Charles Tomlinson and the Nameless You

Judith P. Saunders
Marist College

The British poet Charles Tomlinson (1927--) frequently addresses his poems to a specific but unnamed listener-companion. Such deliberate concealment of identity achieves a paradoxical effect: it stimulates readers' curiosity and heightens the importance of the name that is withheld. Functioning as an unrestricted signifier, the "you" of the poems assumes an all-inclusive, larger-than-life character. Patterns of metaphor involving celestial light, such as moon, star, or sun, further exalt the nameless presence. The implications of Tomlinson's strategy of omission are wide-ranging, aesthetic and philosophical as well as personal. Casting an aura of mystery around an often invoked and clearly significant Other in his poems, he underlines the power of naming in an unusual fashion.

Many of Charles Tomlinson's poems invoke an addressee who is, at least ostensibly, the primary recipient of impressions and insights communicated to readers indirectly: we listen in. This not unusual rhetorical situation calls attention to itself in Tomlinson's work chiefly because of his decision, in certain intriguing instances, not to identify the individual to whom a poem is directed. This *you* is centrally important to a poet-speaker who keeps persistent silence concerning the identity (and gender) of the unnamed person, and who also refrains from defining the exact relationship between the addressee and himself. A name that exists but deliberately is not employed draws attention to itself by its very absence; hence the withholding of identification endows the conspicuously *not signified* person or object with great evocative force. This sort of backhanded salute to the power of naming occurs regularly in Tomlinson's writing.

Names 54:3 (September 2006): 263–272
ISSN:0027-7738

"Winter Journey" (included in the 1987 volume *The Return*) provides an especially elaborate example, focusing on a cherished yet unnamed addressee. Longer than is typical of Tomlinson's work, this four-part poem is directed toward a domestic intimate, now homeward bound following a journey to an unspecified destination. The speaker muses aloud, as if his thoughts might be transmitted directly to the consciousness of the absent one. "You wrote to tell of your arrival," he begins, noting that during the time the letter was composed he had been asleep and "dreaming your way for you." The words of the letter assume an almost physical power of contact, as if the "hand" that penned them actually "reached out to touch me." Continuing, the speaker makes reference to an evidently long common history in a shared home, including domestic catastrophes faced together ("I thought back to our flood"). Laying the table "where, tonight, we eat," and "uncork[ing] the wine," he prepares with almost sacramental care for an arrival he compares to the closing of a circle.[1] This "circle" is finished, i.e., fully whole, only when the journeying other returns to the point of origin and of belonging, "to complete itself where you began."

The affection implied throughout "Winter Journey" is profound and abiding. Yet nowhere in the poem is the "you" (to whom every word is directed) addressed by name. Readers are left wondering why the poet chooses not to specify the human context the poem so tenderly commemorates. Some of Tomlinson's most attentive readers have filled in the blank. In their extended discussion of "Winter Journey," for example, both Michael Kirkham and Brian John, authors of book-length studies of Tomlinson's work, unhesitatingly identify the addressee as Brenda Tomlinson, the poet's wife.[2] From one point of view, this supplying of information the poet has omitted seems harmless, merely confirmation of what readers are likely to surmise. To discuss the poem in this fashion—in terms of "Brenda's absence" or the "wife's return"—nevertheless

serves to override a conspicuous auctorial silence, leaving its purposes unexamined. Typically, readers could not be expected to ferret out the information the poet has suppressed and would be approaching the poem, of necessity, without it. Evidently Tomlinson believes there is something to be gained from this reticence on his part, and it is worth considering what that something might be.

That the refusal to disclose identity in "Winter Journey," and in other poems similarly directed toward a domestic intimate, represents deliberate intention on Tomlinson's part, even a cursory review of his work proves. He is ordinarily not shy about naming the various *you*'s, singular or plural, to whom a considerable number of the poems are addressed. Either by way of title or, more frequently, by way of epigraph, such poems name one or more individuals who function as addressees in the text that follows. In many instances Tomlinson invokes well known, predominantly literary, figures, including William Carlos Williams, Octavio Paz, Donald Davie, Ivor Gurney, James Dickey, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson. Readers' probable familiarity with such individuals and with their accomplishments lends an extra dimension to a poem's statement. Just as frequently, though, Tomlinson's poems name as addressees friends and acquaintances not in the public eye, e.g., "for Richard and Eileen," "for Paula and Fred," "for Olivia," "for Brian Cox." Readers are not likely to recognize such names, nor are they expected to do so. Including them serves the purpose of paying tribute to friendship and to friendship's occasions. Besides gratifying those for whom and to whom the lines are composed, such poems suggest to the general reader the warmth and extent of the poet's private relationships. The abundance of these individual tributes identifies him as a social being, one who values friends and whose memories of joint expeditions are colored by his affection for his companions.

Poems dedicated to specific individuals articulate and preserve the essence of an experience for those with whom it was shared, directing attention to special perceptions and memories. Interactions between speaker and addressee do not take stage center, but rather provide a human context for the insights to be communicated. Thus the poet recalls mushroom-gathering excursions, mountain walks, automobile trips, and garden tours, typically lingering over descriptions of landscape and weather, natural phenomena and processes. Home from a trip to Japan, for instance, he observes that he is viewing the wintry-bare branches of English trees through a new perceptual lens, i.e., his recently garnered impressions of the starker outlines of Japanese trees. Instead of reporting this intriguing experience of "double" perception directly to his readers, he titles his poem "Letter to Uehata" and allows readers to overhear the comments he sends back to his Japanese host. Tomlinson utilizes this type of rhetorical technique at regular intervals throughout his career, addressing numerous poems to specifically identified people. The landscape of his verse is strewn with indirect testaments to a rich personal life, the act of naming demonstrating his appreciation of a wide spectrum of human connections.

Given the large number of poems he dedicates to named individuals, it is remarkable that not one is labeled specifically as having been composed for, or to, his wife. A few poems are addressed to other members of his immediate family (e.g., "to My Daughter" or "For a Granddaughter"), but none to his spouse. In place of individually designated poems, he has dedicated each book of poems, *in toto*, "To Brenda," noting in the preface to the *Collected Poems* that "all [his] books were written" for her "in the first place." Not having hesitated to inscribe her name prominently in the front of every book, any more than he has hesitated to address countless poems to friends clearly identified in epigraphs or titles, why, then, has Tomlinson held back from writing even a single poem designated "For Brenda," or "To My Wife"? Why

does he also refrain from identifying her, even if tangentially, in the body of texts clearly centering on her? Since some poems, like "Winter Journey," appear very obviously to concern her, his decision not to use her name or to specify her relationship to him in such instances undoubtedly is well thought through and must have discernable purpose.

One reason for omitting his wife's name might be a desire to honor the couple's privacy, a wish to exercise restraint in the midst of a poetic age dominated by confessional impulses that Tomlinson emphatically has rejected (see, for instance, "Against Extremity"). At the same time, the omission of this one crucial name serves to highlight the presence of the significant other rather than to efface it. Compelling the reader to make active inquiry, to wonder who the addressee of a poem might be, the poet makes the never definitively provided answer seem all the more important. In this way the decision not to identify his wife actually helps to underline her centrality in his life and art. Naming her in occasional poems in fact might cause readers to lose sight of the front-page dedications to her and thus detract from their all-encompassing effect. Since, as he states, "all" the poems are written for her, it follows that poems specifically invoking her need not be individually identified. Unless other names are provided, readers might plausibly speculate, Tomlinson's wife is perhaps the implied addressee in every single poem employing a rhetorical situation based upon an unnamed "you" or "us." Her presence literally *goes without saying*, and hence the poet refrains from mentioning it explicitly. Almost another self, this *you* is an ever-present companion, confidante, and counselor. Each time Tomlinson invokes an unnamed addressee, no matter how peripheral the implied dialoguing may be to a poem's thematic center, he reaffirms the existence of a person so near, so trusted, as to require no announcement. Thus his silence seals the special significance of the one individual who needs no naming: she is overwhelmingly, unutterably, important.

The impulse that motivates Tomlinson to keep details of her personal life private at the same time lends a liberating inclusiveness to his poetry. Assuming a larger-than-life character, the *you* he declines to name becomes universally applicable because readers are free to imagine a beloved intimate of any sort. The domestic companion for whom the poet-speaker waits and to whom he addresses his thoughts in "Winter Journey," for example, need not be a wife. Since neither gender not an explicitly erotic component to the relationship is specified, the situation Tomlinson describes conceivably might involve a pair of grown siblings, or a parent and adult child, as well as unmarried partners or same-sex friends and lovers, i.e., any two people united by a strong bond of affection and a shared daily life. To identify his wife as the "you" of the poem would push one kind of human relationship—marriage—into a position of pre-eminence, and Tomlinson's refusal to do this broadens greatly his tribute to a decisively meaningful other. His strategy of omission represents acknowledgement that human attachment can take many forms, that its value is not dictated by extrinsic factors, whether social, legal, or biological, but is intrinsic and inestimable. To overlook the implications of Tomlinson's deliberate reticence in such poems is to underestimate his commitment to a conception of intimacy larger by far than the one example which employment of a name would instance. In guarding privacy, paradoxically, he transcends the purely personal.

He further underscores the universally applicable and extraordinary character of his communion with the unnamed *you* by recording unusual astral phenomena that consistently mark their togetherness. In "The Recompense," for example, he reminisces about a dark walk through "crowding trees" to view a comet whose appearance has been predicted. When they arrive at the selected vantage point, however, he and his companion are disappointed: "We waited. / No comet came." Giving up, finally, the two run back through the chilly night,

only to be confronted, as they reverse direction, with "a growing glow" in the sky. The source of this illumination proves to be "the immense circle of the risen moon," which apparently welcomes the approaching humans, i.e., "traveling to meet us." Standing out in dark relief in the "glow" of moonlight, the trunks and curving branches of the surrounding trees now resemble a kind of "cursive script where every loop and knot / Glimmered in hieroglyph." This sight proves more than sufficient "recompense" for the anticipated comet, fully its equal in aesthetic surprise. As the speaker's metaphors suggest ("script," "hieroglyph"), the moonlit landscape appears irradiated with meanings that include the "we" of the poem:

> We—recompense for a comet lost—
> Could read ourselves into those lines
> Pulsating on the eye and to the veins,
> Thrust and countercharge to our own racing down,
> Lunar flights of the rooted horizon.

Now, as the intimacy of the walk through darkness is followed by "pulsating" excitement, a subtly rendered eros infuses the scene. The moon is both source and reflection ("thrust and countercharge") of a "racing" human response. Speeding through the night, caught in the moon's eerie brilliance, the pair of humans has in effect become the equivalent of the missing comet. Enacting their own "lunar flight," the two find their relationship commemorated by a more than earthly display of light. Their intimacy is exalted as they behold themselves comprehended, seemingly, in a vaster design.

In poems such as "Varenna," "Night fishers," "Night Ferry," "The Journey," or "The Flood," to mention only a few of the most striking instances, Tomlinson similarly associates moonlight, starlight, or sunlight with the *you* of his poems. The exhibitions of light he describes are bewitchingly lovely and strange, suggestive of "mystery" and even miracle ("Varenna"). Thus they provide fitting symbolic embellishment of the primary bond he quietly celebrates. He

and the all-important other are visited in their recently flooded living quarters by a "vertigo of sunbeams" shimmering on water-glazed surfaces ("The Flood"); they watch the "gilding" effect of a moving "column of sundown" reflected in lake waters, creating "fire-threads" or "flames that wrestle and dance" ("Varenna"); they examine white nettle at night by torchlight, entranced by the "immense, shifting crystal / Latticed by shadow" opening to their sight, each separate leaf starkly illumined" in serrated, dazzling divisions" ("Night Transfigured").

In "Night Fishers," the poet and his unnamed companion witness an amazing metamorphosis, a cosmic exchange of identities: the dark ocean water all at once "seem[s] / A sky spread out beneath us," while the phosphorescent fish they track resemble "constellations / Swimming into view." In this transformation of "sea" into "firmament," the universe seems characterized momentarily by oneness, "holding both mind and eye" in the sudden perception of wondrous, nearly mystical, unity. The arrival of the cherished companion in "Winter Journey" similarly is marked by the speaker's meditation on constellations, the Pleiades and "the plough and bear," along with many others unknown to him by name. This "revolving multitude" adds a dimension of wonder to the darkness, "opening out the immensity flame by flame." These astral "flame[s]" function further as guides and guardians: they are "lights that beam you in." Slipping into religiously tinged vocabulary that matches his awed gratitude for the life he shares with the returning "you," the poet-speaker announces that he is a "celebrant in the mass of night." The "feast of light" jewelling the firmament provides the only possible equivalent, a fitting frame, for the relationship the poem hallows: "the moon's high altar glittering up from earth, / Burning and burgeoning against your return."

The moon assumes special importance again in "The Morning Moon," as Tomlinson meditates on an astronomical

spectacle laden with peculiarly pointed personal significance: a moon poised in broad daylight above his own home. Since he himself has "failed to see" this atypical occurrence, he bases his conception of it on a report given him by the "you" of the poem: the moon "appeared to stop (you tell me) / above the house-top." He describes for the benefit of the addressee the mental image he has formed, second-hand, in response to this report, admitting that his imaginative re-creation of the scene is an exaggerated one:

> in my picture of the scene
> the sun is lost to me,
> with this high visitant
> in the zenith of the mind's eye.

In his imagining, this daytime moon eclipses the very sun and hangs suspended, with apparent permanence, right over his own roof, "as still as the pole star."

This comparison between moon and pole star suggests that the heavens themselves are identifying the speaker's home as the fixed point in his existence. Home is where he gets his bearings, what he steers by; implicitly, it is site and sign of a human relationship that serves him as a moral, intellectual, and spiritual North Star. This poem pays tribute twice over to the unnamed addressee, to whom the speaker is indebted in the first place for the shared perception of something marvelous, and whose presence in their shared home he hails, metaphorically, as unshakably central to his life. The power of statement here is enhanced by the delicate nod to Shakespeare's Sonnet #116, another poem in which "the marriage of true minds" is figured in terms of "an ever fixéd mark" and navigational guide: a "star" of immeasurable "worth[]." Placing domestic intimacy in a celestial glow, Tomlinson emphasis the ultimately universal character of a *you* who not only is unnamed but finally nameless. Repeatedly, in his poems, light emanating form another sphere lends special beauty and splendor, an all but supernatural incandescence, to the human relationship it

distinguishes. By such means, the uniquely significant other in Tomlinson's poetry comes to assume a role more elevated, and more potent, than any the act of naming could define.

Notes

[1]Both Michael Kirkham and Brian John discuss the circle as a structural and thematic feature of "Winter Journey." See *Passionate Intellect: The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 198, 305, and *The World as Event: The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 77.

[2]*Passionate Intellect*, 297-305; *World as Event*, 76-79.

Works Cited

John, Brian. *The World as Event: The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989.

Kirkham, Michael. *Passionate Intellect: The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999.

Tomlinson, Charles. "Against Extremity." *The Collected Poems*. 1985. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 163.

_____. "The Flood." *The Collected Poems*. 346-48.

_____. "Letter to Uehata." *Annunciations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. 43.

_____. "The Morning Moon." *The Door in the Wall*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. 61.

_____. "Night Ferry." *The Return*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 50.

_____. "Night Fishers." *The Collected Poems*. 374.

_____. "Night Transfigured." *The Collected Poems*. 160-61.

_____. Preface. *The Collected Poems*.

_____. "The Recompense." *The Collected Poems*. 319-20.

_____. "Varenna." *Jubilation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. 20.

_____. "Winter Journey." *The Return*. 33-35.