Charles Tomlinson and the Language of Silence

J. Keith Hardie

In 1969, British poet Charles Tomlinson introduced a collection of essays on Marianne Moore by praising her readiness “to accord to objects and to animals a life of their own” in an age “when such major poets as Eliot and Yeats have treated nature with an imperiousness that, at times, recalls their symbolist forbears.” This praise would seem to be based on principles dear to Tomlinson, for he, in another context, castigates even Wallace Stevens, whose poetry provided the model for much of Tomlinson’s early verse, for neglecting the objective world: “was there ever a poetry which stood so explicitly by a physical universe and against transcendence, but which gives so little account of that universe, its spaces, patterns, textures, ‘a world of canon and fugue’ such as Hopkins spoke of seeing before him?” Like many artists, Tomlinson predicates his aesthetics upon metaphysical and epistemological concerns; in “Descartes and the Stove,” he expresses a bias against a cogito which insists that experience of the self precede experience of the world. Here, he objects to the tendency of analytical reflection to create what Merleau-Ponty has called an “impregnable subjectivity . . . which loses sight of its own beginning”:

Thrusting its armoury of hot delight,
Its negroid belly at him, how the whole
Contraption threatened to melt him
   Into recognition. . .
   The great mind
Sat with his back to the unreasoning wind
And doubted, doubted at his ear
The patter of ash and, beyond, the snow-bound farms,
   Flora of flame and iron contingency
And the moist reciprocation of his palms.

Idealism, as well as rationalism, suffers Tomlinson’s scorn:
“Idea,” he says in a passage referring to “cold Platonic thought,” “lacks
a true anatomy/Of consciousness” (R&C, pp. 268-69). Another telling
criticism is found in the final section of Seeing is Believing, which is
prefaced by an unattributed quotation—“Oh! que ses yeux ne parlent
plus d’Ideal/Mais simplement d’humains échanges!”—and framed by
a pair of poems, “Nothing: A Divagation” and “Something: A Direction”
(SB, pp. 47, 49, 56-57). “Nothing” is, for Tomlinson, a divagation, a wander-
ing about: philosophical systems which begin by positing an ideal realm
or a pure consciousness, he contends, commence from nothing and
go nowhere:

There are
   In lucidity itself
Its crystal abysses
Perspective within perspective:
The white mind holds
An insufficiency, a style
To contain a solitude
And nothing more. Thus,
The infirm alchemy
Of Platonic fantasy—
Word, the idea,
Spacing the vacuum: snow-prints
Wanting a direction. . . (SB, p. 49)

As an alternative to this nothingness, this “insufficiency” of a
mind which is locked in the solipsism of the self-reflexive Cartesian
cogito or which prefers abstractions to perceptions, Tomlinson offers
interaction between the mind and its world. As opposed to the divagaton
of “nothing,” he offers “Something: A Direction:"

Out of the shut cell of that solitude there is
   One egress, past point of interrogation.
Sun is, because it is not you, you are
   Since you are self, and self delimited
Regarding sun. . .
   Released
   From knowing to acknowledgment, from prison
To powers, you are new-found

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Neighbored, having earned relation
With all that is other. (SB, pp. 56-7)

Here, as in much of his poetry, Tomlinson reflects his interest in phenomenology. Tomlinson traces his roots to Nietzsche and Ruskin, and his work after 1969 was influenced by Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophy emphasizes the “primacy of perception.” That is, unlike Cartesian rationalists, for whom the self-reflective cogito is the basis of thought, Merleau-Ponty holds that there is a pre-reflexive perception of the world which enables thought: the “perceived world is always the presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth (PP, p. 13). Tomlinson shares with Merleau-Ponty a belief that rationalist epistemologies neglect to consider the perceptual basis of our knowledge. According to Tomlinson, we derive proof of our existence not by the hermetic ruminations of the Cartesian cogito but by “acknowledgement,” by “regarding,” by “having earned relation with all that is other” (SB, pp. 56-7). The same concept, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, goes like this: “I grasp myself, not as a constituting subject which is transparent to itself, and which constitutes the totality of every possible object of thought and experience, but as a particular thought, as a thought engaged with certain objects, as a thought in act; and it is in this sense that I am certain of myself” (PP, p. 22).

Both Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty write of perception by making analogies between language and perception; for both men the foundation of all of our knowledge is the discourse between our bodies and the objects that impinge upon our senses, the “language” by which objects communicate their presence to us. In “Poetry and Possibility: The Work of Robert Duncan,” Tomlinson defends Duncan's conception of the “great language in which the universe itself is written” by noting its “phenomenological underpinning” and quoting, by way of explanation, from Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: “The passing of sense-data before our eyes or under our hands is, as it were, a language which teaches itself, and in which the meaning is secreted by the way of the structure of the signs, and this is why it can literally be said that our senses question things and that things reply to them.”

Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty both treat perception as the source of all knowledge, regarding as the end of knowledge not a transcendent essence or thing-in-itself but the establishment of a relationship between the self and the world. This allows them to value the sign over transcendental signifieds, texture over a final meaning. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the “signification without any sign, the thing itself—that height of clarity—would be the disappearance of all clarity.” Following Merleau-Ponty here, Tomlinson seeks to overcome the distrust of language so common to literature, to overlap the tendency of poets to see language as forming an undesirable mediation between the mind and its world. Tomlinson overcomes—or at least sublimes—his desire for knowledge of interiors by making the purpose of language a process,
a communication, rather than the achievement of a complete knowledge.

Rather than lamenting the fact that words do not totally capture the essences of things, Tomlinson rejoices that words do not achieve ultimate clarity, that neither consciousness in the act of perception nor language can expose things-in-themselves. Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty see the desire of Adamic language theory for omnipotent knowledge as a kind of death wish, a desire for the end of process and becoming: "things are not given absolutely, so that there is much (necessarily) that escapes us, escapes the forms of language. If you could close that circle, if language or consciousness could completely possess their objects, there would be no more room for literary endeavor and there would be no surprises, no discoveries."8

Both Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty find in perception a presence which precedes or escapes the play of signifiers. That is, despite their insistence that perception is limited by structure and perspective, they nonetheless hold that through a purification of perception, one can perceive Being, despite (as well as because of) the limitations of perspective. From the vantage of post-structuralism, it is clear that phenomenologists such as Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty posit a center, a ground, a source for language and thought that a more rigorous structuralism would deny.

A complete post-structuralist critique of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief consideration of a well-known line from Blake will perhaps help illustrate some of the difficulties presented by Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty. "If the doors of perception were cleansed," wrote Blake, “every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” A traditional reading of Blake—a reading consistent with the history of Western metaphysics, including the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, as well as that of Merleau-Ponty and Tomlinson—would hold that the cleansing necessary to see things “as they are” is a simplification, a reduction to presence, to unity. Phenomenology purports to “ bracket” the presuppositions of logical and rationalist philosophy and so to reveal a Being which transcends the limitations of traditional philosophy. Modern post-structuralist thought follows phenomenology in its questioning of the claim of traditional metaphysics that logical discourse can attain truth, but by rigorously applying the principles of structural linguistics to the theory of language and to the epistemology of perception, it goes beyond phenomenology to question the possibility of either perceiving things as they are or revealing Being through language. From a post-structuralist perspective, then, the “cleansing” of perception would be constituted not by a reduction to a pre-reflexive simplicity, but by an awareness of a duplicity which infinitely defers things “as they are.” The infinity which a post-structuralist perspective “reveals” is not one of the thing “as it is,” but one of dispersion, of the infinite regression of a chain of signifiers.

Phenomenology finds the foundation of meaning in perception, which it claims precedes the self-awareness of the Cartesian cogito; post-structuralism points out that these perceptions are always already
influenced by previous perceptions and conclusions drawn by a self already divided (or disseminated) throughout the structure of language, making "pure" perception impossible. Thus, according to poststructuralist thought, the notions of "cleansing" and of a pure perception which could behold "things as they are" would have to be used with extreme reservation. That is, they would have to be used since they are the only philosophical tools which Western thought has evolved, but at the same time that they are used they must be questioned, discredited, deconstructed.

Like all phenomenologists, Tomlinson remains at the borderline of post-structuralism. That is, he is aware of the metaphysical limitations of language, but at the same time, he continuously restates that which transcends language, placing something (meaning, presence) beyond play. Though Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty recognize the significance of structuralism insofar as it disrupts the naive concept of an innate relationship between words and things, they both posit a pre-reflexive and pre-linguistic perception in which things reveal themselves "as they are," thus grounding thought and language in perception and avoiding the radical textuality which post-structuralist thought sees as preceding even perception.

Tomlinson's conception of language is inextricably bound up with perception; language and our perception of the objective world are, to use a word frequently used by Tomlinson himself, reciprocal. For Tomlinson, both language and perception are significant systems, each constituted by a reciprocation between opposing principles: in the case of language, words and silence reciprocate to make articulation possible, and, in the case of perception, objects and space are the two principles which allow the world to become significant. Intertwined with these conceptions are several kinds of silence: the "silent language" of the world, by which objects communicate with our senses; the silence between words, which, analogous to the spaces between objects, is requisite for meaning; and, lastly, the necessary silence of the subject who would be receptive to the world, to the "language of silence."

For Tomlinson, silence and space are the grounds which make the articulations of language and the world possible. Reviewing several studies in Chinese literature for Poetry magazine, Tomlinson commented on the theme of "significant emptiness, the potentiality of quietude" in Chinese poetry and quoted from the Tao Te Ching to illustrate:

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel
But it is on the space where there is nothing
that the usefulness of the wheel depends.
We turn clay to make a vessel;
But it is on the space where there is nothing
that the usefulness of the vessel depends.
We pierce doors and windows to make a house;
And it is on these spaces where there is nothing
that the usefulness of the house depends.9

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Tomlinson's world is based on figure and ground, on relief. The world is not simply a sum of objects, but matter in space. "Reality," he says in "Aesthetic," "is to be sought not in the concrete, but in space made articulate" (N, p. 1). "A bridge," we are told in "More Foreign Cities," "does not exist for its own sake. It commands vacancy" (SB, p. 22). Tomlinson, like Merleau-Ponty, understands space not as negation or absence, but as the ground which makes the perception of objects possible. Merleau-Ponty explains this in his Phenomenology of Perception: "Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected" (PP, p. 243).

Throughout Tomlinson's poetry, natural landscapes are described in terms of figure and ground, shadow and light. When the sun fails to strike objects in such a way as to leave shadow and light, the world is obscured and objects cease to communicate with our senses:

The whittled crystal: fissured
For the invasion of shadows... .
   And to what end?
To the enrichment of the alignment:
Sun against shade against sun:
That daily food, which
Were it not for such importunities
Would go untasted... (PL, p. 38)

Smooth light: all bronze
and polished like a bell
that, biding utterance
hangs heavy with
the fullness that it does not tell.

Yet do not stay too near
the heart of fire, but watch
the way it takes the trees and they
in looming clear, resist it.

Sun-burst: the dam
goes down in silence, feeds
the thirst of shadows, and
brilliance, quiet distances
attest a counterpointing land. (PL, p. 39)

This system of differences, this play of shadow and light, calls the mind from its transcendence. In Tomlinson's poem "The Greeting," a landscape does just that: it greets a subject who "glances... idly, half blindly... into the depths of distance," demanding an attention to its surfaces,
a quieting of the mind’s tendency to look for something transcendent behind a transparent reality:

space and its Eden
of green and blue
warranted more watching
than such gazing through:

but the far roofs gave
a ‘Good day’ back,
defeating that negligence
with an unlooked-for greeting: . . .

one instant of morning
rendered him time
and opened him space,
one whole without seam. (WI, p. 29)

In Tomlinson’s poetry, all natural phenomena, including aural phenomena, are based on a dialectic between presence and absence: “space vibrates, enlarges with sound;/ Though space is soundless, yet creates/ From very soundlessness a ground/ To counterstress the lilting hoof fall as it breaks” (R&C, p. 264). In the opening section of “Movements” Tomlinson treats the importance of “space” in music:

broken chords
Space a footing for melody, borne-out above
The haven of its still begetting, the hill
Of its sudden capture, not disembodied
But an incarnation heard, a bird-flight
Shared, thrust and tendon and the answering air.
(Written, pp. 50-51)

Tomlinson, it should be noted, is a painter as well as a poet, and so it is not surprising to find that differences in color also constitute a system of relief. In “The White Van,” for example, a van blocks the poet’s view of the autumn scenery, reducing its colors to a reflection on the side of the van, a “black and white/ abstraction of a colored/day,” but the poet finds that the contrast heightens the experience, “the paint of autumn/ showing the more intense/ for these pied/ anatomies
and / as the white van turns/ right, distance/ ahead of us/ reopens its density/ of gold, green, amethyst” (Written, p. 30).

For Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty, this play of figure and ground in the field of perception has significance. Just as, according to structural linguistics, words have meaning only because they exist in the system of language, so, according to the phenomenological theory of perception, the objects we perceive derive significance from the field in which they appear. We cannot know an object outside of a perceptual field; we cannot even conceive of an object except from a certain
perspective. For example, Merleau-Ponty points out that when we imagine a cube, “we take up a position in space, either on its surface, or in it, or outside it, and from that moment we see it in perspective.” (PP, p. 204).

According to this understanding, the world has meaning; there is a logic to perception which precedes any transcendental logic: “My gaze ‘knows’ the significance of a certain patch of light in a certain context; it understands the logic of lighting. Expressed in more general terms, there is a logic of the world to which my body entirely conforms, and through which things of intersensory significance become possible for us” (PP, p. 326). The significance of an object is not transcendent; we are not to think of objects as holding some unseen interior essence, and thus we should not hunger after some meaning which hides behind the opaque surfaces of objects, for the “significance of a thing is not behind appearances” (PP p. 319). Thus, significance resides wholly in perception, which, for Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty, is “the cradle of significations, the meaning of all meanings, the ground of all thoughts.”

For Tomlinson, meaning is not something bestowed upon the world by a transcendental consciousness; it is learned by perception. Tomlinson has said that he believes in “the possible meaningfulness of life at large,”11 and, in an interview, has cited what he calls Coleridge’s “phenomenology” in explaining the connection between perception and meaning: “sensation itself is vision nascent, not the cause of intelligence, but intelligence itself revealed as an earlier power in the process of self-construction.”12 This passage recalls one in Merleau-Ponty’s The Primacy of Perception:

By . . . 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 conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to tasks of knowledge and action. It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality. (PP p. 25)

Tomlinson thus relocates meaning; it is no longer behind or inside of objects; it is the way in which objects present themselves to us. This allows him to reject two common theories of language: the one that devalues objects insofar as they are signs and another which values them only when they represent something greater than themselves. Objects represent themselves directly to our senses; they are the mysterious others which are the foundation for all our thought and call not for interpretation but for celebration. “There is,” he says in The Poem as Initiation, “no occasion too small for the poet’s celebration—
Williams’s red wheelbarrow or Wordsworth’s ‘naked table’—all ask . . . to be recorded by us in their deeper significances.”13

When Tomlinson writes of the way in which our world communicates with us, the world is presented as opaque, its signs paradoxically unreadable. This is a reflection of what Merleau-Ponty calls the “paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception”: “Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given” (PP, p. 16). Thus, perception does not reveal a transcendent reality; there is “no mediate inference from the sign to what is signified, because the alleged signs are not given . . . separately from what they signify” (PP, p. 15). Tomlinson’s images of the opaqueness of the language by which objects communicate with our senses recognizes that objects are present to us only in a perceptual field, that we can never know an object totally, in itself, without the limits of perspective. Our perspective is constantly changing, revealing new signifiers, but never will we see through them to some transcendent signified.

Merleau-Ponty and Tomlinson here follow Husserl and Kant by insisting that our experiences and perceptions do not give us any insight concerning a supra-temporal realm. They are opposed to the tradition which holds that we can intuit an ideal, eternal realm. In this, they disagree with the literary tradition that encompasses both Plato and Emerson. The position taken by Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty maintains that all we can know is immanent in perception; we can know limited perspectives, not transcendent universals. What is transcendent of perception is only the perspectives of other perceptions. The post-structuralist position, more radical than the phenomenology of Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty, would question the purity of what is perceived from these limited perspectives, pointing out that even perception is always already structured, not by Kantian categories, but by language. That is, even perception cannot escape structurality and textuality.

Tomlinson’s poem “On Water” contains several images of the opaque signification of the world. Water, that most appropriate image for the shifting configurations of reality, is credited with “illegible depths and lucid passages;” it is, metaphorically, a “bestiary of stone,” “a book without pages” (Written, p. 3). This opacity is a necessary condition of our being-in-the-world; objects are what they are to us because they are not revealed outside of perspective, in a transcendent totality. “On Water” ends with a colon, indicating, among other things, the poet’s acceptance of the paradox that the continuously given meaning of the world is there only because a final meaning is not. Water, it says,

confers
as much as it denies:
we are orphaned and fathered
by such solid vacancies: (Written, p. 3)
“Swimming Chenango Lake,” a poem which Tomlinson calls “almost an allegory of the way we take purchase on the world of phenomena yet can never ‘possess’ it,”14 develops the theme of the paradox of perception as does “On Water.” It shows how the world reveals its surfaces to us, yet remains in itself ever alien:

... to swim is to take hold
   On water’s meaning, to move in its embrace
   And to be, between grasp and grasping, free.
   He reaches in-and-through to that space
   The body is heir to, making a where
   In water, a possession to be relinquished
   Willingly at each stroke. The image he has torn
   Flows-to behind him, healing itself,
   Lifting and lengthening splayed like the feathers
   Down an immense wing whose darkening spread
   Shadows his solitariness: alone, he is unnamed
   By this baptism, where only Chenango bears a name
   In a lost language he begins to construe—
   A speech of densities and derisions, of half-
   Replies to the questions his body must frame
   Frogwise across the all but penetrable element.
   Human, he fronts it and, human, he draws back
   From the interior cold, the mercilessness
   That yet shows a kind of mercy sustaining him.
   The last sun of the year is drying his skin
   Above a surface a mere mosaic of tiny shatterings,
   Where a wind is unscaping all images in the
   flowing obsidian,
   The going-elsewhere of ripples incessantly shaping.
   (World, p. 3)

The conclusions of these two poems reveal that Tomlinson has not completely freed himself from nostalgia for a complete presence of the world in itself; he still feels “orphaned” by the “mercilessness” of the world which refuses to give itself totally to him. But he does recognize the paradox of perception—he knows that he is both “orphaned and fathered” by the limitations of perspective. Likewise, Tomlinson sees that the complete knowledge he sometimes longs for is a kind of death, a transcendence of the world. Merleau-Ponty explains what would happen if the limitations of perspective were dissolved:

... if the thing and the world could be defined once and for all, if the spatio-temporal horizons could, even theoretically, be made explicit and the world conceived from no point of view, then nothing would exist; I should hover above the world, so that all times and places, far from becoming simultaneously real,
would become unreal, because I should live in none of them and would be involved nowhere. (PP, p. 332)

Despite the fact that we can never know the world completely, things clamor for our attention. We scrutinize them, attempting to ascertain the text of the world, as if each meaning were not constantly being replaced by another. “At the edge of conversations,” Tomlinson notes in a prose piece, “uncompleting all acts of thought, looms the insistence of things which, waiting on our recognition, face us with our own death, for they are so completely what we are not. And thus we go on trying to read them, as if they were signs, or the embodied messages of oracles. We remember how Orpheus drew voices from the stones” (WI, p. 29). Objects are unknowable in themselves, but people also remain undeniably other. The characteristics of a face, its surfaces, are immediately known to us; the other person, never. Tomlinson wrestles with the implications of this in “Face and Image”:

Between
the image of it
and your face: Between
is the unchartable country,
variable, virgin
terror and territory.

The image—
that most desperate act
of portraiture—
I carry and my mind
marries it willingly,
though the forfeiture’s
foreknown already: admit
the reality and you see
the distance from it....

And yet—
seeing a face, what
do we see?
It is not
the one
incontrovertible you or me.

For, still, we must
in all the trust of seeing
trace
the face in the image, image in the face.

To love
is to see,
to let be
this disparateness  
and to live within  
the unrestricted boundary between. (AS, p. 3)

The desire to know others or things totally is perhaps an inevit- 
able human tendency, but as tragedians have been telling us for cen- 
turies, it is a destructive tendency, a lust for impossible power. Though, 
as I have pointed out, Tomlinson sometimes longs for this knowledge of interiors, he more often affirms the constant loss of meaning, the flux and otherness that are corollaries of being-in-the-world. To say yes to change is not to lose all, for loss of final meaning is compensated for by the continuous presentation of the text of the world, the seamless parade of signs before perception, the at-homeness of the body in the world:

... hard to read
The life lines of erratic water
Where, at a confluence of two ways
Refusing to be one without resistance,
Shoulderings of foam collide, unskein
The moving calligraphy before
It joins again, climbing forward
Across obstructions: but do you recall
That still pool—it also fed its stream—
That we were led, night by night,
To return to, as though to clarify ourselves
Against its depth, its silence? We lived
In a visible church, where everything
Seemed to be at pause, yet nothing was:
The surface puckered and drew away
Over the central depth; the foliage
Kept up its liquid friction
Of small sounds, their multiplicity
A speech behind speech, continuing revelation
Of itself, never to be revealed:
It rendered new (time within time)
An unending present, traveling through
All that we were to see and know:
‘Written on water,’ one might say
Of each day’s flux and lapse,
But to speak of water is to entertain the image
Of its seamless momentum once again,
To hear in its wash and grip on stone
A music of constancy behind
The wide promiscuity of acquaintanceship,
Links of water chiming on one another,
Water-ways permeating the rock of time. (Written, p. 54)
Just as perception depends upon the silent language of figure and ground, shadow and light, so, Tomlinson finds, the system of human expression is constituted by the play of presence and absence, sound and silence. Objects have significance only in a perceptual field, and likewise, words do not mean in and of themselves, but only in a structure, a system, a landscape of other words. Each speech act draws its significance against the background of the entire system of language; it is only because of the silence of the rest of language that what is said has meaning. In an essay which Tomlinson has cited, Merleau-Ponty compares language to an arch, a system in which each element remains in place only because of its relationship to other elements. At the beginning of the same essay, Merleau-Ponty explains how the dependence of language on silence is derived from Saussure's first principle, that the literary sign is arbitrary:

What we have learned from Saussure is that, taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so much express a meaning as mark a diversion of meaning between itself and other signs ... so that meaning appears only at the intersection of and as it were in the interval between words. This characteristic prevents us from forming the usual conception of the distinction and the union between language and its meaning. Meaning is usually thought to transcend signs in principle ... and to be immanent in signs in the sense that each one of them, having its meaning once and for all, could not conceivably slip any opacity between itself and us, or even give us food for thought. ... But meaning does not actually dwell in the verbal chain or distinguish itself from the chain in this way. Since the sign has meaning only in so far as it is profiled against other signs, its meaning is entirely involved in language. Speech always comes into play against a background of speech; it is always only a fold in the immense fabric of language. There is thus an opaqueness of language. Nowhere does it stop and leave a place for pure meaning; it is always limited only by more language, and meaning appears within it only set in a context of words. (Signs, pp. 39-42)15

In the theory of language espoused by Tomlinson, words achieve their meaning in the same way that objects do, by an articulation against what is absent. Just as we can never know things in themselves, so a word cannot have a meaning outside the structure of language. Always, meaning depends upon configuration; just as objects can have meaning only in a perceived relationship in space, so words in combination can go beyond themselves to achieve meaning. The meaning achieved in language is, for Tomlinson, very much like the meaning given by
things: contingent, never final. As Pierre Thevenaz has said of Merleau-Ponty's theory of language, "'There is meaning' " but "not a meaning." By definition, then, language is limited; things constantly escape the ephemeral "meaning" achieved by language:

\[
\ldots \text{the mind is a hunter of forms:} \\
\text{Finding them wherever it may—in firm} \\
\text{Things or in frail, in vanishings—} \\
\text{It binds itself, in a world that must decay,} \\
\text{To present substance, and the words} \\
\text{Once said, present and substance} \\
\text{Both belie the saying. (Written, p. 50)}
\]

'sea' I was about to say, 
but sun so rapidly advances 
between glance and word 
under that leafy headland 
mist lies a sea no more. (\textit{WI}, p. 25)

A weather of flashes, fragments 
of Pentecost restored 
and lost before the tongue 
has time for them. The word 
is brought to nothing 
that caught at burning bushes 
gone already and at vistas 
where there are none. (\textit{Written}, p. 30)

Tomlinson's passion for the forms of the world evokes in him 
a nostalgia for a meaning that would transcend change—for an eternal form, one not limited by perspective. Perhaps forgetting that form is a product of perspective, of being-in-the-world, he yields in the third of "Four Kantian Lyrics," to a yearning for a place where things could be named finally:

\[
\text{We cannot pitch} \\
\text{our paradise in such a changeful} \\
\text{nameless place and our encounters} \\
\text{with it. An insufficiency of earth} \\
\text{denies our constancy. For,} \\
\text{content with the iridescence of the moment,} \\
\text{we must flow with the wood-fleece} \\
\text{in a war of forms, the wind} \\
\text{gone over us, and we} \\
\text{drinking its imprints, faceless as the sea. (PL, p. 21)}
\]

Here, Tomlinson sees the relationship between language and the world only in terms of loss—"such a changeful nameless place"—forgetting that we are "both orphaned and fathered/ by such solid vacan-
cies” (Written, p. 3), that the flux and distance which denies us the final silence of the identity of words and things grants us the seamless flow of signifiers. In “After a Death,” still thinking of the relationship between language and being in nostalgic terms, Tomlinson laments the failure of language, regrets that the “unnaming” world constantly undoes the efforts of language:

    Obstinate words: measured against the blue
    They cannot conjure with the dead. Words,
    Bringing that space to bear, that air
    Into each syllable we speak, bringing
    An earnest to us of the portion
    We must inherit, what thought of that would give
    The greater share of comfort, greater fear—
    To live forever, or to cease to live?
    The imageless unnamning upper blue
    Defines a world, all images
    Of endeavors uncompleted. (WI, p. 19)

Tomlinson has noted that the only myth he feels compelled to use is Eden—that it fits what he is doing “with its implication of primal things, fresh sensations, direct perceptions unmuddled” (“Interview,” p. 407). Tomlinson believes that the direct perception of Eden is still available, but he does see limits to the powers of perception—in fact, he holds that perception is possible only because it is limited. When Tomlinson says that he wants “to see what is there,” he does not mean that he wants to see a timeless essence; in fact, he wants to cleanse “the content of our consciousness and . . . of our egos” of the mythology of the timeless essence, the in-itself, in order to see the fluctuating surfaces of things as they present themselves to us (“Interview,” p. 407).

    Just as we still have Edenic perception, the purity of Adamic language is still available to us. Again, however, Tomlinson, by borrowing phenomenological concepts, has redefined traditional terminology, and, just as he treats perception as limited by the necessity of being situated, so, according to Tomlinson’s view language can never achieve complete expression. The function of the act of naming is not, as innatist Adamic language theory would have it, to capture the essence of an object, to allow us to know it once and for all, from a universal, unsituated perspective, but rather to respond to the language of silence by which objects communicate with our senses, joining them in a dance of constant becoming. According to Tomlinson, we misuse language when we expect to stop the flux of becoming with names. To Tomlinson, Edenic language is not a key of ciphers which reveals an unchanging transcendental substance; it is the antiphonal response of the body to the world it lives in. Eden, he feels, is still with us; we lose it only when we demand an identity between words and things, a mastery of things through language:

225
Adam, on such a morning, named the beasts:
   It was before the sin. It is again.
An openwork world of lights and ledges
   Stretches to the eyes’ lip its cup:
Flower-maned beasts, beasts of the cloud,
   Beasts of the unseen, green beasts
Crowd forward to be named. Beasts of the qualities
   Claim them: sinuous, pungent, swift:
We tell them over, surround them
   In a world of sounds, and they are heard
Not drowned in them; we lay a hand
   Along the snakeshead, take up
The nameless muzzle, to assign its vocable
   And meaning. Are we the lords or limits
Of this teeming hoard? We bring
   To a kind of birth all we can name
And, named, it echoes in us our being.
   Adam, on such a morning, knew
The perpetuity of Eden, drew from the words
   Of that long naming, his sense of its continuance
And of its source—beyond the curse of the bitten apple—
   Murmuring in wordless words: ‘When you deny
The virtue of this place, then you
   will blame the wind or the wide air,
Whatever cannot be mastered with a name,
   Mouther and unmaker, madman, Adam.’
(World, p. 8)

What Tomlinson is calling for is a constant revaluation, an eternal re-naming, an acceptance and even a blessing of the limits of language. In “Ode to Arnold Schoenberg,” Tomlinson explains how a revaluation of the structure of music is necessary for meaning to come into being:

in the liberation of the dissonance
   beauty would seem discredited
and yet is not:
redefined
   it may be reached
   thus to proceed
through discontinuities
   to the whole in which
   discontinuities are held
like the foam in chalcedony
   the stone, enriched
   by the tones’ impurity . . .

 ..........................................................
For what is sound
made reintelligible
but the unfolded word
branched and budded,
the wintered tree
creating, cradling space
and then
filling it with verdure? (PL, p. 50)

The linguistic equivalent of this openness to change and flux would be a language which would aim, in Tomlinson's words, "less to record with completeness the impression an event makes, than to mark its successive aspects as they catch the eye, the ear of the speaker" (World, p. 55). To attempt to claim for language a more comprehensive power, to attempt to master the world with language is to deny the necessary limitations of language; it is an attempt to see things from a divine perspective, a linguistic mistake which Tomlinson treats as the primal sin.

Modern poets often use "open" forms as a means of forestalling resolutions, a way of avoiding finality, of keeping open the dialogue between the poet and his world. Though Tomlinson generally uses traditional structures, he also makes frequent use of the breath-determined line espoused by Olson, and he sometimes avoids closure by ending a poem with a colon. For example, in "Against Portraits," which concerns the way things constantly go beyond language, the concluding colon seems to call for language to respond to its own "failure" by engaging itself in the world again and again, constantly recreating meaning:

if there must be
an art of portraiture,
let it show us ourselves as we
break from the image of what we are:

the animation of speech, and then
the eyes eluding
that which, once spoken,
seems too specific, too concluding:

or, entering a sudden slant
of brightness, between dark and gold,
a face half-hesitant,
face at a threshold: (Written, p. 47)

Tomlinson prefers the process and tension of relationship to the stasis that would come with complete comprehension. The kind of attention paid to objects by Williams and Wordsworth, he finds, develops in one this sense of relationship, which becomes an "ethical awareness."
In our involvement with objects in the field of our perception, Tomlinson finds the roots of language and community:

... the particular, rather than existing in its own isolate intensity, means first of all the demands of a relationship—you are forced to look, feel, find words for something not yourself and it means, like all relationships, a certain forgetfulness of self, so that in contemplating something, you are drawn out of yourself towards that and towards other people—other people, because, though the words you use are your words, they are also their words: you are learning about the world by using the common inheritance of language, and once you are moving on into your poem, rather than ‘isolate intensity,’ you are aware of belonging among objects and among human beings and it is a great stay for the mind, this awareness. (‘Interview,’ p. 406)

Human community seems based on the reciprocation between our attention to objects and our response in words. The changing configurations of our world keep calling forth language, but language never achieves complete expression; if it could, notes Merleau-Ponty, we would fall into eternal silence:

The relation of meaning to the spoken word can no longer be a point by point correspondence... we should not even say that it is implied. This notion of implication naively expresses our conviction that a language... has succeeded in capturing things themselves in its forms...

To speak is not to put a word under each thought; if it were, nothing would ever be said. We would not have the feeling of living in the language and we would remain silent, because the sign would be immediately obliterated by its own meaning and because thought would never encounter anything but thought—the thought it wanted to express and the thought which it would form from a wholly explicit language. (Signs, pp. 43-44)

Just as both Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty deny that it is possible to know things-in-themselves, claiming that all we know are the surfaces which we perceive, so they find that there is no thought which transcends language, that there are no pre-linguistic mental formulations. Merleau-Ponty objects to those “analyses of thought [which] give us the impression that before it finds the words which express it [thought] it is already a sort of ideal text that our sentences attempt
to translate.” Language, he notes, “does not presuppose its table of correspondence; it unveils its secrets itself” (Signs, pp. 42-43).

For Tomlinson, too, thought and language are organically related, inseparable, as he notes in a discussion of the role of rhythm in poetry: “the rhythm of writing . . . is in itself an element of meaning, a feeling-out of the design, an inventing of the material, where material and design neither pre-exist ‘just to be written down’ nor exist in separation.” Since the phenomenological attitude of Merleau-Ponty and Tomlinson denies that we could ever know either a thing-in-itself or a “pure” unsituated thought, everything seems to occur in the relationship between the body and the world. Thus, perception and expression are involved in a reciprocal relationship and even become indistinguishable: “All perception, all action which presupposes it, and in short every human use of the body is already primordial expression” (Signs, p. 67). Tomlinson compounds perception (“to see”), conception (“to think”), and expression (“to say”) into one great sweep, “to think is say is see:”

Man, in an exterior, sits down to say
What it is he sees before him: to say
Is to see again by the light of speech
Speechless . . .

an actor
May rehearse, sewing the speech behind his, thoughts
Readying them to come into his mind
Before the words. Yet here, to think
Is say is see . . . (Written, pp. 52-53)

Speech makes the inner self public, but this is possible only because the public system, language, provides the background against which individual articulations can be made. Our speech acts take on meaning only in the context of all other speech acts; language is the matrix in which all humanity is united:

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,
Heirs to the commonalty of sight, that the night
In its reaches and its nearnesses, possessed
A single face, sheer and familiar
Dear if dread. (World, p. 9)

The speech of those now dead, that which has fallen into silence,
ravertates in our speech. The power of what we say has, at least partially, to do with our ability to reflect the rich history of language, to revivify the past in the present. But we are also “heirs to the commonality of sight;” part of the history of perception. In an essay entitled “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty explains how, in the world of art, each act of expression, because it invokes all of the works before it, participates in the tradition of art, a tradition which has as its source the world of perception, the language of silence:

The first sketches on the walls of caves set forth the world “to be painted” or “to be sketched” and called for an indefinite future of painting, so that they speak to us and we answer them by metamorphoses in which they collaborate with us . . . each painter revives, recaptures, and renews the entire undertaking of painting in each new work . . . the expressive operation of the body, begun by the smallest perception . . . is amplified into painting and art. The first sketch on the walls of caves founded one tradition because it was gleaned from another—the tradition of perception. The quasi-eternity of art is of a piece with the quasi-eternity of incarnate existence. (Signs, pp. 60, 70)

The relationship between speech and perception is, in Tomlinson’s poetry, dynamic: things call forth language, language falls silent as things pass beyond it, and a new configuration calls forth more words. “There is a moment for speech and for silence,” Tomlinson says in “Flute Music” (N, p. 11). In “Appearance,” he notes how “the cold/ Hills drawing us to a reciprocation,/ Ask words of us, answering images/ To their range, their heights, held/ By the sun and the snow, between pause and change” (Written, p. 32). This process is, however, never complete; something always remains unconquered by words, hiding, waiting to call forth a deeper communion in the dialogue between mind and world:

... you feel the two as one, this sound Of water that is sound of leaves, they all In stirrings and comminglings so recall The ways a poem flows, they ask to be Written into a permanence—not stilled But given pulse and voice... No single reading renders up complete Their shifting text—a poem, too, in this They bring the mind half way to its defeat, Eluding and exceeding the place it guesses, Among these overlappings, half-lights, depths, The currents of this air, these hiddenesses. (S, p. 29)

Although things never reveal themselves entirely to us, there are
different levels of perception. Those who would be most open to the world must subdue their willfulness, silence the self in the presence of the language of silence. Because end-directed activities tend to attempt to transcend the immediacy of perception, Tomlinson places a premium on uselessness: when we cease to consider an object as a means and see it as an other, when we are aware of its surfaces, we are most open to it:

These
Are the fox hours, cleansed
Of all the meanings we can use
And so refuse them. (WI, p. 18)

Why speak of memory and death
on ghost ground? Absences
relieve, release. Speak
of the life that uselessness
has unconstrained. (AS, p. 36)

In Tomlinson's poem "Legend," King Midas neglects the surfaces that present themselves to him: he sees things only as instruments, and he transcends the present by attempting to enforce his will over things:

Midas eyes the seasonable glints:
    Pennywise, he hears the cash-crop
Clashing its foliage under the wind,
    As the buzz-saw in his mind
Bores through the pastoral irrelevance:
    Seen from this vantage, every view
Becomes a collector's item, and the atmosphere
    Squares off each parcel of bright worth
In bounding it: limbs to matchwood,
    Skyline saw-toothed to raw angles
Roof on roof, as Midas
    Stares the future into being, melts down
Season into season, past distinction,
    While the leaves too slowly
Deal their lightness to the air that lifts
    Then releases them on suppled boughs,
Time present beyond all bargain, liquid gifts.
(Written, p. 28)

In order to facilitate free exchange in the alternating processes of perception and expression, silence and speech, the drive of the self toward total knowledge and domination must be stilled. Tomlinson seems to see the artist as a contemplative, open to the reciprocation of "the pulse of exploration and the pulse of line" (Written, p. 52). When the ego or self attempts to dominate, it attempts to overlap the limita-
tions of perspective that Tomlinson sees as so essential to an authentic perception.

Tomlinson’s universe is structured in differences in tension; it is constituted by perception and expression, figure and ground, speech and silence. Tomlinson does not privilege a transcendent being or meaning but locates the source of value in perception and process. Therefore, he does not consider language to have failed because it does not name things for all time. Because language arises before we are conscious of it, before thought, it is not devalued as an imperfect representation of a perfect conception. Thought, according to Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty, “does not precede speech . . . it is the result of it.” The function of language, Tomlinson finds, is not to still thought by ending it in a final revelation, but to provide a spontaneous response to the language of silence, a counterpoint to perception. Perception, then, is the “speech behind speech,” “the language of silence.” It is by being situated in the flux of words and things that we discover ourselves, not by an unsituated meditation which, in the haughtiness of solipsism, presumes that thought precedes language and perception. In a poem that is part of Tomlinson’s contribution to a work in which he and three other poets jointly construct a sonnet series, all of the major themes of Tomlinson’s poetry receive compelling statement:

Speech behind speech: language
that teaches itself under the touch and sight:
in the night-bound city, language of light
uncovers spaces where no spaces were;
between the image of it and your face:
language of silence; sufficiency of touch,
o my America, my new-found-land explored,
unspeaking plenitude of the flesh made word;

measure and dreams; through the conduit of stone
the flux runs gleaming: rivermap of a hand:
stained-glass world contained by a crystal:
the faces inhabiting a single face,
Persephone, my city: from whose prodigal
ground branches a tree of tongues, twining of
voices,
a madrigal. (R, p. 81)

Though Tomlinson recognizes that language cannot hold the objects of perception, he does not fault language. Instead, he praises the incarnation of language in flux; he recognizes that its fluidity is what makes it so much a part of the texture of the world.

New Orleans
NOTES


5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics (N. P: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964), hereafter cited in the text as PP. In a letter to the author, Mr. Tomlinson sketched out his philosophic influences, noting that he did not become familiar with work of Merleau-Ponty until he began working on poems for The Wax of a World, which was published in 1969:

I read, shortly before starting those poems, Colin Smith’s Contemporary French Philosophy (Mehuen, 1964) in which M-P is dealt with, going on to acquire Phenomenology of Perception. I went to teach at Colgate U. in September 1967 & staying in George Oppen’s flat in NY I found a copy of The Primacy of Perception when I read the little essay “Eye & Mind” for the first time. Up at Colgate, I completed Prometheus & wrote Assassin and Swimming Chenango Lake (there’s a swimming image in M-P somewhere). So, in short, The Way of a World is where M-P comes on stage. Before that, I’d inherited a situation (inaugurated by Nietzsche) that M-P inherited & we responded in the same (or similar) way(s). All this was fed by Ruskin & also by Buber’s I & Thou (another anti-idealistic book).


attributed to page 492 of an unspecified French edition of *Phenomenology of Perception*.


17 Tomlinson, "’Not in Sequenc of a Metronome . . .'," p. 53.

18 *Signs*, p. 90. It should be noted that while Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty do not see thought as preceding language, they do treat perception as the ground of language. This of course preserves the autonomy of the perceiving self, which post-structuralist thought tends to deny. That is, Tomlinson and Merleau-Ponty find Being present in perception and hold this to be the ground of language. The post-structuralist view is that the self and perception are subsequent to the structure of language, the self being merely a point in the networking of language.