

Translation as Resurrection: Charles Tomlinson's 'The Return'

In the Introduction to his 1983 *Translations*,¹ Charles Tomlinson makes recourse to the notion of poetic translation formulated by his sometime-collaborator Henry Gifford, which he says 'has always stayed at the back of my mind in all subsequent undertakings'. 'The aim of these translations', Gifford wrote of their *Versions from Fyodor Tyutchev* (1960),

has been to preserve not the metre, but the movement of each poem: its flight, or track through the mind. Every real poem starts from a given ground and carries the reader to an unforeseen vantage-point, whence he views differently the landscape over which he has passed. What the translator must do is to recognize these two terminal points, and to connect them by a coherent flight. This will not be exactly the flight of his original, but no essential reach of the journey will have been left out . . . Translation is Resurrection, but not of the body.

This formulation appears to have been at the back of Tomlinson's mind in the subsequent undertaking of a poetic sequence that shows, as Octavio Paz said Eliot and Pound have shown, 'translation to be a process indistinguishable from poetic creation'.² 'The Return', from Tomlinson's 1987 collection of the same title,³ is addressed to Paolo Bertolani, whom he met during his time in Liguria in 1950 and 1951 when they were both starting out as impoverished poets, as the sequence recalls.⁴ Returning to Bertolani's village of La Serra after thirty years, Tomlinson views the landscape over which he has passed much in the way Gifford describes. When he looks ahead up 'The Road' in the first of the four poems the ascent before him is at once behind him, no essential reach of his original journey left out by his memory of 'Each bend and vista' of the walk from the village, the given ground of the sequence. But this is not a case of having known them all already, for the remembrance incorporates a concomitant forgetting which makes the familiar unfamiliar or different, allowing him to know the place for the first time. Forgetting 'Brings back the track of what was always there/ As new as a discovery' – the track being both the literal road and the figurative track through the mind. 'The place has

changed, the image still remains’, he writes in the second poem, speaking of La Rocchetta, the spot at the hill’s summit, and as this imaginative and experiential combination of change and sameness makes it possible for the vantage-point to be discovered anew, it clears the path towards the ‘consonances unforeseen’ between the two poets that form the terminal point at the heart of the final poem. Accordingly, place can be described as ‘an embodiment/ And incarnation beyond argument’: and, as it may be, a resurrection.

If, as I am suggesting, Tomlinson understands poetry to be an embodiment of the processes of translation, then this is made explicit in the third poem, an elegy for Bertolani’s dead wife, ‘Graziella’. Tomlinson recalls

the day
 She imitated my clipped foreign way
 Of saying *Shakespeare*: English, long unheard,
 Came flying back, some unfamiliar bird
 Cutting a wing-gust through the weight of air
 As she repeated it – *Shakespeare Shakespeare* –

Her imitation of his accent initiates a transition in the poet’s mind between her Italian, to which his ear has become habituated, and his native though ‘long unheard’ English. That this movement from one language to another is analogous to an act of translation is affirmed by the bird metaphor that gives ‘coherent flight’, to remember Gifford’s expression, to the ‘clipped’ wings of the foreign-sounding word, which seems to lose its foreignness as the poet’s mother tongue comes ‘flying back’. While at the time this creates the momentary impression that he is speaking to someone in his own language, as the episode comes flying back to him at the present moment of writing this other is literally brought into being as the reader of the poem, which is of course in English. And just as, in the second poem, ‘phrases marrying a tongue and time/ Coil through the mind’s ear’ as he revisits the streets in which he walked those years ago, so do they now as the poem makes itself heard, their coiling motion figuring the temporal returns involved in the

poem's translative procedures. Through thus marrying two tongues over time, Tomlinson makes present to Bertolani the wife 'who tempered your beginning pen' so that she can 'hear, now, the full gamut of your mastery', extending to his friend that same 'deepening of the sense of sacredness of married love'⁵ that he takes to be one of the defining qualities of Dryden's 'Baucis and Philemon' as a work of poetic translation.

And yet this is an incarnation beyond the argument of 'The Return', which states that Graziella 'Will never take this road with us again' since 'The dead do not return'. Indeed, it could be argued that insofar as this is further illustrated by the notion of translation as resurrection, but with the crucial proviso that it is not resurrection of the body, the sense of sacredness to which the sequence gives needs to be thought of, as Tomlinson himself has characterized it, as part of his 'attempt to redefine Christian concepts' ('Tomlinson at Sixty', p. 232). The Christian concept of translation, which sees it as the necessary consequence of sin, the burden of Babel, comes up against his reference in 'Between Serra and Rocchetta' to 'the rise, the run, the fall of voices', where the word order implicitly turns the doctrine of the risen Christ atoning for the Fall on its head. In this connection he also seems to be playing with the Biblical reversal of Babel, the descent of the tongues of fire at Pentecost, these finding a diminished resonance in the fireflies discussed in the second poem and returned to in the fourth, which takes them for its title. There, seen against bay and sky at night, 'these/ Tiny, travelling fires gainsay them both,/ Trusting to neither empty space nor seas/ The burden of their weightless circlings'. While the cancelling out of the fireflies' 'burden' with 'weightless' may suggest that Tomlinson distrusts and wishes to gainsay the faith that illuminates the kind of 'circlings' shaping Dante's fire-wreathed vision of hell, this is belied by the fact that their glow is described earlier in the poem in incarnational terms, as being 'Flushed into flesh', which counteracts somewhat the de-Christianizing force of 'translation as

resurrection, but not of the body' as a governing principle of these poems. What they work up to, rather, is something of the 'ungainsayableness' which Tomlinson, in the same breath as he speaks of wanting to redefine Christian concepts, says is common to poetry and religion both, but which was lost to religion in the nineteenth century when it 'ceased to care about language'. In short, contrary to what is sometimes supposed, he doesn't have any argument with religion per se, or even more specifically with the Christian Incarnation; he looks beyond this, albeit to a beyond that never leaves the track of what was always there, or what is always here. The articulation of this, which plays poetry's discursive resources against its musical and visual qualities, entails a mode of self-limitation on Tomlinson's part that is almost kenotic – though to say so is to disregard his assertion that 'my poems live in a world of presences that touches on the unknowable, where "to name the Name" seems crudely premature'.⁶ Such is the measure of his remembering the name mimicked by Graziella: 'Why does a mere word seem autonomous/ We catch back from the grave?', he asks. In another mind this might easily have occasioned some meditation on The Word, but that it doesn't is testimony to Tomlinson's sense that all he has to work with are mere words, mere English or Italian words. Nor is this cause for regret, or for brooding over one's sins, since his unanswered and, as it must be, unanswerable question gives rise to nothing so numinous as tongues of fire; merely to the fireflies, which at the end of the sequence remain 'Uncounted in the sum of our unknowings', these the words of one who knows to count his blessings, one who may 'Savour the good wine of a summer's night' with his friend without having to speak of a sacrament or a Saviour.

The lower-case 'grace' the place held for him the first time he came had shriven him of that brooding introspection to which his poetry stands opposed, as is brought to light on his second coming, which is related in such a way as makes it difficult to tell

whether he is returning in the flesh or in the mind. In 'Between Serra and Rocchetta' he recounts how

I felt the sunlight prise me from myself
 And from the youthful sickness I had learned
 As shield from disappointments: cure came slow
 And came, in part, from what I grew to know
 Here on this coast among its reefs and islands.

The growth of the poet's mind is conditioned by emotion recollected in tranquillity, but that is the extent of any similarity between Tomlinson climbing the hill to La Rocchetta, the snow-covered Apennines glittering in the reaches beyond, and Wordsworth crossing the Alps, solipsistically luxuriating 'In dreams and fictions, pensively composed:/ Dejection taken up for pleasure's sake' (*The Prelude*, 1850, VI, ll. 550-1). 'We need no fiction of a hillside ghosted', we are told at the start of the next poem, but there I take it the repudiated fiction or dream, though it may derive in part from Romantic precedents, is the figment of an unmistakably Christian imagination, one which, quite appropriately for Tomlinson's purposes, brings together an English, or rather an American poet, and an Italian one. I am thinking, and so I suspect is he, of the Dantescan encounter in Eliot's 'Little Gidding', the last poem in *Four Quartets*. Eliot is not only alluding here to Dante, or to Dante's meeting with the shade of the poet Brunetto Latini in Canto 15 of the *Inferno*; his 'familiar compound ghost' comprises, among a number of other names that might be put to a face which has the look of 'some dead master', the Shakespeare behind the 'affable familiar ghost' of Sonnet 86. Though 'Shakespeare' also returns on the lips of Graziella in 'The Return', she is not to be likewise compounded into a literary ghost, since in naming the name left silent by Eliot's allusive manoeuvre, Tomlinson, far from entering upon the unknowable prematurely, retains the poetic utterance within the bounds of the knowable, of ordinary rather than revelatory experience, 'on the Easter side of death'. There can not be much doubt as to which side he means, since 'the dead poets' do

not for Tomlinson ‘assert their immortality most vigorously’⁷ as they do for Eliot, he preferring to speak in the final poem of living poets, himself and Bertolani, ‘Knowing no more of death than other men’ – other men, for that matter, regardless of whether or not they are poets. It is this knowledge which, while presenting a world of presences, prompts them to ‘wait now on the absence of our dead/ Sharing the middle world of moving lights/ Where fireflies taking torches to the rose/ Hover at those clustered’. In describing this ‘waiting time’ Tomlinson demurs at the waiting time of Dante’s middle world, the hillside ghosted that is Mount Purgatory, which is the source of the ‘refining fire’ spoken of by Eliot’s ghost. The promise of paradise therein, which flowers into the final line of ‘Little Gidding’ where ‘the fire and the rose are one’, is superseded by the ‘fireflies taking torches to the rose’: these, in their multiplicity, and in their Ruskinian ‘peculiar and separating form’,⁸ divest themselves of the spiritual singularity that Tomlinson elsewhere imputes to *Four Quartets*,⁹ serving as manifestations of an earthly Eden, an ‘Eden’ that ‘is given one’,¹⁰ as he writes in another poem. Furthermore, ‘the rending pain of re-enactment’ that apprises Eliot’s conception of purgatory is alleviated by Tomlinson’s re-enactment of Graziella’s affable, familiar banter. Instead of ‘the laceration/ Of laughter at what ceases to amuse’ which emanates from the hint of self-parody about Eliot’s method of ‘imitating’ Dante,¹¹ Graziella’s imitating Tomlinson reveals a ‘living tone/ Shaped to that sound, and mocking at its own,/ A voice at play, amused, embodied, clear’. And yet the ‘And yet’ that prefaces this last statement clarifies the nature of the amusement, or play, in a way that abates any sense that Tomlinson’s is a poetry subject to ‘rhetorical tendencies’,¹² pointing as it does to what he calls the ‘epistemological comedy’¹³ of his work, which highlights the absurdity of taking an absolutist position, and of becoming humourlessly wrapped up in one’s own self-importance, when it would be far more liberating to simply grant other points of view, and so open the possibility of relation: ‘to

respect [. . .] otherness’, as he puts it, ‘*and yet* to find our way into contact with that otherness’ (my italics).¹⁴ The epistemological comedy of his relationship with Eliot lies in the knowledge that though the ghosted fiction of ‘Little Gidding’ is to a degree the oppositional focus of Tomlinson’s sequence, Eliot’s voice, with Graziella’s, ‘Spryer than any ghost still haunts the ear’.¹⁵

One of the reasons why the voice of *Four Quartets* still haunts his ear is that Tomlinson shares the ghost’s concern for speech, speaking in an earlier poem about Bertolani, entitled ‘Up at La Serra’ (*Collected Poems*, pp. 78-82), of ‘*sacra conversazione*’, which might serve as the banner under which he models himself as a latter-day practitioner of the conversation poem. As those words are also meant to indicate, conversation is equally sacred to Bertolani, who has published several collections of poetry in the dialect of Serra di Lerici,¹⁶ and it is partly in this spirit that he, and the ‘Innumerable conversations’ which ‘chafe the air’ he breathes, are represented in ‘The Return’. For all his concern with speech, Tomlinson would appear to resist the impulsion ‘To purify the dialect of the tribe’ which the ghost and his party accede to in Eliot’s poem, given that the original line from Mallarmé’s ‘Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe’, ‘Donner un sens plus purs aux mots de la tribu’, goes hand in hand with his understanding that ‘Languages are imperfect because multiple’ and that ‘verse [. . .], in all its wisdom, atones for the sins of languages’;¹⁷ Tomlinson’s verse, in all its wisdom, makes no such high claim, as the second poem makes clear, the pages he and Bertolani have ‘Rooted in earth’ – and in ‘the diversity of languages on earth’ which for Mallarmé ‘means that no one can utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of Truth Herself Incarnate’ (ibid.) – said to concur in the conviction that ‘We have lived into a time we shall not cure’, a conviction which qualifies Tomlinson’s vision of an Eden on earth, allowing for ‘a possible loss’ as well as ‘a possible return’ (‘A Human Balance’, p. 438). But then so

would Eliot seem to be distancing himself from Mallarmé even as he invokes him, for as Michael Edwards has observed, ‘in the very act of translating from one imperfect language to another, he acknowledges that the new verse remains dialectal’.¹⁸ Mallarmé’s invitation to purify language through poetry has a correlative implication that Eliot is also wary of, not least, one senses, because acutely aware of its seductions. This is the development of ‘pure poetry’, or ‘*la poésie pure*’, which Eliot, in one of his later essays,¹⁹ traces from Poe, through Baudelaire and Mallarmé, to Paul Valéry. ‘This’, he explains, is a ‘process of increasing self-consciousness – or, we may say, of increasing consciousness of language’, wherein the subordination of subject matter to style denotes the pursuit of some ‘theoretical goal’; but he goes on to say that ‘I believe it to be a goal that can never be reached, because I think that poetry is only poetry so long as it preserves some “impurity” in this sense: that is to say, so long as the subject matter is valued for its own sake’ (p. 39). The ghost of ‘Little Gidding’ shares Eliot’s scruples as to this theoretical goal, saying at the outset that ‘I am not eager to rehearse/ My thought and theory which you have forgotten./ These things have served their purpose: let them be’. And so, I believe, does Tomlinson let these things be. His poetry ‘gives the effect of alertness and chastity’,²⁰ as noticed by Donald Davie, one of Tomlinson’s early advocates and a vociferous exponent of a certain kind of poetic purity;²¹ however, it is just this alertness with regard to his subject matter, together with his declining to begin writing out of any ‘theoretic preconceptions’ (‘A Human Balance’, p. 439), which preserves in his poetry the ‘impurity’ addressed by Eliot. As in ‘Graziella’, where it is not simply that ‘The dead do not return’, but that they do not return ‘To pry and prompt the living or rehearse/ The luxuries of self-debating verse’. We catch back from those lines an echo of what the ghost is not eager to rehearse, the decadent ‘luxuries of self-debating verse’ bearing out Eliot’s view of pure poetry as ‘something which must ultimately break down, owing to an

increasing strain against which the human mind and nerves will rebel' ('From Poe to Valéry', p. 42). Tomlinson's verse effects a lessening of this strain, not by redeeming the time through the miracle of Truth Herself Incarnate, but through translation as resurrection, the process of increasing self-consciousness confounded by the opening up of one language to another, and so of self to other. It seems quite right, then, that in 'The Return', though it is the idea rather than the practice of translation which engages Tomlinson poetically, this should not draw excessive attention to a thought and theory of language. He austere refuses to afford himself such any luxuries, sensing how 'Severe' is 'the grace a place and people share'.

Thomas Day

¹ Charles Tomlinson, *Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

² Paz's remark is adduced by Henry Gifford in an article about his collaborations with Tomlinson. 'The Poet as Translator', *Agenda*, 33.2 (1995), 61-71 (p. 70).

³ *The Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 7-11.

⁴ See Tomlinson's account of this in his interview with Richard Swigg. 'Tomlinson at Sixty', in *Charles Tomlinson: Man and Artist*, ed. by Kathleen O'Gorman (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988), pp. 223-232 (pp. 225-6).

⁵ *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Reprinted in Tomlinson, *Metamorphoses: Poetry and Translation* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), pp. 101-85 (p. 109).

⁶ 'Charles Tomlinson: The Art of Poetry LXXXVIII' (Interview with Willard Spiegelman), *The Paris Review*, 40.149 (1998), 160-188.

⁷ Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 13-22 (p. 14).

⁸ An expression of Ruskin's quoted by Tomlinson in his interview with Bruce Meyer. 'A Human Balance: An Interview with Charles Tomlinson', *The Hudson Review*, 43.3 (1990), 437-448 (p. 440).

⁹ In a recorded conversation with Octavio Paz at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1989. *Octavio Paz Talks to Charles Tomlinson* (Keele Recordings, 1989).

¹⁰ 'Eden', in Charles Tomlinson, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 159.

¹¹ Which he discusses in 'What Dante Means to Me' (1950), in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), pp. 125-35 (p. 128).

¹² Of the kind that he deplures in Dylan Thomas and J. F. Hendry. 'Some presences on the Scene: A Vista of Postwar Poetry', in *On Modern Poetry: Essays Presented to Donald Davie*, ed. by Vereen Bell and Laurence Lerner (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1988), p. 231.

¹³ 'Charles Tomlinson in Conversation' (with Michael Schmidt), *PN Review*, 5.1 (1977), 35-40 (p. 37).

¹⁴ *The Poem as Initiation* (New York: Colgate University Press, 1967).

¹⁵ Richard's Swigg's comment on Tomlinson's 'combative' relationship with the poet of *Four Quartets* somewhat misses the point. Richard Swigg, *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition* (Lewisburg: University of Bucknell Press, 1994), p. 15.

¹⁶ Including *Seinà* (Torino: Einaudi, 1985), *'E gose, l'aia* (Parma: Ugo Guanda, 1988) and *Die* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 1998).

¹⁷ 'Crisis in Poetry', in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays and Letters*, trans. by Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1956), pp. 34-43 (p. 38).

¹⁸ Michael Edwards, "'Renga", Translation, and Eliot's Ghost', *PN Review*, 7.2 (1980), 24-8 (p. 27).

¹⁹ 'From Poe to Valéry' (1948), in *To Criticize the Critic*, pp. 27-42.

²⁰ 'Introduction to Charles Tomlinson's *The Necklace*', in Donald Davie, *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), pp. 187-91 (p. 190).

²¹ As the author of *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952).

Thomas Day is currently teaching for the Open University after completing his doctoral studies in English at the University of Warwick. He has published on Geoffrey Hill and Donald Davie, R. S. Thomas and Christopher Ricks.