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Richard Swigg

Charles Tomlinson's American Voices

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Richard Swigg

Charles Tomlinson's American Voices

Charles Tomlinson's poetry, from *The Necklace* (1955) to *The Vineyard Above the Sea* (1999), has continued a remarkable dialogue with America. Adapting different verse-forms by Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, he has extended his range and sharpened his grasp of a Wordsworthian syntactic inheritance. But he has also brought the sound and texture of American voices themselves into the poetry. Re-evoked—indeed, at times, retrieved from the unheard or buried—they attest to the widened sense of singularities, in people and place, that the experience of America has given Tomlinson—that which, translated back to Europe with a new poetic collectivity, can also return once more, enlivened, to its original country.

Yet, for all the interchange of the poetry, what mattered to the young poet of *The Necklace* was the creation of a flexible lucidity in verse that was unadorned without being starkly over-bare. When he says in 'Observation of Facts', 'A dryad is a sort of chintz curtain / Between myself and a tree', he rejects the intrusion by myth or too-comfortable ego that obfuscates the independent reality of fact. He is remembering the words of Martin Buber in *I and Thou* ('I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but the tree itself'), as well as Whitman's in the 1855 *Preface to Leaves of Grass*, affirming the poet who 'swears ... I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect ... to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains.' This tough-dealing American

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