REGINALD GIBBONS

"WITH SO EXACT A CARE"

Charles Tomlinson, *The Shaft,* O.U.P., 1978, 54pp., £2.50

A peculiar sense of contained energy, of taut oppositions, marks the best poems in Charles Tomlinson's new volume, and this tension is perhaps what readers of his earlier work will recognize as his poetic signature. Much of what we think of as characteristic of his poems — the precision of language and perception, the concern with problems of the intellect as well as of the emotions, the long sentences broken over many free-verse lines — will be found in *The Shaft.* If one is always reminded when reading Tomlinson's poems of his happy recourse to certain American sources — literary, artistic, topographical — it is worth noting more exactly that what Tomlinson seems to have found most useful in the American poets he has read with sympathy, Williams especially, has been not so much formal devices nor an insistance on the bare presence of *things* in poems, but more a sort of general strategy suited to the celebration of phenomena: poems of the moment, poems which, whatever their matter, phenomenon or event or personality, treat the moments of specific occasions. Hence in Tomlinson's poems the acute sensitivity to perception, primarily visual, springs from a heightened sense of momentary impressions, often stumbled on, or breaking in over other concerns:

> ... the moment itself, abrupt
> With the pure surprise of seeing,
> Will outlast all after-knowledge and its map —
> ("The Gap")

The sort of attention enacted in this poem, and the way in which it establishes a *sequence* of perception, recalls De Quincey's account of what Wordsworth said one midnight, apropos a bright star he glimpsed after giving up hope of hearing, ear to the ground, the distant wheels of a newspaper-carrier's cart: "I have remarked, from my earliest days, that, if under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if

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this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances." Making the necessary allowances for Wordsworth's way of talking, and his sense of the beautiful, far less scrupulous than that which must be maintained by a poet in our time, we have here a venerable and still pertinent account of a special sort of poetic perception. Tomlinson exploits it.

Perhaps calling the reader's attention to this is merely going over old ground, but one particular aspect of Tomlinson's perceptual precision deserves to be recognized anew, as it is so characteristic of his descriptive poems, and so far from the relaxed, ambling manner that others have inherited from Wordsworth: this is the tensed musculature of both thought and emotion which lies under the smooth, carefully wrought surface. Even in the brief quotation from "The Gap", a taut paradox — that of a transitory instant outlasting any record of itself — ripples under the calm lines. Such paradox often informs the stopped-time word-pictures of this volume. An often implicit (though sometimes blatant) "as if" reveals the contradictory quality of what breaks in on the senses as a surprise, capturing the stage from the usually more insistent and ordinary world. That this revelation is elusive and ephemeral is what generates the tension, for the poem does apprehend it, and hold it down.

To take a fundamental instance: as in the quotation above, the impulse to resist time — willfully, hopefully, wistfully — has no doubt been lodged in poems since they were first composed in a cavemouth, beside a fire; Tomlinson investigates this impulse in several ways, in numerous situations, making it the very matter of poems without seeming to write at all airily about writing itself — the danger to which so many poets occasionally succumb. At times the statement is bald:

> As if this place could be pried out of now,
> As if we could fly in the face of all we know.
> ("Near York")

But sometimes, more subtly and more effectively, the contradiction of transcending time is sustained in the structure and pace of the poem, as in the lovely "Near Corinium":

The recalcitrance
of whorl-wheel fossils
of belemnite teeth
shatterings
from the meteors
gods had hurled
according
to those who also
lie in the subsoil these inlay:
'I, Caius Martius restored
this Jupiter column
the Christians had defaced'
of which
only the limestone base . . .
those who,
these which —
history's particles refusing
both completion
and extinction:
traceries
finer than the lines
of spider floss:
it is as though
this torn tapestry
faded calligraphy
were whole
if only one could adjust
one's eyes to them:
excavations
for the by-pass:
the dust-motes turning like stars
which the air-currents lift

It is tempting to linger over this poem — to ponder the swift metamorphoses from traceries to spider floss to tapestry to calligraphy; to explore the delicate hint of a pun concealed in "recalcitrance" (a false hint, suggesting L. *calx,* lime, instead of proper L. *calx,* heel: but there too something intriguing) as the hint of limestone flows quickly into the whiteness of the belemnite, the faint echo there — entirely by association —

of Montale, and then . . . But for now, consider the way "shatterings" hurled down perhaps by gods — after their central identification with "history's particles refusing both completion and extinction", like the ruined fragments of the works of men—turn to rising dust-motes; that is, they enact a reversal of the downward movement with which the poem began, a forceful feat of poetic levitation which holds decay balanced against a fierce resistance to loss and oblivion.

The ostensible occasion of "Near Corinium" (the prior, steady observation that enabled the second, penetrating observation to be recognized as heart-felt) is "excavations for the by-pass" — which serves to emphasize how acutely Tomlinson registers a horror of decay when he confronts scenes shaped by industry and urban pressures, where he witnesses the ruin of traditional landscape before the developers' and roadbuilders' onslaught. But Tomlinson also laments the loss of what he cherishes of the work of men; he does not simply prefer a "natural" landscape, as "Near Corinium" already shows, and which, in any case, he would be unable to find without difficulty in England; he prefers an integrated landscape, therefore one which, unfortunately, can be spoiled by neglect as well as by the callous frenzy of building:

> D'Annunzio saw it all behind golden mist,
> A wavering of decay, vegetable, vast,
> That had taken hold on each statue, each relief,
> And was eating and unmaking them, as if leaf by leaf.
> ("Lines Written in the Euganean Hills")

More poignant expression can be found in "Casarola," in which a millstream can be heard "squandering its way towards the mill" that has fallen into ruin, "a desolation/ Of still-perfect masonry." And although Tomlinson acknowledges that "There is a beauty/ In this abandonment," he adds immediately, "there would be more/ In the slow activity of smoke/ Seeping at roof and lintel." So here, nature

> Daily takes distinctness from that signature
> Men had left there in stone and wood,
> Among waning villages, above the cities of the plain.

It may be that Tomlinson habitually responds to human

dilemmas by way of landscape; but in the book's opening poems on figures of the French revolution, or in "Portobello Carnival 1973," "The Death of Will," or several poems in the last section, one finds that when the poet turns his powers entirely on human dilemmas, he produces his finest work. What unites these poems to the clean, adroit renderings of natural phenomena and events is again the tense musculature, a balancing of opposing forces and impulses which refuses to simplify any event, object, or person into a static repose, but which insists on that uncertainty of counterpoised tensions which is the mark of living things, of historical change, and even of those inanimate spectacles, like the clouds, that seem models of reversal and swift metamorphosis. It is difficult to demonstrate this quality of Tomlinson's poems with brief quotation, for to the credit of the poet it is most often a structural and syntactic element, as in "Near Corinium", not a matter of a few isolated lines or one or two images. In the section that most depends on a static apprehension of the problem, in fact, "Perfections," the poems suffer from their very explicitness, which robs them of strength, though conveniently one of these poems provides us with the credo of the volume:

> . . . it is here
>   That I like best, where the waters disappear
> Under the bridge-arch, shelving through coolness,
>   Thought, halted at an image of perfection
> Between gloom and gold, in momentary
>   Stay, place of perpetual threshold
>
> ("Departure")

"It is here that I like thought best" — and the sytactic dislocation allows us to take another sense: the waters shelve through coolness and through thought — waters in apparent stasis, the wavelets holding place while the streams rushes through them, as thought does. An insistence on *thinking* about what one sees and about the often obscure pleasure that seeing provides marks Tomlinson's work with a special and pleasing austerity. Pleasing because it derives not from the narrowness, however intense, or the enervated conception of poetry, that mark some poets, but instead from continually resorting to keen, disciplined perception, as the spring of emotion.

The immediate passage from sensuous experience, meshed in its first instant with emotion, to intellectual inquiry, is a primary concern and a distinction of these poems. Tomlinson has mastered, or captured, rather, a quality of light, a tone of voice, that sharpens what one feels by carefully guiding ones eyes, and this is all the more remarkable given the especially elusive emotions that interest Tomlinson: this is the delicacy of his descriptive powers and the tension in his poems, poems which refine overt announcements of feeling out of the lines till the emotional effect on the reader lies in a special realm of subtle changes of mind and mood toward familiar things:

> The cold came. It has photographed the scene
> With so exact a care....
>
> ("In the Balance")

Or, from "Death in Venice":

> A high stack
> flaring-off waste from Mestre
> hangs beaconed across water
> where each outboard's wake
> is flexing, unmaking those marble
> images, bridals of stone
> and sea, restless to have
> that piled longevity
> down and done.

A careful playing against expectation often lies at the center of the poems, as things seek out their opposites; this idea, often latent, occasionally comes to the surface, as in "Sky Writing" or in a subtler way in the extraordinary poem "The Scream." Eagerly following this lead, which experience will again and again drop in one's path, Tomlinson can finally sense that his grasp on contradiction is firm enough to allow him to draw a kind of a moral:

> ... long ago
> This blunt lapsarian instinct, poetry,
> Found life's sharpest, readiest
> Rhyme, unhesitating — it was knife —
> By some farm-yard gate, perhaps,
> That led back from nature to history.
>
> ("MacDuff")

Making this connection, nature and history, constitutes the greatest challenge poets face, when nature though still wonderfully threatening shows itself daily weaker than we had thought against our devastations, and when history, incredibly, grows more brutal and incoherent. That we ourselves are both nature and history provides the poet with his material; Tomlinson is one of the few poets strong enough to make the connection between them, whether the poem's occasion is of a sudden, interrupting sort —

> I took a tree for a guide — I mean
> Gazing sideways, I had chosen idly
> Over walls, fields and other trees,
> This single elm, or it had chosen me —
> ("Tree")

or, as in "The Scream," it shoves itself violently, insistently, into consciousness. The best sections of this book, the first and last, "Histories" and "In Arden," resonate with Tomlinson's special power, his pictorial mastery and his precise language, the exacting care with which he treat our lives.