Williams' aesthetics makes for a compelling account of that overexposed poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow":

What depends on the red wheelbarrow for Williams is the fact that its presence can be rendered over into words, that the perception can be slowed down and meditated on by regulating, line by line, the gradual appearance of these words. The imagination "accurately accompanies" the wheelbarrow, or whatever facets of reality attract Williams, by not permitting too ready and emotional a fusion with them. (SP 17)

The poem reifies the act of consciousness. This is a poetry of presence, an attempt to objectify, to give form to, the process of perception. Wondering how Williams' poem "Raindrops on a Briar" gets from its opening to its conclusion, Tomlinson writes: "wasn't that devious track the poem's most exact way of saying what it had to and by a superb use of form?" (SP 19).

Out of this understanding comes Tomlinson's essentially Objectivist position on the nature of poetic language: "when the dance with facts suffices, syntax, the forms of grammar, puns, the ambiguous pull between words unpunctuated or divided by line-endings, these all contribute to—accompany—the richness of a reality one can never completely fuse with, but which affords a resistance whereby the I can know itself" (SP 18). Such an alignment of identity with the poetic act recalls the argument of Olson's "Projective Verse"—and Tomlinson makes repeated reference in his prose to Williams' reception of this essay, "with its preference for an explorative syllable-based verse and its invitation 'to step back here to this place of the elements and minims of language . . . to engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical'" (SP 20). In the Introduction to his *Se-*

lected Poems of Williams, Tomlinson returns to the Poundian foundation of Olson's Objectivist poetics with their emphasis on poetry's physiological origins and registers: there is an essential connection between Williams' emphasis on physical place and the nature of his poetic language, between the strong presence in his poetry of the outer world and the way his lines sound. Tomlinson likes Pound's description of the stylistic "jerks, sulks, balks, outblurts and jump-overs" of *Al Que Quiere!* and comments that "Not only is 'locality' . . . the geographic source of Williams' poetry, but 'locality,' seen as the jerks and outblurts of speech rendered on to the here and now of the page, is the source of his lineation." He goes on to argue that "the sound structure of the poems . . . is an expression of strains, breath pauses, bodily constrictions and releases. Thus Williams's 'locality' begins with a somatic awareness, a physiological presence in time and space, and this in quite early poems" (*SP* 11–12). This understanding of the poem as something that registers the poet's bodily presence simultaneously with the world he perceives, a presence manifested in the grain and texture of poetic lineation, is strongly reminiscent of Olson's argument (in "Projective Verse") based on the crucial, if much debated, proposition that "the line comes . . . from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes" (19).

Thus, in Williams, Tomlinson finds confirmation for his conviction that the poem is an exploratory act of self-definition, in which the poet locates his being and identity within but also over against the world he inhabits, in apposition to it: "a resistance whereby the I can know itself." This is the conviction "Swimming Chenango Lake" offers as the alternative to a Stevensian vision:

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.
 (Tomlinson, *CP* 155)

That "language" is "construed" by means of a "somatic awareness" ("the questions his body must frame"). But characteristically the "contraries" are emphasized as much as the "relations" between self and world: the questions are framed in the "all but penetrable element" ("it is the gap between words and forms that gives poetry its chance to exist").

It may seem paradoxical that Williams' preoccupation with form should accompany an emphasis on presence, a search for poetic immediacy and alertness to the unpredictable. But such a paradox underlies the appeal to an analogy with cubism and "dance." It also provided the impulse for Objectivism in America and the invention of such oxymoronic concepts as "open form." It accounts, too, for the appealingly provisional nature of Williams' critical pronouncements. In his essay "Some Presences on the

Scene," Tomlinson quotes approvingly Williams' statement, " 'The goal of writing is to keep a beleaguered line of understanding which has movement' " (221), a statement that lies behind many of Tomlinson's penetratingly attentive readings of particular poems by Williams. He shows how in "Spring Strains" (a poem from *Al Que Quiere!*) the "relation between subject and object appears . . . in a series of images of physical strain"—and this way of putting it rightly notices the crucial pun in Williams' title. It is very much a poem that "feels out its own balks and resistances against those of the scene outside." Tomlinson points out that the poem "end[s], as so often in Williams, on a dangling clause that pulls the main clause towards incompleteness and asymmetry [*sic*]," a device that for Tomlinson signals the poet's refusal to impose himself on the object of his perception (SP 12–13).

That "beleaguered line of understanding" is similarly evident in Williams' poem "Young Sycamore," with its sly syntactical waywardness, where the opening statement, "I must tell you," leads the reader to expect a dependent clause ("I must tell you that . . .") that never comes, an assuredly "open form" maneuver. The sycamore's "undulant / thrust," its action of "sending out / young branches on / all sides" is never syntactically completed, so that at the end of the poem the action of the "twigs / bending forward / hornlike at the top" (SP 63) remains unfinished (there is no final punctuation). The action can be imagined to continue after the poem has stopped, the tree growing beyond the margins of the poem, so to speak. In his essay "Some Presences on the Scene," Tomlinson writes: "It is as if Williams had learned to fit his words accurately to the moment-by-moment progress of the happening he was a part of—a part of, rather than master of, as a more rigid formal approach might have implied" (222), a formulation that implicitly acknowledges the richly contradictory nature of Williams' aesthetic with its desire to give form to the immediate and changeable.

Tomlinson picks up the word "strain" in another poem by Williams, "Trees" (again from *Al Que Quiere!*), to show how its "music" conveys a resistance between poet and world, "the jump-overs at the line breaks enacting the pressure of that straining . . . the poem like the tree dissociating itself from a blent music for [the] 'melody / of harsh threads.' 'Bent' puns and rhymes eagerly against 'blent' in this piece" (SP 13–14). According to this view, syntax and lineation are an index of the poem's continually changing relationship with and participation in the scene: perception is a constant becoming. Thus, Tomlinson's statement (in an interview with Jed Rasula and Mike Erwin) that "language stylizes our perception" (412) may mean that language is necessarily at several removes from perception. But it also means that language gives form to perception, that there is no such thing as a pure medium of cognition; the verbal artefact, the "machine made out of words" (Williams, SE 256), participates in the world it conceives.

To inquire whether Tomlinson's own poetry shows a "beleaguered line of understanding" of the kind he finds in Williams' poetry raises the question of whether such poetic strategies are imitable, whether the very attempt to imitate a technique that makes a virtue of intuition and spontaneity—however self-consciously and with an artlessness only apparent—is not in the end self-defeating. Tomlinson's criticism is revealingly aware of the contradictions inherent in Williams' aesthetic, but to translate that awareness into poetic practice is another matter. It is the great, paradoxical achievement of Williams' poetry at its best to give form to the formless and chancy, to give the impression that pattern emerges from the words as it will. But to many readers Tomlinson's poetry may come across as leaving little to chance (even though one of his poems is called "The Chances of Rhyme").

An instructive example is Tomlinson's poem "The Tree" (from *The Way In and Other Poems*, 1974), evidently written with the three tree poems by Williams in mind: "Spring Strains," "Young Sycamore," and "Trees." "The Tree" employs Williams' short line, as if in imitation of the nervously hesitant, exploratory, visually and auditorily alert sensibility of Williams. This is the sort of lineation that in Williams' hands appears never to know quite where it is going, that lives on its wits, as Tomlinson's reading of Williams ably demonstrates. But is this the effect of Tomlinson's poem, or are its strategies more composed than that? "Young Sycamore" and "The Tree" are both evidently based on photographs, and thus the scenes they depict have already been interpreted by the perceiving artist. But in Tomlinson's poem the reader is made more conscious of the intervention of the poet. According to Bram Dijkstra, "Young Sycamore" "would seem to be a minute description" (190) of a tree in a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, whereas the photograph on which "The Tree" is based is of a treeless urban street of terraced houses; the poem itself tells us that its "tree" is an imaginative invention:

This child, shovelling away
what remains of snow—
a batter of ash and crystals—
knows nothing of the pattern
his bent back lifts
above his own reflection:
it climbs the street-lamp's stem
and cross-bar, branching
to take in all the lines
from gutter, gable, slates
and chimney-crowns to the high
pillar of a mill chimney
on a colourless damp sky:
there in its topmost air

and eyrie rears that tree
his bending sends up
from a treeless street, its roots
in the eye and in the net the shining
flagstones spread at his feet. (Tomlinson, *CP* 247)

These lines evidently recall the endless ending of Williams' "Young Sycamore," with its "twigs / bending forward / hornlike at the top" (*SP* 63). The poet of "The Tree" wants there to be "pattern," but the poem resists the notion of its being humanly imposed. There is a "form of reality" out there that exists both independent of and dependent on the poet's perception. The pattern both "climbs" of its own accord, as it were, and has its "roots in the eye" of the beholder, which could be a camera-eye as well as the eye/I of the poet. That "eye" comes as something of a surprise at the end of the poem, as if to locate a perceiver only after, and therefore as a result of, the exfoliating, "branching" act of looking that is the poem itself: "a resistance whereby the I can know itself."

For Williams the action of "telling" ("I must tell you," or "so much depends / upon") becomes the poem's occasion, the event that implicitly locates a teller in the telling. But the emphasis is on "implicitly." Tomlinson's "The Tree" is explicit in its epistemological instructions. The fact that the child in the poem "knows nothing of the pattern" strongly suggests that the poet, and with his guidance the reader, are to know much about it. The tree that the poet envisions behind this unvisionary, urban scene is at first suggested by that low-key metaphor in "branching." The "pattern" branches out visually and verbally through a series of consonantal and assonantal echoes, making a pattern of sound that reaches up and out, as it were, to "that tree": "gutter, gable, slates," "chimney," "high," "pillar," "mill," "air," "eyrie," "rears," "tree," and on through "bending," "sends," "treeless," "street," "eye," "net," "shining," "spread," "feet." Against these aspiring and inspiring vowel sounds are the undertones of what it is the poem is aspiring to elevate itself above, without at the same time ever allowing itself, in what Tomlinson would regard as romantic afflatus, to leave the physical environment behind: the undertones of words, sounds, and realities such as "colourless," "damp," "flagstones." But at the same time "flagstones" is made to echo "topmost" and "roots," the open vowels that intimate the extent, from bottom to top, of the whole aspiring branching and quasi-visionary "pattern." Even as the poem would "net" the elusively other, it does not want to reject the urban realities.

This poem's verbal and audible pattern shows that Tomlinson has learned much from the kind of music he has heard in Williams' poetry. But Williams at his characteristic best is less direct, more wily, slyer even than this. Would he have felt the need to point out that the tree is present only in the eye of the beholder, that it is in reality "a treeless street," that the inscribing of this pattern is only for the initiated, for the poet-figure

who is privileged to see the pattern that the inhabitants of the scene “know nothing” about? For all its affinities with Williams’ aesthetic, Tomlinson’s poetry is more self-evidently “knowing” in a way that is perhaps inevitable for a writer of the “old world” learning from the “new.”

This edgy poetic relationship between the two poets bears on the fact that the Englishman did not share the American’s openness to a pluralist society. It is arguable that Tomlinson’s attraction to a Williamsite open-form poetic sits uneasily—if productively—with a more “closed” attitude to society. However, by studying Williams’ example, Tomlinson seems to have wanted to come to terms with what he felt was contemporary society’s “leveling” suburbanization of spirit. The opening, title poem of *The Way In*, the collection that contains “The Tree,” addresses the urban expansion of the industrial Midlands where the poet was born. The poet first describes, with considerable bitterness, “the way in” along an urban free-way past “demolitions,” redevelopments of “mannerless high risers,” and “deformations of acrid heat.” He then homes in on an aged couple from the “nomad hierarchy” in the process of being rehoused, cast out from their imagined Eden, she “a sexagenarian Eve,” “our lady of nameless metals.” Finally, the poet tries to imagine a future:

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.
(Tomlinson, *CP* 242)

The poet has coaxed his own style effectively—and thrustingly angry it is earlier in the poem. It “sways” (“The needle-point’s swaying reminder,” begins the first and last stanzas) impressively between scorn and depressed sympathy. The sympathy finds expression not in describing “the dismantlings of a neighbourhood,” but in an imagined world, those “unforeseen configurations.” It is not a style of “jerks, sulks, balks, outbursts and jump-overs,” not a style that participates in the “locality” by finding sympathetic speech for it, that can create an “admiring” participatory verbal “dance” out of the “clutter” of poverty in Williams’ “Pastoral,” which is the first poem in Tomlinson’s *Selected Poems* of Williams:

When I was younger
it was plain to me
I must make something of myself.
Older now
I walk back streets
admiring the houses

of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves
and parts of boxes, all,
if I am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best
of all colors.

No one
will believe this
of vast import to the nation. (*SP* 25)

Richard Swigg, discussing Tomlinson's debt to Williams, appears to prefer the pupil's poetry to the master's. Having noted that in "Pastoral" the "straight idea of American progress is flouted" by the depiction of "the houses / of the very poor," Swigg grudgingly adds, "Apart from the delight they give, . . . there is little further realization" (96). This is in spite of the fact that it is in connection with "Pastoral" and other poems like it that (as Swigg points out) Tomlinson makes this persuasive comment: "Instead of wishing simply to reform the poor . . . [Williams] senses there is a point where the imagination, partaking of this anarchy, could dance with it, could 'lift' it to an answering form, but a form fully responsive to the waywardness and inconclusiveness of daily realities" (*SP* 13). But here, according to Swigg, is where Tomlinson outdoes Williams. Tomlinson's "answering form," argues Swigg, "is intellectually sharper than the American's. . . . '[A]nswerable' denotes accountability to fact, but also the capacity for reply. For the nimble human consciousness, separate from what it dances with, undertakes a dialogue where it can 'answer' fact—particularly the degraded, urban variety—with the language of possibilities" (96). But it is precisely the judgmental consciousness in words such as "degraded" that Williams' poetry does not want to countenance. The "further realization" of "Pastoral" is the poet's relationship to what he is describing, which is not easy to characterize, but is indeed "responsive" and alertly, even uneasily, "answerable." The difference within similarity between the titles "Pastoral" and "The Tree" makes the point. Both titles are ironic, for Williams' poem is not a pastoral idyll but a suburban slum, so to speak, and Tomlinson's tree is absent from the urban scene he is describing. But "Pastoral" intimates the poet's would-be benign attitude

toward his subject, whereas "The Tree" represents what the poet would imaginatively impose on his subject.

The lightly self-parodic irony at the start of "Pastoral" immediately acknowledges that the poet implicates himself in the act of describing his surroundings. The poem's way of "partaking of this anarchy," of "dancing with it" (an effect conveyed in part by the faintly syncopated rhythms), reflects as much on the poet's place in the scene as on the scene itself. If he indirectly berates himself for an erstwhile patronizingly youthful attitude that would have shunned the poor neighborhood, his older self can be accused of a voyeuristically patronizing attitude in the very act of "admiring the houses / of the very poor." Yet the poet seems to know this, and he goes on implicitly to acknowledge his own self-regard by raising the possibility that he might be "fortunate" (although the idea of the "fortunate" in these circumstances is problematized even as it is uttered). Willy sincerity characterizes the poet's self-blame and self-exculpation, and the concluding sentence deflates pretension by speaking the truth, even as it lays claim with quiet irony to a certain self-worth with its disclaimer of "vast import to the nation." Williams' adroit handling of tone and attitude here may lay him open to the charge of false naivety, but it reveals an attention to human awareness and possible self-deception arguably more "nimble" than that of Tomlinson's "The Tree," which by comparison comes across as having designs on the reader and on the scene it would depict.

Swigg's account of Tomlinson's debt to Williams inadvertently betrays this tendency in the English poet. For instance, Swigg argues that Tomlinson's poem "Canal" (from *A Peopled Landscape*, 1963), while it "looks back . . . to the kind of patient, disclosing style" (96) of *Spring & All*, still outdoes Williams in its discriminations: "Quietly yet decisively, the human observer, via the swans, gives room and habitation to the pulse that could, with stronger beat, recivilize house and city" (99). The poem concludes with

the eye of the discriminating
swans that seek
for something else
and the blank brink
concludes them without conclusion. (Tomlinson, *CP* 65)

Swigg writes of "the poem's moral and visual exactness" (99), and he rightly claims that Tomlinson's characteristic moral stance is evident in the way the poem grounds its aspiration for "something else" in the actual and visible. But would Williams be happy concluding (albeit "without conclusion") a poem with that gesture toward "something else," or with the choked back despair of "the blank brink"?

"The language of possibilities," in Swigg's phrase, describes well the impulse behind much of Tomlinson's poetry. That language persuasively

fills the gap between the “degraded” urban realities and the poet’s vision, those “roots in the eye” of a poem such as “The Tree.” Tomlinson feels that he has to “coax [his] style from these disparities,” that he has to work against the grain of his material, whereas Williams’ style would make a new music out of the disparities. Williams’ poetry is content to move in a world of actualities, acknowledging even as it does so that the poet’s presence in his landscape is provisional and subject to vagaries of personality and perception, whereas Tomlinson’s frequently looks beyond the actual to conjure up possibilities. This characteristic tendency to imagine “unforeseen configurations,” however well-grounded, is more a confounding than an extension of Williams’ aesthetic. In terms of the present discussion, it represents the Stevensian pole of Tomlinson’s imagination, where “the image of an interiority” vies with the visible world, where landscape transforms into mindscape.

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