1976

Underground

Charles Tomlinson

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Refuse all final outline, drift
From a dew-cold blue into green-shot grey:
   In the intensity of final light
A time of loomings, then a chime of lapses
   Failing from woodslopes, summits, sky,
Leaving, for the moonrise to un tarnish,
   Hazed airy fastnesses where the last rays vanish.

Underground

Tall—too tall
for a dancer—I’m
a dancer’ was all
she’d say, shrieking
clicking a routine
in the one space
they’d cleared between
her and the wall: those
nearest, on the packed
platform were backing
away to avoid
her flailing legs:
animal activity,
decay of faculty
bespoke a woman
who moved with neither
pain nor thought,
insensibly subdued
to endless sound:
all the crowd
she disowned utterly
facing her wall,
lost in the space
they’d left her
and never once
did she turn
round to accost
or denounce them: well-
dressed, you could see
with her matching
tartan coat
and trousers, she belonged
in the general prosperity:
even her song
and patter seemed
merely an acceleration
of the battering set
left to itself: never
lost for words
but lost among,
infested by them—
whether it was feet
followed tongue
or tongue feet—
she neither slowed
nor rested: her scat-
song, her drop
into sudden blues
would stagger
towards a pattern:
she had sleep-talked
her way to an exact
sorrow and then
her voice cracked on it
and drowned in the sounds
she danced to:
the train came:
would she take it?
She got in:
at each stop
her din broke
as the doors parted,
then was shut
back under the roar
as we slid forward:
getting down
I looked to where
her song sprang
to try and see
the face she'd hidden:
she rode standing:
and two hands
beating a rhythm
on the shut pane
as the doors again
closed to, were all
you could catch
except where,
the metal frame
masking the rest of her,
the mouth flexed on
fulminating its song
into the tunnel.

Charles Tomlinson: With Respect to Flux /
A. K. Weatherhead

The poetry of Charles Tomlinson is of interest not least for its comment on form, in a period when discussion about form and literature is lively enough. Whether there is form in reality, whether form in a scene is part of the act of perception, or whether it belongs not to reality but to the alien "order of discourse," in a word whether in the literary act form is discovered or imposed—these questions arise in Tomlinson's work; and though they receive, usually, ambivalent answers, they firmly secure our engagement. Also, if it is true that geometrical regularity in art by momentarily arresting the flux of being offers repose to the man disquieted by the obscurity and confusion of the world, then again in the manipulation of geometric lines in his poems Tomlinson may be considered a spokesman for these entangled times.

He has amassed by now a substantial number of volumes of poetry, his own and translations. They contain no lines that spring or will spring to the mind to appease it in specific situations—the criterion Auden once proposed for testing; for of the clothes of the perfectly dressed man one remembers nothing. The poems are formed, one must imagine, with exquisite care; and they are exquisite. Tomlinson is admired by traditionalists, obviously; but he is accepted also by the radicals—those in whose presence one mustn't praise Philip Larkin.

He bridges in fact a number of divisions. He is from Staffordshire, the