Charles Tomlinson: The Way of His World
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Charles Tomlinson’s remark that “the fundamental interests of a poet’s work do not alter” holds true of his own work, and as the volumes of poems continue to appear, it becomes evident that Relations and Contraries, the title of his first book published in 1951, may some day be used for his Collected Works. Critics and reviewers have seen from the beginning that his imagery and vocabulary are concerned with, to use his own phrase, “the fineness of relationships,” being comprised of bridges, windows, meetings, encounters, truces, reciprocations, and resistances. Twenty-five years after that first volume, however, we have come to a point when the variousness, adventurousness, even deviousness of these fine relationships can be analyzed and followed with greater appreciation. Tomlinson has been steadily extending his range. There have been translations from Russian, Spanish, Italian, and Mexican poets, and poems of homage and dialogue with many others; two volumes reproducing his paintings, and one multilingual collaboration with poets from Italy,

3Versions from Fyodor Tyutchev (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960); Castilian Ilexes: Versions from Antonio Machado (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963); two translations from Lucio Piccolo in Written on Water; several translations in Octavio Paz, Configurations, a volume of Paz’s poems translated into English by several hands (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971).
France, and Mexico. Several volumes show him traveling from his home in the south of England to other provinces and countries: The Necklace (1955) and Seeing Is Believing (1958, 1960) have Italian subject matter; American Scenes (1966) goes to New Mexico, the New England states, and Mexico; The Way of a World (1969) to the western states again; Written on Water (1972) to the Isle of Skye and Italy again; The Way In (1974) to the English Midlands and back to the Hebrides. Each geographical journey corresponds to an extension in poetic subject, technique, and tone. In the first American poems Tomlinson experiments with a looser line and idiom, and exercises a dry humor which continues to enliven future volumes; in Mexico he begins to write of politics; the Midlands represent a return to the scenes of his own childhood, and the section on his past precedes and, arguably, makes possible a venture into a more nocturnal and hallucinatory realm called “Under the Moon’s Reign.” Each outward migration is followed by a withdrawal to earlier modes of observation and language, which might be called the south of England mode. This pattern of departures and returns is partly a reflection of his actual traveling around Europe and America, but also of a deeper psychological and metaphysical pulse.

A rereading of all the books and as many of his reviews and articles as can be located (it is high time for a bibliography) makes it clear that Tomlinson’s poems and groups of poems have been engaged over the years in a kind of dialogue with themselves and others, an invigoration and clarification of a distinctive idiom. The reader finds himself drawn into and inhabiting a world of meaning hardly suspected in the earliest volumes, and a view of the whole can enrich his rereading of any single part. Tomlinson’s poetry has moved from a primarily visual orientation in which self and world are related by way of the eye (what Constable “saw / Discovered what he was” [SB, p. 30]), to one which allies muscular and tactile, modes of apprehension to the visual (the word “see” is joined by the word “grasp”), and then to one which begins an oblique acknowledgement of the oneiric and unconscious life. These stages overlap, or unfold

5Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud, Edoardo Sanguineti, and Charles Tomlinson, Renga: A Chain of Poems (New York: George Braziller, 1971). Citations of Tomlinson’s works will be indicated in the text by the following abbreviations seeing Is Believing (1960), SB; A Peopled Landscape (1963), PL; American Scenes (1966), AS; The Way of a World, (1969), World; Written on Water (1972), Written; The Way In (1974), WI (all the preceding volumes were published by Oxford Univ. Press); Renga, R. A new volume, The Shaft (Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), has appeared since this article was written.
simultaneously from the original work, and are as much an expository convenience as representative of distinct periods in his development. As they unfold, or as one comes to realize their presence, the sound and syntax of Tomlinson’s poetic language also come to be felt as an inevitable embodiment of his philosophy and temperament.

I

Since Tomlinson has always been an admirer of Ruskin, the aphoristic title Seeing Is Believing may owe something to the following passage in Modern Painters, or to one like it: “[T]he greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion,—all in one.”6 A characteristic component of Tomlinson’s seeing can be discerned in the following cluster of words: striation, channels, skeins, strands, lanes, filaments, ripples, currents, grains, veins, tracery, unravelings, meshes, crosshatching, openwork, honeycombs, and networks. In an early poem called “Glass Grain” (SB, p. 16), sunlight shining through a flawed pane of glass throws a reflection of “its firm, disordered square,” streaked with “shifting strands” and “lanes of light.” Finding similes for these patterns—“like combed-down hair,” “like weathered wood”—prompts larger speculations on the interaction of eye and language:

...Like... in likes, what do we look for?
Distinctions? That, but not that in sum. Think of the fugue’s theme:
After inversions and divisions, doors
That no keys can open, cornered conceits
Apprehensions, all ways of knowledge past,
Eden comes round again, the motive dips
Back to its shapely self, its naked nature
Clothed by comparison alone—related.

What Tomlinson sees is an Edenic world (he has remarked that Eden is the only myth he finds necessary7) of meshes, alignments, and correspondences. In other poems wind and water, wind and foliage, light and stone move in a fascinatingly irregular unison, showing forth

and making possible human harmonies as well, or demonstrating by poignant contrast their lack.

Tomlinson is endlessly adroit at rendering lines and networks in motion, fluctuating patterns and currents in water, air, foliage, or more obscure media. A wave recedes over a beach:

The sun rocks there, as the netted ripple
   Into whose skeins the motion threads it
Glances athwart a bed, honey-combed
   By heaving stones. . . . (SB, p. 1)

A tiny obstruction in the surface of a stream

   . . . has ravelled the imaged sky till it could be
   A perplexity of metal, spun
   Round a vortex, the sun flung off it
Veining the eye like a migraine—it could
Scarcely be sky. The stones do more, until we say
We see there meshes of water, liquid
Nets handed down over them, a clear
Cross-hatching in the dance of wrinkles that
Re-patterns wherever it strikes. (World, p. 13)

Wind blowing through the ivy on a gorge wall is “Like a conflagration / Climbing the rockface” (SB, p. 20); or a cypress

   stretches itself, its surface
working as the wind
travels it in a continual
breathing, an underwater
floating of foliage
upwards . . . . (Written, p. 17)

He is fascinated by the unpredictable arabesques performed by creatures in the claim of opposing forces—reeds “tugged in their full sap / By the slow current” (SB, p. 36), or wind-blown branches “staggering / and climbing the air” (AS, p. 7). An “undulation of aspens” displays a synchrony of currents, “turning the wind to water and to light,” while under them the deeper current of autumn and the turning year “is dragging at all the roots of the view” (World, p. 16). This kind of imagery expressing the joy of a painter’s eye in evanescent, animated patternings evolves in Tomlinson’s usage toward the satisfactions of a moralist, historian, or metaphysician.
The moralist can see how "House and hollow; village and valley-side" are "Meshed / Into neighbourhood by such shifting ties" (SB, p. 2), and the historian perceives the way "space on space has labyrinthed past time" in the intricate "circuits, drops and terraces" of ancient Provençal earthworks (WI, p. 27). Watching the wind invade an avenue of chestnut trees the metaphysician weighs, along with the cherishing calculations men made in planting the trees, the "incalculable" and extravagant contributions of nature:

The greenness teeters till the indented parallels
Lunge to a restive halt, defying still
The patient geometry that planted them
Thus, in their swaying stations. We have lent them
Order—they, greeting that gift
With these incalculable returns. . . . (PL, p. 19)

"The Way of a World" (World, p. 14), the title poem of its volume, renders explicit some of the implications of these networks and currents. A gull and an ash-key are "borne-by whirling / On the same surge of air":

. . . the bird,
The seed, the windlines drawn in the sidelong
  Sweep of leaves and branches that only
The black and supple boughs restrained—
  All would have joined in the weightless anarchy
Of air, but for that counterpoise. . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
It is the shape of change, and not the bare
Glancing vibrations, that vein and branch
Through the moving textures: we grasp
The way of a world in the seed, the gull
Swayed toiling against the two
Gravities that root and uproot the trees.

The beauty of pattern, depending on both symmetry and deviations from symmetry, is a function of mutually resistant forces, of bondage and freedom. Daisies, for example, "flying, stalk-anchored, towards the dark," seem to desire escape and flight, but "Cut the stalks and they fall, they do not fly; let them lose their bond and they, too, would grow, not lighter, but suddenly heavy" (World, p. 53). The flight of the mind also participates in the way of Tomlinson's world. The tremulous meshes, nets, and crosshatchings formed on the surface of
the stream as water meets resistance in grass or stone present an image of logic:

Its strength is here; it must
Account for its opposite and yet remain
Itself, of its own power get there.
Water is like logic, for it flows
Meeting resistance arguing as it goes. (World, p. 13)

The poem shows that logic, the patterned motion of mind, is like water in both its "irrefutable strength" and its accommodation to resistant matter.

Tomlinson's poems are a continuous, many-faceted exploration of the mutual engagements, adaptations, and responses between mind and perceived world. Sometimes, as in "Logic," the mind is an active going forth. Sometimes it is still, empty, and receptive. In "A Given Grace" two white cups on a mahogany table

... unclench
the mind, filling it
with themselves.

... . . . . . .
you would not wish
them other than they are—
you, who are challenged
and replenished by
those empty vessels. (AS, p. 12)

But Tomlinson would always have the self acknowledge the world's mysterious, uncompliant otherness. The network of reflected sunshine in the receding wave, reflected again in the observer's mind, leads to this admonitory conclusion:

... That which we were,
Confronted by all that we are not,
Grasps in subservience its replenishment. (SB, p. 1)

His many winter landscapes testify to nature's remoteness:

... One is ignored
By so much cold suspended in so much night. (SB, p. 18)

The inaccessibility of a wild animal's world is recognized in the way a fox approaching a house suddenly sheers off in another direction:
How utterly the two worlds were
disparate, as that perfect
ideogram for agility
and liquefaction flowed
away from us rhythmical
and flickering . . . . (World, p. 42)

The skulls of birds, too, with their brittle surfaces and concealed interiors, “resist the eyes’ imaginings” (World, p. 52).

Tomlinson’s moral values have been termed “Augustan,” but it must be obvious from these quotations that the theories of perception underlying and generating his poetry are informed by contemporary aesthetics, psychology, and phenomenology. Even though he believes that the willful, interfering ego must be subdued in order to receive nature’s gifts, it does not follow for him that the senses are merely passive receptors or the mind a “tabula rasa”:

One sees. But not merely the passive mirrorings of the retinal mosaic—nor, like Ruskin’s blind man struck suddenly by vision, without memory or conception. The senses, reminded by other seeings, bring to bear on the act of vision their pattern of images; they give point and place to an otherwise naked and homeless impression. (World, p. 52)

For all his imagery of patterned lines, Tomlinson knows as a painter that there is no such thing as a line in nature; “we say / We see there meshes of water” (World, p. 13; my italics), the patterns seen resulting from the collaboration of nature, the eye, and language. The poet’s “glance / grasping upon its single thread / a disparate scene” (PL, p. 50) must be informed by love as well, as he implies in a little poem generated by the chance placing of a typesetter’s hyphen. The word “love-liness” situated at the end of a line of print and broken as indicated by a hyphen made the poet misread a phrase as “the country’s love-lines,” and with this accidental metaphor “what I saw / was a whole scene / restored,” the love-lines weaving the components of the scene together (WI, p. 23).

These visual networks extend synaesthetically into the realm of sound and music. In “Words for the Madrigalist” (World, p. 19), one of several remarkable poems on music, the poet follows the instructions of Orazio Vecchi to “look with the ears,” and is led through a “landscape of . . . emotion” composed simultaneously of evening

sounds, Vecchi’s madrigal, and the words of the poem, all superimposed and dissolving rapidly into one another:

. . . I look
With the ears at the confused clear sounds
As each replenished tributary unwinds
Its audible direction, and dividing
The branchwork of chime and counterchime
Runs the river’s thick and drumming stem:
   Loud with their madrigal of limestone beds
Where nothing sleeps, they all
   Give back—not the tune the listener calls
But the measure of what he is
   In the hard, sweet music of his lack,
The unpremeditated consonances: and the words
   Return it to you over the ground—
Bass of their syllables, Orazio Vecchi:
   Hear with the eyes as you catch the current of their sounds.9

The poem is an elaborate pun supported by subordinate play on words such as “beds,” “measure,” “consonances,” and “ground.”

II

In Seeing Is Believing Tomlinson says ironically that in his observations “There is of theme or apophthegm / No more than meets the eye” (SB, p. 36). But it is not only the eye that goes out to meet with the world. In the post-1969 work the word “grasp” joins “see” in importance. “Swimming Chenango Lake” (World, p. 3), a poem which Tomlinson chose to read twice during his Phi Beta Kappa address on poetry at Colgate College,10 marks the transition. It occupies, he has said elsewhere, “the moral centre of all that I have done,” its analysis of the act of swimming being “almost an allegory of the way we take purchase on the world of phenomena yet can never ‘possess’ it, and the way it takes purchase on us, confirming our identity.”11 The contact between the swimmer and the lake water is intimate, sustaining, and yet threatening to the swimmer; the water gives support only because the swimmer keeps moving, keeps

10The Poem as Initiation.
reaching out in it, knowing all the time that this fluid environment will not sustain him forever. The swimmer launches ever-moving concentric ripples into the water as he swims through it, and as in so many Tomlinson poems, what he observes is the "consistency, the grain of the pulsing flow," the laws of fluidity governing the eccentricity of the ripples and the distortions of the reflections: "It is a geometry and not / A Fantasia" and yet, as he says in "Rower" (Written, p. 6), the water is continuously "Expunging the track of his geometries"; in "Swimming Chenango Lake" the very invasion of the waterscape by the man's body "sways it to tatters," and though it heals behind him in the image of an immense wing, what the swimmer actually sees is water playing bafflingly before him, giving only "half-replies" to his questions. Tomlinson is always impressed by the fundamental impenetrability of the world around him, and though "Human, he fronts it," he also "draws back / From the interior cold."

The pivot of the poem (and from one point of view Tomlinson's work as a whole) is a sentence a little less than halfway through: "he has looked long enough, and now / Body must recall the eye to its dependence." For Tomlinson, as for William Carlos Williams, poetry and the imagination are grounded in actual concrete experience: "for me, the moment of sensation, the taking hold on the physical moment . . . [is] what comes first in my poetry."12 To take hold, to take purchase on—both phrases imply that sensation or perception has come to include the motor, muscular, and kinetic senses as well as the visual, and that any one sense, such as sight, intimately involves the activity of all the senses. "The muscles which move the eyeballs," he says in a prose poem, "derive from a musculature which once occupied the body end to end" (World, p. 53). Much of the earlier poetry was based on the premise that visual perceptions of space, in houses or in landscapes, have much to reveal about the perceiver's intellectual and moral qualities. In "Swimming Chenango Lake" we begin to realize how space is not only seen but grasped, spatial perceptions being a function of motor and kinetic senses as well as visual. To understand fully the spatial and kinetic imagery in "Swimming Chenango Lake" we must digress into the work of Merleau-Ponty, whom Tomlinson was reading at the time he wrote the poem. According to Merleau-Ponty, "We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A 'corporeal or postural schema' gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the


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relation between our body and things, or our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or 'motor projects,' radiates from us to our environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.”13 We must consider the body as “an intertwining of vision and movement,” he says; “My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible.” My body is “caught in the fabric of the world . . . it holds things in a circle around itself.”14 Tomlinson’s swimmer, steering through an analogous medium, “reaches in-and-through to that space / The body is heir to, making a where / In water.” Merleau-Ponty explains how he inhabits his flat and how as he moves about this familiar space he knows without thinking “that walking towards the bathroom means passing near the bedroom, that looking at the window means having the fireplace on my left,” and that “It remains a familiar domain round about me . . . as long as from my body intentional threads run out towards it,”15 just as the “ripples” are “incessantly shaping” around Tomlinson’s swimmer. Poets have often seen the natural world in terms of anatomical and architectural analogies, but Tomlinson extends the tradition when, in a later suite of poems called “Movements” (Written, pp. 50-54), he perceives body, building, and landscape, all three kinds of space, as a network of intentional or possible moves:

. . . Anew we see
Nature as body and as building
To be filled, if not with sound, then with
The thousand straying filamented ways
We travel it by, from the inch before us to the height
Above, and back again.

Though Tomlinson’s swimmer is “heir” to the space he moves through, it is “a possession to be relinquished / Willingly at each stroke.” “The world is not what I think, but what I live through,” says Merleau-Ponty, “I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible.”16 Freedom for the swimmer must be defined in terms of space, as just

14Ibid., pp. 162, 163.
16Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.
this reciprocal possession and surrender of self and the fluid environment; “to move in its embrace / [is] to be, between grasp and grasping, free.”

The moral and spiritual values assigned to spatial perception in Tomlinson’s earlier poetry, and the definition of freedom just offered, will raise suspicions that “Swimming Chenango Lake” is not just engaged in finding images for a theory of spatial perception; “to swim” is after all “to take hold / On water’s meaning” (my italics). “Sensation, as people have been telling us for a long time, isn’t just the naked impact of objects but already a grasping for significance.”17 Poetry is for Tomlinson both a recapitulation and a transcendence of the activities of eye, ear, and muscle. On two occasions in his essays he puts his finger on just this transition in Merleau-Ponty’s thought between perception and what lies beyond: “What is distinctive of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of phenomenology is the belief that in all these other levels [the realms of the imaginary, of ideality, of language, culture and history] or realms of experience we will rediscover the fundamental structures of perceptual consciousness, but transformed and enriched and therefore quantitatively irreducible to perception as such.”18 Picking up Merleau-Ponty’s Primacy of Perception in a friend’s flat in New York, he discovered “all I’d wanted to say” on “how we build our structures on the sensed and the given.” He returns time and again, he says, to the following passage from that essay:

By these words, the “primacy of perception,” we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent logos; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true condition of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action. It is not a question of reducing human knowledge [and here I put in “poetry”] to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality.19

This justifies the intimate convergence in Tomlinson’s work of

17“An Interview with Charles Tomlinson,” p. 408.
18“Poetry and Possibility: The Work of Robert Duncan,” Agenda, 8, Nos. 3-4 (Autumn-Winter 1970), 167. This is a quotation from James M. Edie’s introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s The Primacy of Perception pp. xvi-xvii; the passage in square brackets is Tomlinson’s interpolation.
19“An Interview with Charles Tomlinson,” p. 416. This is a quotation from The Primacy of Perception; the passage in square brackets is Tomlinson’s interpolation.
sensation and intellectual/moral generalizations. “No ideas but in things” certainly—which is not to say there can be no ideas, and Merleau-Ponty’s reconciliation of sensation and intellect, subjectivity and objectivity, may explain why Tomlinson added: “That, for me, with the whole essay behind it, is one of our great defenses of poetry.”

It is not surprising, considering that Chenango Lake is in New York State and that the poem was read at an American college, that “Swimming Chenango Lake” reflects Tomlinson’s interest in certain American poets and painters. As early as 1964 Tomlinson conducted an interview with Robert Creeley for The Review, in which he invited Creeley to tell his English readers about Olson’s “projective verse” and how “the whole physiology of man is at work in the poem.”

That same year, interviewed himself by Ian Hamilton, Tomlinson said that English poets ought to be more familiar with Williams, Creeley, Olson, and with painters such as Pollock, de Kooning, or Arshile Gorky. Then, in an important 1970 essay on Robert Duncan which I have already referred to, Tomlinson gathers together Merleau-Ponty and the American poets and painters; the painters begin, he says,

in an act of the locomotor muscular-nervous system and not with the eye registering the forms and tones of nature and lifting them on to canvas. It is interesting to see, back in the world of poetry, how a writer such as Olson will repeatedly speak of taking hold, of grasping and, at the same time that he is talking of poetry and writing poetry in this mode where intellect declares itself in terms of gesture, grasp, hold, of muscular equilibrium, he is very conscious of this kind of poetry also bringing in eye and ear, the measuring and judging faculties.

Noting that for Duncan the act of making poetry is a recapitulation of the child’s training “of three basic capacities—those of ear, eye and muscular coordination,” he quotes from Duncan on the way a poem expresses in little the total perception and being of a poet:

The individual poem stirs in our minds, an event in our language, as the individual embryonic cell stirs in the parent body. The beginning of the poem stirs in every area of my consciousness, for the DNA code it will use

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23Ibid., p. 166.
towards its incarnation is a code of resources my life pattern itself carries; not only thought and feeling but all the nervous and visceral and muscular intelligencies of the body are moved. Awakening—listening, seeing, sensing—to work with the moving weights and durations of syllables, the equilibrium of patterns, the liberations of new possibilities of movement; to cooperate in the aroused process.  

These various quotations on the physiological contributions in painting and poetry demonstrate, not how derivative Tomlinson is—“Swimming Chenango Lake” bears little obvious resemblance to Williams or Black Mountain poetry, and its images have compressed subtleties tangential to Merleau-Ponty—but how rich his poetry is in configurations of meaning not yet adequately traced by critics. The poem “Hawks” (Written, p. 25), for example, might seem from its subject and its location in the volume Written on Water (it is in a section following journeys to the Isle of Skye and Italy) to be just an uninventive return to the south of England mode of seeing. But by now we can see how it activates visual-kinetic modes of perception. The “earth-clung” couple watching the hawks is caught up “in their sway,” riding “where we cannot climb”; and their mutual inhabitation of a distant space, made possible (as Merleau-Ponty has argued) not by the step-by-step processes of analytical thought but in the immediate grasp of perception, links the couple in shared love as well, transforming, enriching, and transcending the shared perception:

. . . till we are kinned
By space we never thought to enter
On capable wings to such reaches of desire.  

“Appearance” (Written, p. 32) continues Tomlinson’s dialogue between the observant self and the observed environment, but its words take on new energies read in the Merleau-Ponty context. “[I]t can literally be said.” Merleau-Ponty affirms in a passage quoted by Tomlinson, “that our senses question things and that things reply to them.” Sometimes the interrogation reverses itself, and things

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25 Under the word “capable” Skeat’s Concise Etymological Dictionary notes “L. capabilis, comprehensible; afterwards, able to hold.” Tomlinson may have intended both active and passive connotations in this poem, i.e., “able to grasp” and “graspable.”

26 “Poetry and Possibility,” p. 163; quoted from Phenomenology of Perception.
require a certain response or posture in the observer. For Tomlinson “full half [of the appearance of distant snowy hills] / Is in the rushing out to greet them,” in a “look / That gathers them in,” in a “meeting of expectations / With appearances.” Amplifying on Merleau-Ponty, he says the perception “comes as neither / Question nor reply,” but a kind of mutual seizure: “The image seizes on us, and we grasp / For the ground that it delineates . . . the cold / Hills drawing us to a reciprocation, / Ask words of us, answering images. . . .”27 The meditation on hills and perceiving mind in this poem as in “Swimming Chenango Lake” and others begins somewhere near Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, but devises an independent, lively, and linguistically intricate way of accounting for their “reciprocation.” Tomlinson even provides us with a bit of burlesque on these Merleau—Ponty themes:

It was when he began to see fields
As arguments, the ribbed ploughland
Contending with the direction of its fence:
If you went with the furrows, the view
From the fence disputed with you
Because you couldn’t see it. If you sat still
The horizontals plainly said
You ought to be walking, and when you did
All you were leaving behind you proved
That you were missing the point. And the innumerable views
Kept troubling him, until
He granted them. Amen.28

III

The logic of “fine relationship” reaches down into the most minute components of Tomlinson’s language. Much of the music and meaning of his verse depends on the correlation of syllables, “the to-and-fro of syllables in search / of marriage” (R, p. 71), “rhyme hiding itself among the syllables, in the bells and knots of language.”29 It might be useful to think of a line of influence here stretching from Pound by way of the Black Mountain poets; for, like them, Tomlinson is concerned with “the reconstituting of the verse-line as the poetic

27The word “ground” in this poem as in others is a characteristic pun, collapsing “earth” and “background.”
29“‘Not in Sequence of a Metronome . . . ,’” Agenda, 10, No. 4 and 11, No. 1 (Autumn-Winter 1972-73), 54.
unit, slowing down the surge from one line into the next in such a way that smaller components within the line (down to the very syllables) can recover weight and value.”

It would probably be more accurate, however, to say that the Pound-Olson lineage—to which of course Williams must be added—reinforced Tomlinson’s own practice, rather than influenced it, since the actual configurations of those “smaller components” in his verse are unmistakably his own. The poetic behavior of syllables is difficult to chart, but it is clear that one way he gives them weight and value is by his use of internal rhymes, half-rhymes, alliteration, assonance, consonance, all kinds of unclassifiable echoes and rustlings, a “liquid friction / Of small sounds” (Written, p. 53). Reviewers have so often and rightly noted his qualities of control, precision, and reticence that we might be inclined to overlook how these qualities unite with a sheer exuberance in the aural possibilities of language. “The Chances of Rhyme” (World, p. 59), for example, meditates on the aural fertility and generosity of language:

The chances of rhyme are like the chances of meeting—
In the finding fortuitous, but once found, binding.

It is only a partial truth that we possess a language, for language just as truly possesses us. “We are led, though we seem to lead,” and in these aural clues we are bound to discover more than casual moral connections between “chance,” “impenitence,” “dance, vigilance / And circumstance.” “Immersion” in the echoing syllables rhymes with “conversion—of inert / Mass . . . into energies to combat confusion.” Little vortices of sound are continually spinning off into metaphor.

Tomlinson’s noticeable enjoyment of the Latinate register of English is not just a demonstration of erudition. Multisyllabic Latinate words give him an opportunity to play off, and weave meaningful patterns out of the aural, morphological, and etymological entanglements of syllables. To take a fairly simple example in the suite of six poems called “Movements” (Written, pp. 50-54) the series “compounded,” “recomposing,” “complete,” “confidence,” “consequence,” and “confluence” bears the reader toward reflections on cum, with, and its thematic alignments with the whole question of

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relationship. And though the *cum* series demonstrates a con-fluence of currents, they are also "refusing to be one without resistance"; the versatile prefix "re" must be in a way isolated before it can be restored to "recovery," "resonance," "recomposing," "recedes," "regard," "return," and "revelation." In "Stone Speech" (*Written*, p. 9) words and sounds chafe on one another, "rubbing shoulders," grinding one another into odd shapes like pebbles on a beach, and this poem shows Anglo-Saxon elements jostling against Latin; "roundheads" modulates through "finds," "grindings," and "groundlings," this last word punning on both the past tense of "grind" and a dialect diminutive form (a pebble, being a bit of the ground, is a groundling, as a young cat is a kitling). Tomlinson counts on the sensitivity of his reader's ear for patterns of sound, and on his awareness of concomitant interal structures of words, of sequences of meaningful particles, morphology combined with phonology. Structuralist linguistics has sharpened our sense of how words shape one another's meanings, so that each particular sign (or word) becomes significant only as a position in, or a modulation of, a general system of signs, and each word functions in a set of related words by marking a divergence from each of its cousins. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "meaning appears only at the intersection of and as it were in the interval between words."31 The sets of syllables and words which "Movements" and other poems summon up perform a kind of sophisticated and ironic exercise in synchronic linguistics.

The play of prefixes just observed is obviously based on the diachronic axis of language as well. According to Tomlinson:

The poet must rescue etymology from among the footnotes, thus moving up into the body of the text, "cipher: the Sanskrit word *sunyā* derived from the root *svi*, to swell." (*World*, p. 49)

Knowing that "contingency" is a cognate of "contact" but not of "random" unravels some of the complexities of the last three lines of "Machiavelli in Exile" (*Written*, p. 21). Only extremists such as Trotsky's assassin (in "Assassin," *World*, p. 10) could speak of the "contaminations / Of contingency," without realizing the irony of the common derivation of these two words from *tangere*, to touch. The assassin persuades himself that "history and necessity" require murder, managing as he does to quell what he regards as distractions

but what the poet sees as keeping us in touch with reality, “this rage of the ear for discrimination, its absurd / Dwelling on ripples, liquidities, fact.” We may usually regard “contingency,” “fortuitousness,” and “chance” as rough synonyms, but Tomlinson would have us ponder the etymological links between “contingency” and “touch,” “fortuitousness” and “fertile,” “chance” and “cadence.” Poetry is in his *Renga* definition a “speech of contingencies” (*R*, p. 47).

We began this discussion of the “smaller components” of Tomlinson’s verse by considering syllables, and have ended by touching on some of the more complex kinds of behavior of language. Tomlinson has said that “Babble must be raised to articulation by a conscious regression to the primitive minutiae of language.” 32 Babble in itself is interesting only as a symptom of privation, a lack of understanding, relationship, and full humanity. In “Terminal Tramps” a mad woman in a railway station teashop, uncomprehendingly sounding out the syllables of a word come upon by chance and apparently irrelevant to her life, has made the primordial motion toward a poem but cannot get it past the nonsense stage:

> [she] picks
> out of the air and starts
> to repeat the word
> *Eisenhower*. She takes
> apart into its four
> syllables the arbitrary
> sound, then feels
> her way out
> over them, as though
> they might have led
> her somewhere, stretched
> from here to there,—
> might have proved
> there there, but the mind’s
> needle merely
> chokes on its repetitions
> until, with an accumulating
> force, the vortex
> spins her on
> into inconsequence. 33

32 “Poetry and Possibility,” p. 165.
Other travelers are tolerant, watchful, but unresponsive to

... her all-but-spent
babble, her syllable-chopping search
for the right sound,
the word to express
her groundless humanity.

Her lack of language and her homelessness are pathetic coordinates.

The "intricate meshings of words" which the mad woman cannot manage and to which Tomlinson asks us to pay ceremonial attention would include syntactical relationships. The syntax of "Written on Water," the last poem of the "Movements" suite, is typically complex, requiring the reader to thread a sure-footed way among signaled and unsignaled subordinate clauses, elements enclosed by dashes or brackets, and absolute constructions. The distance between "where" (line 7) and the subject of the clause it introduces is long, as is often, in Tomlinson's verse, the distance between subject and predicate. Colons replace periods, as if to say that the elements on either side of the colon are not distinct and separable thoughts, but fundamentally correspondent and equivalent, the design of the syntax thus mirroring visual and metaphysical correspondences. The syntax of this poem, like its image of a stream, gives the impression of a "seamless momentum," a continuous current interrupted by, and yet only perceptible because of, subordinate hesitations, eddies, and pulses. Characteristic too is the piling up of syntactical elements—"shoulderings of foam collide, unskein," "their multiplicity / A speech behind speech, continuing revelation / Of itself, never to be revealed"—as if the poet felt the supplies of language and the meanings it unceasingly throws forward to be as inexhaustible as the stream itself. Fine syntactical relationships make an indispensable contribution to the music of his verse:

... the crossing and the interlacing,
The involutions of its tracery and the answering of part
By part, as the melody recedes, proceeds
Above the beat, to twine, untwine
In search of a consonance between
The pulse of the exploration and the pulse of line. (Written, p. 52)

34The Poem as Initiation, no pagination.
These are some of the ways Tomlinson’s poems expose the internal workings of language; many of them meditate on language as well. Fascinated though he is by Rimbaud and Mallarmé, he does not try to escape from language into silence, but recognizes their reciprocity. He feels a gratitude for the gift of words, knowing at the same time how much eludes these words. In pursuing the “speech / Behind speech,” poem II of the “Movements” suite acknowledges that the pursuit is conducted in language:

What we sought for was the unspoken
Familiar dialect of habitation—speech
Behind speech, language that teaches itself
Under the touch and sight: a text
That we must write, restore, complete
Grasping for more than the bare facts warranted
By giving tongue to them. . . (Written, p. 51)

In two facing poems in The Way of a World he considers this process of “giving tongue”: how like Adam “We bring / To a kind of birth all we can name / And, named, it echoes in us our being;” and how we must nevertheless acknowledge “Whatever cannot be mastered with a name” (World, p. 8), and then how even the names we assign are not our own invention but the gift of generations. The strangeness of a nighttime view of nettles by torchlight can only be fully apprehended in inherited words, and even silence, in spite of Mallarmé’s efforts, echoes with history:

To see then speak, is to see with the words
We did not make. That silence
Loud with the syllables of the generations, and that sphere
Centred by a millenial eye, all that was not
There, told us what was, and clothed
The sense, bare as it seemed, in the weave
Of years: we knew that we were sharers. (World, p. 9)

Not surprisingly, his own personal past and environment resound too in his present landscape. Earlier, he had devised his poetic language as a means of escape from the grey ugliness of the Midlands:

It was a language of water, light and air
I sought—to speak myself free of a world
Whose stoic lethargy seemed the one reply
To horizons and to streets that blocked them back. (WI, p. 10)
“I found my speech. The years return me,” and he realizes now that “words and water came of the same source,” from the water-filled marl pits and underground minings in his hometown (WI, p. 10).

Occasionally in Tomlinson’s verse imagery about the workings of language has more ominous connotations. “The Compact: At Volterra” (Written, p. 13) shows sun, moon, earth, and geological faults—forces immeasurably more ancient than the ancient Etruscan town of Volterra—combining “to undo the spot,” to erode the cliff upon which the city is perched. What is unsettling about this poem is not that the earth speaks but that the lips and mouths of the cracks and gullies in the cliff face speak of nature’s inevitable destruction of the tenuous human enterprises represented by the city and its surrounding farms:

The thousand mouths whose language
   Is siftings, whisperings, rumours of downfall
That might, in a momentary unison,
   Silence all, tearing the roots of sound out
With a single roar.

The language itself, in whose historical and aural richness Tomlinson has trained his reader to be vigilant, now becomes disquieting; in the half-light between setting sun and rising moon, “where shadow investigates each fold,” the reader nibbles at the edge of words like “investigate”—invest? investiture? vestigial?—until the language itself, like the land in the poem, becomes mined with “labyrinthine fault[s],” with mouths full of “siftings, whisperings” perhaps as menacing as the geological shiftings the poem is ostensibly about. The “truce” by which the farmers continue to “till up to the drop that which they stand to lose: / Refusing to give ground before they must” is a truce requiring “unreasoned care” of human beings. It is also a truce with language, in which the sober puns of the lines just quoted temporarily restore meaning to idioms which, in the long run, are just as impermanent as the ground which the peasants persist in “fondling” and cultivating.

IV

The cliff face at Volterra with its “black filament / Reaching into the rockface” and at the same time “rooting itself in dreams” seems to be at the interface between objective reality and dream, and we are led to inquire how a poetry so manifestly concerned with sensations
and perception, visual and tactile things, and their moral and historical implications, can register occasionally the more nocturnal and oneiric realms of the mind. A list of Tomlinson's titles and subjects is surprisingly crowded with Gothic paraphernalia—mausoleums, churchyards, old houses, castles, ruins, gravestones, caverns, apparitions, and skulls—and one of Tomlinson's earliest published essays dealt with the Gothic aspect of Coleridge's "Christabel." But a "crooked, questionable path" leading to an abandoned house in the "doubtful light" of nightfall does not bring supernatural events and psychological stress (SB, p. 40); "The Castle" (SB, p. 45) is "no more symbolic / Than you or I" and is being rifled to fill museums. There are no shudders, only reflections on the contrasts between today and yesterday or on the quality of space and stone. Tomlinson rejects surrealism along with the Gothic—"Surreal Narcissus / the river and the buildings are passing you by!" (R, p. 75)—since he sees both as extremist and bullying approaches to the unconscious.

Tomlinson's poems undertake the descent into the unconscious less precipitously. He waits on the threshold, aware of the first elusive stirrings of those energies, how they manifest themselves through objective appearances and patterns, and how they resist labeling. In "The Cavern" (AS, p. 21) there is a simultaneous penetration of the interior of a mountain and the interior of the mind, a glimpse of the "chill affinities" between inhuman rock and human flesh, and in the end a recognition that this gigantic hollow in the earth "elude[s] the mind's / hollow" as effectively as the self escapes naming:

press
in under a deeper dark until
the curtained sex
the arch, the streaming buttress
have become
the self's unnameable and shaping home.

In "Focus" (AS, p. 16) the poet concentrates so intensely on transmitting the precise tones, colors, and shapes of a woodslope that it

shuts down to a single
brilliant orifice:

And the mind
that swimmer, unabashed
by season, encounters
on entering, places
as intimate as a fire's
interior palaces: an Eden
on whose emerald tinder,
unblinded and unbounded
from the dominance of white,
the heart’s eye enkindles.

Sometimes it is aural sensation, rather than visual, that gives admission to these “interior palaces.” “A shimmer at the ear” of small evening sounds, “a spate of sibilances,” are “spread weed in sleep’s underwater” (World, p. 34); or the rhymes that “arise at the threshold of his mind—/ Pass-words into the castle-keep, / The city of sleepers” awaken a poem “stanza by stanza” and the interior of his mind “room by room”:

. . . Door
Opens on door, rhyme on rhyme,
And the circling stair is always nearer
The further it goes. At last,
He will hear by heart the music that he feared
Was lost. . . (Written, pp. 51-52)

The collective poem Renga gave Tomlinson and his friend Octavio Paz an opportunity to volley interpretations of the relationship between outside and inside, objective and subjective. At one point, as we have seen, Tomlinson defines surrealism as Narcissus absorbed in his own image and missing the real world of river and buildings.36 Tomlinson might well have added that in missing the real world, Narcissus was also missing the mysterious depths within itself, which can be approached only by indirection. Paz counters Tomlinson’s image with this alternative:

Narcissus before a lake or Euclid
tracing figures in the sand?
Outside, the river and its drowned palaces,
outside, trains, planes, les départs—where is outside? (R, p. 75)

36Tomlinson uses but significantly modifies surrealist techniques in his painting.
On the next page Tomlinson continues:

Where—and what? What is "outside"? That
in whose creation I had no part, which enters me now
both image and other. . . . (R, p. 76)

In "Variation on Paz" (Written, p. 10) the dialogue takes another
turn, Tomlinson admitting that "we must dream inwards" but
insisting that "we must dream / Outwards too," the vast energies of
the dream, like those of the sea, carrying the dreamer shoreward until
"we wake to what is dream and what is real." This last line implies
perhaps that when truly awake we participate simultaneously in both
dream and reality.

At the moral center of Tomlinson’s work lies his awareness of
what is beyond language and beyond our possession, whether
linguistic, conceptual, or economic. To label these intimations of
energy with myth and symbol is a kind of possessiveness; "Obliterate
mythology," he said, as you enter the cavern of the mind/mountain.
"Mythless I enter my present, my native land / and coming night," he
declares in Renga (p. 49). "In getting rid of the dryad [in a poem of
The Necklace] I’m trying to realize something that has been left out of
consciousness—we are great fixers of the contents of our conscious-
ness and hence great fixers of our egos: we’ll have it all on our own
terms. . . ."37 In a time of depth psychology, anthropology, and
comparative religion, he would say, we carry around in our heads a
catalogue of symbols and myths, ready-made for any faint stirrings of
the numinous. Watching the evening coming in,

. . . From habit, we
   Were looking still for what we could not see—
   The inside of the outside, for some spirit flung
   From the burning of that Götterdämmerung.

But the labeling habit is resisted, and the transfiguration of
the heavens occurs "by no more miracle than the place / It occupied and
the eye that saw it" (WI, p. 17). Tomlinson expresses the still
attention, the waiting, that precedes symbolization, the outer on the
verge of becoming transparent to the inner but maintaining its
objectivity and even resisting the final crystallization into symbol or

myth. The word “fable” must be rhymed with “unstable,” as it is in both of Tomlinson’s translations from Lucio Piccolo (Written, pp. 14-17), to make it an acceptable part of his lexicon.

“The given is ground”—the theme with which he opens his contribution to Renga is central to his entire work. But in “The Dream,” a curious poem from The Way In (p. 18), the word “given” is qualified by the pejorative “merely,” and the primacy of the given objective reality over dreaming seems to be capsized. Here it is the dream which bears the token of truth, and reality is what “burie[s]” and “too much define[s]” the dreamer, “a reality / Merely given—an inert threat.” At first the dreamer feels “some constricted hope / That asked a place in which it might pursue / Its fulness,” the unfulfilled possibilities being so amorphous that they fail to find any visual crystallization and can be expressed only as an uneasiness, as a “tense fluidity / Always a thought beyond him.” As it continues, however, the dream does provide an outlet to freedom in the form of a stone wall which must be followed not by sight but by groping hand. It opens up a space for “resurrection,” indeed an entire city of steps, streets, and passageways, “the dream of a city under the city’s dream.” At the end of the poem the dream of a city has fulfilled in some way the dreamer’s constricted hope, and he wakes with a replenished imagination to the spaces of the real world around him and a reassuring collusion of space and hand: “The intricacies of the imagined spaces there / Strange and familiar as the lines that map a hand.”

Much of the imagery of this poem coincides with that of Tomlinson’s summation poem in Renga (p. 81): “the dream of a city under the city’s dream” may refer in part to the experience of writing Renga, which is in some respects a poem about an imagined, ideal city, written in a Paris cellar. But “The Dream” is uncharacteristically obscure even when read as tangential to Renga, perhaps because the poem arises from a nighttime vision rather than the usual daytime observations, or perhaps because it contains some imperfectly realized latent meaning, some “speech behind speech” (a phrase Tomlinson uses in both the Renga summation and the “Movements” sequence) altogether too resistant to expression. The subterranean elements of this poem can be linked with other parts of Tomlinson’s later work: an article on Isaac Rosenberg’s drama which consists of a densely argued analysis of the tension between “primal energies and conscious purpose,” “primitive vigour and . . . ‘largeness’ of under-

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standing”;38 a poem called “Ariadne and the Minotaur” (Written, p. 20) on Ariadne’s tragic refusal to descend into the labyrinth to meet her half-human, half-bestial brother; and most importantly Tomlinson’s renewed activities since 1968 as a graphic artist in a modified surrealist mode. All suggest some kind of change of emphasis, which, given Tomlinson’s poetic talents, integrity, and unfashionable resistance to the irrational, will be well worth our attention.

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38“Fate and the Image of Music,” p. 61. This essay was actually written in 1957, though not published until 1974 (personal communication from the author).