

“WISDOM JOYNED WITH SIMPLICITYE”: LANDSCAPES OF CHARLES TOMLINSON

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ABSTRACT

Starting with an account of his 1994 review of the new Loeb translation of the Latin poet Martial, this article examines how Tomlinson “incorporates” the qualities of the Latin poet’s style and content in his own poetry. The importance of Ben Jonson’s debt to Martial’s sense of hospitality and grace is felt throughout Tomlinson’s poetry and this article examines in detail the way in which poems from the 1963 volume *A Peopled Landscape* reveal the clarity of the Augustans as cadenced through Tomlinson’s reading of William Carlos Williams. Reflections on Tomlinson’s more recent poetry focus on courtesy, liberality and the landscape which is an emblem of those qualities of ease and friendship the poet most admires.

KEY WORDS: Charles Tomlinson, contemporary British poetry, landscape.

RESUMEN

Tomando como punto de partida su reseña de 1994 de la nueva traducción de Loeb del poeta latino Marcial, el presente artículo examina cómo Tomlinson “incorpora” las cualidades del estilo y del contenido de este poeta clásico a su propia poesía. En la poesía de Tomlinson se aprecia la importancia de la deuda de Ben Jonson con el sentido de la hospitalidad y la gracia de Marcial. Este artículo examina detalladamente cómo en algunos poemas de *A Peopled Landscape* (1963) se revela la claridad de los Augustans a través de la cadencia de la lectura que Tomlinson lleva a cabo de William Carlos Williams. Las reflexiones de la poesía más reciente de Tomlinson se centran en la cortesía, la liberalidad y el paisaje que es un emblema de esas cualidades de bienestar y amistad que el poeta más admira

PALABRAS CLAVE: Charles Tomlinson, poesía contemporánea británica, paisaje.

In Tomlinson’s retrospective words about the *Renga: A Chain of Poems*, originally published in France by Gallimard in 1971 and later in England by Penguin Books, he tells the reader that “One still found oneself speaking with a communal voice: speaking with a communal voice one found —once more— one’s self” (Paz 39). The story of that composition of the *Renga* has an echo of the connections



which tie Tomlinson's work to a tradition of civilized urbanity which go back to the Latin world of Martial and Horace and the English tradition of Ben Jonson and John Dryden. Claud Roy firmly placed this connection between the 'now' and the 'then' in his introduction to the 1979 Penguin edition:

In April 1969 four poets of Europe disappeared underground for a week. In myth, subterranean retreats augur always the unfolding of a harvest: the harvest of wheat which Persephone descends into Hades to gain as her reward, the harvest of life which Alcestis descends to Tartarus to obtain for her egoistic husband, the harvest of wisdom which all the heroes of initiations go to bring to ripeness and gather in the dark of the underworld. (Paz 9)

In fact the underworld into which Tomlinson descended was the basement of a small hotel on the left bank in Paris and his companions were Octavio Paz (Mexican), Edoardo Sanguineti (Italian) and Jacques Roubaud (French). As Roy tells us

No gloom, but plenty of lamps burning calmly beneath their shades. No black poplars, or white cypresses, no fields of asphodel on the banks of Tartarus: just sofas and leather arm chairs. The ghosts of Erebus only served tea here in white jackets. And the muffled rumbling which one made out at times was neither that of the waters of the river of Memory nor the ululating plaint of the Erinnyes: it was merely the trains of the métro between the Bac and Solférino stations. (Paz 9).

Claude Roy's forward to the completed renga, a form of poetic writing that had been developed in Japan between the ninth and twelfth century, affirms the interlinking nature of the exercise. Each of the four poets participating in this underground exercise "restricted himself to linking his contribution to that of the poet who handed over to him and thus lent him his voice" (Paz 9).

It is not difficult to understand why an exercise of listening to tones and rhythms should so appeal to Charles Tomlinson when one reads his own comments upon the act of translation, an art which he regards as a process indistinguishable from poetic creation. In his 2004 preface to the Faber *Selected Poems of Dryden*, referring to the Augustan poet's *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), he suggests that these translations "*made it new* (in Pound's phrase) especially for poets themselves" (*Dryden* xvi). Tomlinson expressed his admiration for Dryden's energy which "can enforce a massive ungainsayable sweep of the verse" and noted that although the nineteenth-century had cooled towards the great Augustan there was one intelligent and significant voice that recognised the vivid nature of his language:

Defending Dryden against Robert Bridges, Hopkins insisted: "He is the most masculine of our poets; his style and rhythms lay the strongest stress of all our literature on the naked thew and sinew of the English language." (*Dryden* xiv)

The toughness of Dryden's language appealed also to Tomlinson as he was trying to discover his own poetic voice in the mid-twentieth-century:



I first came across Dryden and his follower Pope in the years between the 1940s and 50s when English poetry often seemed to be losing its ability to handle a variety of tones...For a young poet it was necessary to struggle to rediscover an idiom where one could simply say what one meant. (Dryden xi)

As well as discovering Dryden at this time Tomlinson also came across the work of both Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. In terms of noting the influences on Tomlinson's poetry of both the seventeenth-century work of Dryden and the twentieth-century modernism of the Americans it is worth looking at the introduction that Octavio Paz wrote for the penguin edition of *Renga* where he focussed on the interrelated sense of the contemporary poet and the past:

For us translation is transmutation, metaphor: a form of change and severance; a way, therefore, of ensuring the continuity of our past by transforming it in dialogue with other civilizations (an illusory continuity and dialogue: translation: transmutation: solipsism). The idea of universal correspondence is returning. Certainly, we no longer see the macrocosm and the microcosm as the two halves of one sphere, but we conceive of the entire universe as a plurality of systems in movement: these systems reflect one in another and, reflecting, they combine like the rhymes of a poem. (Paz 20)

The idea of continuity with the past and the recognition of values that become transmuted, metamorphosed even, is central to Charles Tomlinson's oeuvre: as well as lying behind his comments on the art of translation it informs his poetry in which the urbane and civilized values highlighted by both Martial and Horace become incorporated into an essential aspect of the English landscape.

When D.R. Shackleton Bailey's three-volume translation of Martial's *Epigrams* appeared as part of the Loeb Classics in 1994, Tomlinson published a review for *The New Criterion* under the title "Martial in English" and he noted that this edition "offers an occasion for thinking about the way Martial's presence shows itself in English poetry." He praised the unpretentiously accurate approach of the translator by suggesting that it "helps the reader to the mental possession of the original" as well as making one conscious "anew of how splendidly some of our English poets responded to Martial" (*Metamorphoses* 61). Tomlinson highlighted Martial's imaginatively generous poem celebrating his friendship with Faustinus, whose Baian villa reconciles beauty and use (III, 58), and suggested that Shackleton Bailey's prose was involved in the process of struggling to "get itself into verse, moving towards octo-syllabics and two iambic pentameters":

Nor does the country caller come empty handed. He brings pale honey with its comb and a cone of milk from the woods of Sassina: one proffers drowsy dormice, another the bleating offspring of a hairy dam... Strapping daughters of the honest tenant farmers present their mothers' gifts in wicker baskets. (*Metamorphoses* 65)

Compared with this the poem that truly translates—"carries over"—Martial into English and "into the English scene" is of course Ben Jonson's eulogy of the Sidney household, "To Penshurst":



But all come in, the farmer, and the clowne:
And no one empty-handed, to salute
Thy lord, and lady, though they have no sute.
Some bring a capon, some a rurall cake,
Some nuts, some apples; some that thinke they make
The better cheeses, bring 'hem; or else send
By their ripe daughters, whom they would commend
This way to husbands... (Jonson 94)

Tomlinson's awareness of the importance of Jonson's poem is emphasised in his comments comparing the two:

Penshurst, like Faustinus's farm is the great good place that never was on sea or land, something to stretch the imagination in Jonson's course for civilizing English aristocrats...It was Martial who enabled Jonson's almost laid-back sense of opulence, encouraged his zest for the specific (listing foods in "Inviting a Friend to Supper," as Martial likes to do), inspired him via those complaints about being invited to an aristocrat's house, but not getting the same food as the master, or even sitting at the same table—to a series of generous opposites that can be expected at Penshurst...Martial is re-located in an English setting, after more than a thousand years. (*Metamorphoses* 66)

Tomlinson concluded his review by looking at Martial's understanding of the meaning of friendship and by commenting on the epigram about the precious hours spent by the poet with his friend, Julius Martialis (iv, 64):

His friend's place has all the frank largesse of the Sidneys' acres, but there is nothing about a happy peasantry in Martial here (they are kept out of sight) or the functional nature of a properly run estate. You cannot hear the traffic on the Flaminian and Salarian Way, or the noise of the boatman's cries on the nearby Tiber. All is courtesy and liberality, and the landscape an emblem of those qualities of ease and friendship the poet most admires. (*Metamorphoses* 69)

However, the enormous influence of Martial and Jonson on the poetry of Charles Tomlinson needed one more ingredient before the young poet could discover an idiom where "one could simply say what one meant." That ingredient was to be found in America.

According to his autobiographical account, *Some Americans*, Tomlinson did not seriously begin to read the poetry of William Carlos Williams until the autumn of 1956 when he came across "The Desert Music" and "Journey to Love." When *The Desert Music* came out from Random House in 1954 it opened with a republication of some lines that had appeared in *Paterson II* (1948) which were written in what Williams was to call "the variable foot." These lines were now given the status of a separate poem with the title "The Descent" and this three-ply measure of writing used by Williams was to have a significant influence over Tomlinson for the next few years:



Late in February 1957 I wrote my first poems in emulation of the three-ply cadences that Williams used in the two books of his I had read...it was the three-ply poems that appealed to me most, perhaps because they afforded the possibility of a more meditative movement... (*American* 126)

Tomlinson's reaching out to understand the experience of others, to occupy their space, found the imitation of Williams's poetic measure ideal for his translation of Antonio Machado's "Poem of a Day," written in August 1960 and published in *Castilian Indexes*. Referring to the poem in a letter to Williams, August 1960, Tomlinson recognised that this was possibly the high watermark of the Machado translations. "Poem of a Day" was a long conversation piece which had been written by Machado in 1913 in the dreary town of Baeza, on the confines of Andalusia where it approaches Castile. According to Henry Gifford's account of "The Poet as Translator," written for the special Tomlinson issue of *Agenda* in 1995, Machado in the previous year had lost his young wife, after a brief marriage soon overshadowed by her tuberculosis:

He had left Soria, where Leonor now lay in the graveyard at Espino, which in a poem written a few months later he calls on his "good friend" Jose Maria Palacio to visit, now spring has arrived. In Baeza he continued his monotonous work as teacher of French in a secondary school. Machado's dejection was complete, and in "Poem of a Day" he surveys his situation, unflinchingly and with a quiet irony. Like Tomlinson's "Up at La Serra," in *A Peopled Landscape*, published the same year as *Castilian Indexes*, this poem shows the aptness of William Carlos Williams's "three-ply measure," now hovering, now speeded up, its pace, as Tomlinson observes, "resembling that of thought." No other metre could so well capture the subtlety of tone in Machado's "rural meditations," while avoiding "the rather facile rattle that occurs if one translates Spanish octosyllabics into English with end rhymes." (Gifford 66)

The intricacy of Machado's music is delicately matched with precision in Tomlinson's translation where "Llueve, llueve; tu neblina/ que se torne en aguanieve,/ y otra vez en agua fina!/ Llueve, Señor, llueve, llueve!" becomes

Rain,
rain on!
and alternate
as mist or sleet
and then again
reverting to a tenuous rain
rain, Lord, rain!

Tomlinson's account of his early writing makes the debt to Williams's measure very clear:

In listening to Jersey speech rhythms and to what he calls "the American language," Williams evolved his theory of "measure." "Measure" —by which I take



him to mean those structural principles that still subsist in the language of poetry when one has abandoned traditional metrics— he seems to have supposed, in his more polemical moments, belonged to a specifically American poetry. Already I was trying to prove that “measure” belonged also to English poetry, though I would have hesitated to define it in terms of Williams’s variable foot, that self-contradictory notion which Alan Stephens parodies in the phrase “an elastic inch.” Yet to be admitted to the clan, on whatever grounds, was an honour, for I felt it to be a platoon in a much larger action, one that would eventually establish the importance of other American poets in England besides T.S. Eliot. (*American* 129)

In 1959 Tomlinson had been awarded a travel grant to visit the United States during which he called upon the ageing American poet out at Rutherford. In his recollections of the visit Tomlinson quotes one of Williams’s comments made about the comparison between past and present “When we came here the place was surrounded by woods, and now...” before adding Florrie Williams’s coda, “One thing I *would* like is to see a horse-drawn carriage or two back.” On the return journey to New York Tomlinson registered how the landscape was in the process of change:

Returning with Denise down Rutherford’s main street to the bus, I could now complete for myself Williams’s unfinished sentence about the once surrounding woods. The neons were splashing and trickling their colours over wet sidewalks between buildings whose graceless monotony was made drabber and lonelier by the damp dusk of late autumn. (*American* 132)

During that December the Tomlinson’s drove across America to visit Yvor Winters in California and although the enthusiasm felt by the English poet for Williams’s variable measure of writing poetry wasn’t shared by Winters the hospitality and courtesy of the day was what remained within memory:

The day was an entire success. The dignity and dimension of the man unmistakably communicated themselves, as did a capacity for friendship, rather than friendliness. Winters showed no desire to please, but, as in his urging one to try a particularly fine wine, he was eager to share what he deemed best. The same eagerness appeared when he offered for one’s meditation, as it were, his distinctive vision of things Californian. That vision was, further, tinged with a kind of elegiac sadness, as in his poem “Californian Oaks,” an awareness that the place had changed and was changing now beyond all recognition. Like Williams, he complained: “When we first came here, this was the country.” (*American* 135-6)

The Tomlinsons returned to England just after Easter 1960 and by August he had written “Return to Hinton; written on the author’s return to Hinton Blewett from the United States” which was to become one of the opening poems of *A Peopled Landscape*.

Ten years
and will you be
a footnote, merely,

England
 of the Bible
 open at Genesis
 on the parlour table?
 ‘God
 saw the light
 that it was good.’
 It falls
 athwart the book
 through window-lace
 whose shadow
 decorates the sheets
 of ‘The Bridal March’—
 a square of white
 above the keyboard
 and below
 a text which is a prayer.
 The television box
 is one,
 the mullions and flagged floor
 of the kitchen
 through an open door
 witness a second
 world in which
 beside the hob
 the enormous kettles’
 blackened bellies ride—
 as much the tokens of an order as
 the burnished brass. (*Collected* 65-66)

Richard Swigg’s comments on these opening lines are sharply accurate when he says that the poem “is to be no statutory elegy on vanishing rural ways”:

The mood, if unrancorous, is tougher—clear-eyed in its adaptation of the American verse-line to evoke the constancies, persistencies, and relationships, still astir in a ground long worked and cherished. There is a place’s “presence” within these rooms and utensils, an airy openness inside weight and solidities that the three-ply line lifts into view as the poet’s eye moves from the parlor of the farm towards the kitchen. (Swigg, *Tomlinson* 102)

The “you” of the second line is left deliberately ambiguous as to whether the address is to the farmer’s widow or to an England which is in the process of changing. The quality of permanent cultural values is suggested by the emphatic reference to the King James Bible, a cornerstone of generations, lying open at the heraldic words of Creation. However, the use of the literary term “footnote” in the preceding line suggests already a diminishing of the literary weight behind the book that connects Jonson’s early seventeenth-century world with that of mid-twentieth century Somerset. The inherited quality of life garnered within a domestic solidity is given



us with the reference to “The Bridal March” although this too is reduced to “a square of white” which prepares us for the geometrical counterpart of the “television box.” These shapes act as openings, what Tomlinson’s friend Philippe Jaccottet was to term “ouvertures,” as the reader’s eye is drawn through the vertical mullions of the Gothic windows across the stone squares of flags in order to arrive at the kitchen. Here the enormous utensils provide a sense of inherited value and possess a life of their own which is pregnant with a tradition to be carried forward. The word “tokens” refers to “a stamped piece of metal, issued as a medium of exchange by a private person or company, who engage to take it back at its nominal value, giving goods or legal currency for it” (OED) which links to what can or at least *should* be taken on trust. However, this trust in a sense of order is one that is in the process of being betrayed and the thought echoes the words Tomlinson had heard from both Carlos Williams and Yvor Winters in his recently completed American tour. That said life does not simply stop in response to the changes imposed by technological and industrial advance:

You live
between the two
and, ballasted against
the merely new, the tide
and shift of time
you wear
your widow’s silk
your hair
plaited, as it has been
throughout those years
whose rime it bears.

The “television box” associated with “the merely new” is juxtaposed with what the woman wears, itself a memory to the past, and the value of this continuity is held both with the significance of ballast and the natural whiteness of winter’s “rime.” The surviving widow who hopes that her son’s pride in his tractor will carry on for the future a quality of life that is “more than bread” is portrayed in terms of her qualities that last beyond a swift-moving present:

Your qualities
are like the land
—inherited:

The threat to a quiet and reflective way of living is not so much the inevitability of death, a certainty that possesses its own gravestone writing, as the unstoppable process of industrial improvement.

Death’s
not the enemy
of you nor of your kind:
a surer death



creeps after me
 out of that generous
 rich and nervous land
 where, buried by
 the soft oppression of prosperity
 locality's mere grist
 to build
 the even bed
 of roads that will not rest
 until they lead
 into a common future
 rational
 and secure
 that we must speed
 by means that are not either.
 Narrow
 your farm-bred certainties
 I do not hold:
 I share
 your certain enemy.
 For we who write
 the verse you do not read
 already plead your cause
 before
 that cold tribunal
 while you're unaware
 they hold their session.

The firm repudiation of mere nostalgia is held by the poet emphasising that he does not share the widow's narrow "farm-bred certainties" but, instead, shares "your certain enemy." The temptation to give the widow a full awareness of the nature of the changing reality of the surrounding world is firmly eschewed by making it clear that his poem is not writing she would ever read and that her confident vulnerability ensures that she remains unaware that the "cold tribunal" of a planning committee is already meeting to discuss the landscape's future. Tomlinson's concern for a constancy under threat from standardizing forces was communicated to Williams in a letter of June 1960, some weeks before the composition of "Return to Hinton" where he told him of plans for a motorway across the Cotswolds:

One cannot drive an immense highway across these lovely intimacies of steep green hills and deep, recessed valleys. (Swigg, *Look* 142)

Tomlinson's firm sense of the importance of what is "inherited" is placed in the closing lines of the poem:

Our language is our land
 that we'll
 not waste or sell



against a promised mess
of pottage that we may not taste.

The Martial-Jonson sense of contentment is clear in the last lines:

For who has known
the seasons' sweet succession
and would still
exchange them for a whim, a wish
or swim into
a mill-race for an unglimsped fish?

The "courtesy and liberality" and "those qualities of ease and friendship" which Tomlinson recognized as emblematic in the landscape are inevitably in the process of being devalued and that use of the word "tokens" has a resonance which might propel us forward to "Before Urbino," an early poem by J.H. Prynne which shows its clear debt to Tomlinson.

Such tokens are a ready currency:
And we are thus too liberal in their use
Who read a landscape so between the lines,
And take what is before us as a sign
Of what is mere conjecture. (Prynne 3)

Prynne's awareness of conversation, golden words, between the rural Italian people has a more sceptical tone to it as he links the word "tokens" with the speed of movement of "currency." The process of devaluation with its temptation to sentimentalize the lives of other people is brought home to us with that too great liberality with which we presume to know what is, after all, "mere conjecture."

In the autumn of 1960 Tomlinson wrote "The Farmer's Wife" again using William Carlos Williams's three-ply line to convey intricate movement and moments of stillness:

Scent
from the apple-loft!
I smelt it and I saw
in thought
behind the oak
that cupboards all your wine
the store in maturation
webbed
and waiting.
There
we paused in talk,
the labyrinth of lofts
above us and the stair
beneath, bound
for a labyrinth of cellars. (*New Collected Poems* 76-78)

Opening with the directness of the pun on sense and motion the pervasive “scent” becomes a door through which we can imagine a world, a still-life painting of the wine which is both “webbed” and “waiting.” The conceit here brings to mind not only the cobwebbed bottles (age and stillness) but also the labyrinth of rich associations which surround the farm and its heritage. Williams’s measure slows the cadence to allow a savoured fullness, a stately progress which pauses with the single line “There” and it is almost as though the poet and the farmer’s wife stand at the centre of a web of meanings: above, the labyrinth of lofts reflect a network paralleled by the labyrinth of cellars. The apples, the scent of which opened the poem, find their counterpart in the cellars, a traditional home of cider or wine and the interlacing of meaning is given a further enrichment with the word “bound.”

Everywhere
 as darkness
 leaned and loomed
 the light was crossing it
 or travelled through
 the doors you opened
 into rooms that view
 your hens and herds,
 your cider-orchard.

Here the sense of a web is continued in “leaned and loomed” where the alliteration echoes the criss-crossing of fabric on a loom and the light “crossing it” reveals, when a door is opened, those elements of a farm which are part of the inheritance: hens, herd and cider-orchard.

Proud
 you were
 displaying these
 inheritances
 to an eye
 as pleased as yours
 and as familiar almost
 with them. Mine
 had known,
 had grown into the ways
 that regulate such riches
 and had seen
 your husband’s mother’s day
 and you had done
 no violence to that recollection,
 proving it
 by present fact.
 Distrust
 that poet who must symbolize
 your stair into
 an analogue



of what was never there.
 Fact
 has its proper plenitude
 that only time and tact
 will show, renew.
 It is enough
 those steps should be
 no more than what they were, that your
 hospitable table
 overlook the cowshed.
 A just geography
 completes itself
 with such relations, where
 beauty and stability can be
 each other's equal.

The value of this inherited quality of living is central to the poet's awareness of how a tradition has been continued over generations without any resort to a violence of change. The "just geography" which follows, the labyrinthine and webbed lines of which constitute a map of human conduct, is completed by the balancing of beauty and stability although this last quality is followed by a hint of foreboding:

But building is
 a biding also
 and I saw
 one lack
 among your store of blessings.
 You had come
 late into marriage
 and your childlessness
 was palpable
 as we surveyed
 the kitchen, where four unheraldic
 sheep-dogs kept the floor
 and seemed to want
 their complement of children.
 Not desolateness
 changed the scene I left,
 the house
 manning its hill,
 the gabled bulk
 still riding there
 as though it could
 command the crops
 upwards
 out of willing land;
 and yet
 it was as if
 a doubt



within my mood
troubled the rock of its ancestral certitude.

The word “building” acts both as a noun and a verb, stasis and movement with the latter suggesting a continuance of traditional values centred around the settled sense of “biding.” However, with no children to take over the farm that interweaving of human domestic value and the natural environment within which it sits may be coming to an end. The poem is raised far above a domestic recollection for the poet as the significance of what the Fostons Ash world represents conjures up a precise comparison with Jonson’s “To Penshurst” where the poet praises nature’s willingness to provide for man’s sustenance:

Each banke doth yield thee conyes; and the topps
Fertile of wood, ASHORE and SYDNEY’S copp’s,
To crowne thy open table, doth provide
The purpled pheasant, with the speckled side:
The painted partrich lyes in every field,
And, for thy messe, is willing to be kill’d.
And if the highswolne Medway faile thy dish,
Thou hast thy ponds, that pay thee tribute fish,
Fat, aged carps, that runne into thy net. (Jonson 94)

However, whereas Jonson’s panegyric lauds continuity that seems safeguarded on account of the lady’s fruitfulness and the sense that her children will continue an inheritance of a true dwelling Tomlinson’s poem ends more bleakly and the “rock” with its reference back to the Bible is no longer enough to build on.

When Hopkins referred to the “naked thew and sinew” of language to be found in Dryden he was echoing a metaphor used by both Sidney and Jonson. In *The Defence of Poesie* Sidney is direct in his attack upon poetical weakness when he writes that he does “not remember to have seene but fewe (to speake boldly) printed, that have poetical sinews in them” (Sidney 235) and Jonson’s translation of Horace’s “Of the Art of Poetrie” castigates those poets who “striving to run smooth, and flow,/Hath neither soule, nor sinews” (Jonson 307). For both these poets the word “sinews” denotes content, the central part of a poem, and Jonson went on to suggest in his prose *Discoveries*

The sense is as the life and soule of Language, without which all words are dead. Sense is wrought out of experience, the knowledge of humane life, and actions, or of the liberall Arts... (Jonson 307)

In the 1983 Cambridge Clark Lectures which Tomlinson delivered on the theme of “Poetry and Metamorphosis” he recalled an early essay by Williams from 1915, “Vortex-WCW” where the young American gave his reactions to the manifesto on sculpture written by Gaudier Brzeska, published in the second issue of *Blast*, in which he celebrated his emotions as a sculptor as arising from the arrangement of surfaces and from the lines and planes defining surfaces:



Williams translates the terms of Gaudier's manifesto into the terms of a poetry where the word "plane" is used to reinforce Williams' idea of a poetry of line pulling against line, a poetry where the sense of physical resistance is paramount, where words and groups of words make up the resistant facets of a poem—a terminology obviously opposed to the impressionistic drift of contemporary free verse in writers like Amy Lowell. (Tomlinson, *Metamorphoses* 180)

The intersecting planes and contrasting pulls of language which allow the sinews of Tomlinson's verse to move both flexibly and with careful meditative movement are clearly seen in "The Way of a World" (February 1967) where steadying and upheaval are held in counterpoint:

Having mislaid it, and then
 Found again in a changed mind
The image of a gull the autumn gust
 Had pulled upwards and past
The window I watched from, I recovered too
 The ash-key, borne-by whirling
On the same surge of air, like an animate thing:
 The scene was there again: 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. (*Collected* 170-71)

The criss-cross pulsing, meshing, of ties and change, stasis and movement, are held within the surfaces: a gull's upward pull by the wind, the seed of the ash tree whirling, the sweep of movement in the leaves which are still held secure by "supple boughs." What could be an anarchy of whirling change is held within a sense of purpose, like a framework or a tradition, by a "counterpoise" that leads to a clarity of vision:

 All rose
 Clear in the memory now, though memory did not choose
Or value it first: it came
 With its worth and, like those tree-tips,
Fine as dishevelled hair, but steadied
 And masted as they are, that worth
Outlasted its lost time, when
 The cross-currents had carried it under.
In all these evanescences of daily air,
 It is the shapes 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 human sense of value which Tomlinson captures in this series of images rests in the abiding memory whose worth is brought into the present even though the image was not initially selected for keeping. The repeated word “worth” is placed alongside an inherited steadiness which is itself connected to man’s outward push with “masted,” that symbol of the ship riding the seas which haunts the Homeric opening lines of Pound’s “Canto I.” Worth outlives the “lost time” when we seem to have become disinherited and the surge to a future “way of a world” is contained not only in the seed but in the fine balance of opposites contained in the closing image of gravity which acts both as an anchor for the root and a pull for the top of the tree as if in imitation of another seventeenth-century source: the Body’s cry in Andrew Marvell’s “A Dialogue between the Soul and Body”:

O who shall me deliver whole
From bonds of this Tyrannic Soul?
Which, stretcht upright, impales me so,
That mine own Precipice I go. (Marvell 22)

In July 1989 Tomlinson wrote a measured poem of parting from his friend Octavio Paz “In a Cambridge Garden” as he contemplated

Another town and time —and little left of it
Before you were to go. Castles in Spain
Stood solid to receive your royal progress
While Wren detained us. Beyond his colonnade
Arched and shaded, as if Italian pavours
Had laid the flags we echoed on —our way
Led us to lawns whose midday shadows
Seemed cast from trees as massive
I was about to say, as those that grow
In Mexico itself —but no: this plane
This copper beech, both take their scale
From their own setting, and could stand
Nowhere but here, their power contained
Beside a wall in England. (*Collected* 492)

The echo of a seventeenth-century sense of difference in landscape, a comparison between “the Indian Ganges side” and the “Tide of Humber,” is hinted at with grace and wit as the connecting link is given palpability in the garden which is a poem:

And so we coincide
Against distance, wind and tide, meet
And translate our worlds to one another,
Greet in verse. A poem is itself
A sort of garden —we are waving our farewells—
Seasonable at all times as we bring
Our changing seasons to it —we are losing sight



Of the speeding car that is launched and one
With the traffic now and the mid-May sun.

The overarching quality of friendship, shared feelings for poetry and place, is something Tomlinson measured in his inclusion of different translations of Martial's *Epigram, Book X*, 47, chosen for his edition of *Verse in Translation* (Oxford 1980). The first of these is by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and its tone suggests the quiet steadiness admired in Tomlinson's appreciation of an English quality of steadfastness:

Marshall, the thinges for to attayne
The happy life be thes, I fynde:
The riches left, not got with payne;
The frutfull grownd; the quyete mynde;
The equall freend; no grudge, nor stryfe;
No charge of rule nor governance;
Without disease, the helthfull life;
The howshold of contynuanee;
The meane dyet, no delicate fare;
Wisdom joined with simplicitie;
The night discharged of all care,
Where wyne may beare no soveranty;
The chaste wyfe, wyse, without debate;
Suche sleapes as may begyle the night;
Contented with thine owne estate,
Neyther wisse death, nor feare his might. (Tomlinson, *Oxford* 29)

However, Charles Tomlinson is no simple translator of virtues from either the First Century Spaniard or the Sixteenth and Seventeenth century English poets. The awareness of America is essential and the statement in Carlos Williams's essay on Gaudier Brzeska that may well have struck Tomlinson was the clarity of

I will express my emotions in the appearances: surfaces, sounds, smells, touch of the place in which I happen to be.

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