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Michel Delville

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Michel Delville

The Civility of Relationships: Charles Tomlinson and the Conversion of American Modernism

In *Some Americans: A Personal Record* (1981), Charles Tomlinson touches on his beginnings as a poet and records the process of ‘mental emigration’ by which he educated himself in American literature, mainly in order to escape from what he describes as ‘that suffocation which has affected so much English art ever since the death of Byron’.¹ In the 1950s, Tomlinson’s complaints were more specifically directed against the overblown rhetoric of Dylan Thomas and the Apocalypse as well as against the deliberately low key, down-to-earth ‘Little Englandism’ of the Movement poets. By contrast, what attracted him to the American modernists was ‘a sense of cleanliness in the phrasing’ (*Americans* 2), a model of economy and exactness epitomized by Ezra Pound’s ‘radiant world where one cuts through another with a clear edge’ (11). Because of his unflagging interest in Pound and the American model, Tomlinson was soon categorized as the most ‘Americanized’ of all English poets. His affinities with American modernism, however, also contributed to the resistance his work originally encountered in England at a time when it had already found an audience in the United States, where it was praised by Hugh Kenner, William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. ‘The fifties’, he notes, ‘were an unpropitious time to write the kind of verse that interested me, and England an unpropitious place to publish it. An heir of Pound, Moore, Stevens must inevitably appear an odd fish in English waters’ (12).

The Imagist and Objectivist emphasis on clarity, detachment and the direct apprehension of the objective world proved increasingly formative in Tomlinson’s early works. In this respect, also, his interest in modern American poetry is inseparable from his rejection of the rhetorical excess and all-encompassing egotism of the neo-Romantic and Apocalyptic mind, as well as the accompanying notion that poetry is a medium for the expression of personality and intensity. The emphasis on accurate observation and description Tomlinson absorbed from his American mentors indeed brings us to what he describes as his own ‘basic theme’: ‘that one

¹ Charles Tomlinson, *Some Americans: A Personal Record* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 12, 19.