

Charles Tomlinson: Converging Borders

by Marina Morbiducci

«È stato in Italia che ho scritto le mie prime vere poesie. Mi trovavo sulla riviera del Golfo di La Spezia. Qui Shelley e Byron hanno lasciato le loro tracce e qui, un secolo più tardi, ha abitato D. H. Lawrence. Ero proprio in prossimità di Fiascherino dove Lawrence e Frieda venivano nel 1913»¹.

Introduction

This paper discusses the work of Charles Tomlinson, the British poet described by Andrea Sirotti² as an author whose work has received a fair amount of attention in the past twenty years in Italy, but not as much as it deserves, considering his stature and overall output. Professor Emeritus at Bristol University, critic, translator, world-wide traveler and painter, with a refined mind and a boundless culture, Tomlinson was the recipient of major poetry awards and published more than twenty books of poetry [some of which exhibited experimental composition techniques, such as *Renga* (1971)]³. In the words of Judith P. Saunders, «[u]nsurprisingly, Tomlinson's life and career reflect the same energetic interest in cross-cultural convergence that infuses his poetry. Travel and residence abroad have played a major role in his development as a poet»⁴.

Considering his significance as a contemporary poet whose work encompasses a range of cultures, languages and aesthetic currents, Tomlinson certainly deserves critical attention, but for Italian scholars and translators there is an additional reason: his close ties to the Italian landscape and his deep and detailed knowledge, knowledge gained quite literally «in the field».

This paper aims to revisit some of the poet's main motifs that were inspired by his Italian journeys and extended stays in the country, with a threefold objec-

tive: firstly, to draw critical attention to Charles Tomlinson's poetry within the Italian academic world five years after his death; secondly, to stress the cogency of Judith P. Saunders' critical approach, which postulates the interpretive key of «border»; thirdly, to suggest a reading of Tomlinson's poem *Piazza* inspired by the notion of liminality and aporia while investigating his postmodern deconstructive procedures.

Charles Tomlinson and the Italian landscape as poetical initiation

The influence of the Italian landscape on international writers is a given for many British and American authors from different periods, but in the case of Tomlinson, in particular, his coming to Italy also coincided with his very first steps as a poet, representing a form of artistic initiation: «[h]is first extended foreign stay coincides, as he explains, with 'the experience of beginning to write poems (my first real poems) in Italy in 1950-1951'»⁵.

More specifically, Tomlinson spent his first stay in Italy at Percy Lubbock's Villa degli Scafari, near La Spezia, where he first assisted the critic as his personal secretary; when that job ended, he was then hosted in an annex on Lubbock's property by the sea. This sojourn in Liguria sparked the first glimmerings of travel poetry by Tomlinson, as the poet was strongly inspired by the contact with the local landscape. The

place where Tomlinson first lived in Italy was Fiascherino, a little village on the Ligurian coast, near Lerici, in an area universally known as the «Golfo dei Poeti». As Massimo Bacigalupo puts it,

[d]i visitatori stranieri, anglosassoni in particolare, c'è nel Golfo un flusso ininterrotto. Fra questi sono autori ed epistolografi che lasciano traccia delle loro impressioni e permettono di ricostruire l'evoluzione del viaggio e della percezione dei luoghi. [...] Il Golfo dei Poeti non si chiamerebbe così se non vi fosse stato l'incontro di luogo, scrittura e mito⁶.

What led Tomlinson to Lerici from Britain in 1951 – when he was only 24 – was precisely his interest in the places that had so greatly inspired his Romantic predecessors, as well as the bond with his American forerunners who had visited those places, from Henry James to Ezra Pound⁷.

Tomlinson devoted numerous poems to the Ligurian region, and also acknowledged strong links of comradeship with local poets, feeling indebted to them for his poetical initiation. For instance, he mentions Paolo Bertolani, from Serra di Lerici, the very first poet he met, and reports his conversations with Vittorio Sereni and Attilio Bertolucci, who used to reside in that area in the summer. Throughout his career Tomlinson expressed affection for the Italian places he visited and the poets he met:

[i]l primo vero poeta che ho conosciuto era italiano, Paolo Bertolani, che è nato e vive da sempre alla Serra di Lerici. Più tardi Vittorio Sereni e Attilio Bertolucci – ambedue avevano residenze estive nelle vicinanze – divennero miei amici. Ho avuto un carteggio con Ungaretti e anche uno con un poeta siciliano ora ingiustamente quasi dimenticato, Lucio Piccolo⁸.

Tomlinson's relationship with the Italian poets represented the first step into a borderless world of poetic collaboration.

Charles Tomlinson and the notion of «border»

In her illuminating book, Saunders suggests to investigate Tomlinson's poetry by focusing on the notion of «border»⁹ and on the liminality and porosity of margins,

meant both physically (different landscapes in different countries) but also psychologically (different perceptions and apprehension of reality). Stretching her line of interpretation, in our opinion these two levels of analysis provide the possibility of encounter between diverse entities – even if divergent – which in turn may give way to lines of signification and expression made possible by the permeability of borders assumed through the aporetic discourse. It is here that opposites meet and antinomies converge, with the poet's consciousness acting as a form of hinge axis around which the whole experience of composition rotates and from which it radiates. In the case of Tomlinson, the local element triggering the poetic process projects and expands the poet's experience into the reader's consciousness, in a sort of ripple¹⁰ effect, in which the concentric circles of meaning and references overlap. In Saunders' words:

[h]istory, mythology, literature, music, and the visual arts all provide impetus for his poetry, as does the physical world itself in both its human and nonhuman aspects. Equally passionate in his exploration of landscapes without and landscapes within, Tomlinson organizes his poems persistently around lines of demarcation: boundaries, frontiers, thresholds, frames¹¹.

We subscribe to Saunders' view when she claims that in Tomlinson's poetry the «border» theme is both an element of physical demarcation and the threshold of inner exploration, conjunction, and convergence:

[i]n any scene he likes to draw readers' attention to the point at which two realms, literal or metaphoric, intersect. His poems define what lies on either-side, investigating the implications of that contiguity and inviting a back-and-forth process of comparison and contrast. Thus a preoccupation with borders unifies his poetry both methodologically and thematically¹².

Indeed, the oxymoron that «edges are centres», as Tomlinson himself put it in his poem *The Flood* (1981)¹³, inspires his whole work. In «contrapuntal designs», «[b]orders [...] invite a mode of comprehension based on comparison and contrast, parallels and antithesis», Saunders remarks.

From the beginning of his career, Tomlinson focused his attention on the notion of «relations» and their «contraries» (as the title of his first book reads)¹⁴, where

he shows tide set against shore, glacier against rock, earth against sky, sun against cloud; he juxtaposes Spanish and English, poverty and wealth, woodslope and cornland, old gods and new. Encompassing historical, economic, and sociopolitical polarities as well as the elemental, Tomlinson's preoccupation with 'poised contraries' is neither static nor reductive¹⁵.

Antitheses and edges weave through Tomlinson's poetic thinking, in an antiphonal relationship which unleashes «energies pouring through space and time»¹⁶. In Tomlinson's oeuvre there are poems in which the earth is literally diluted and becomes water, water is sublimated in mist and vapour, light resembles fire, and solidity can easily crack apart and collapse. In his poetry, an «elemental demarcation» exists only to be overcome and negated. «Endlessly fascinated by the boundaries upon which discrete identity depends [...] Tomlinson recognizes that any line of convergence is simultaneously one of divergence»¹⁷. And vice-versa, we would add. The lines of his poetry become «a place where two territories separate as well as the place where they come together»¹⁸, resonant with «the fascinations of inside and outside», to quote Tomlinson himself¹⁹. «What is 'outside'? That / in whose creation I had no part, which enters me now / both image and other», Tomlinson says in *Renga*²⁰.

Tomlinson and the aporetic vision

It is due to his particular skill at identifying opposites, and his poetic intention of possibly reconciling them in a compact sensory and cognitive experience, that we may invoke the notion of *aporia* with regard to Tomlinson's process of composition (and therefore interpretation, for the critics).

Etymologically speaking, «*aporia*» means a lack of passage, yet it is precisely through the poetic immersion in the external entity perceived by the poet's consciousness that we are able to penetrate and absorb – in a unified form and with a simultaneous temporality – the discrepancy or, more aptly, the *différance* of the entities therein represented.

According to Derrida, «*aporia*» indicates a border, therefore a limit, but also a track which might open us up to other entities. Philosophically speaking, Derrida implies in the term an indication that the truth is,

literally, limited, constrained in its own border/s, and may provide the experience of (non-)passage, preventing us from having the possibility of any passage from one point to the other, blocking our way²¹. In this case, the impossibility of passage, of trespassing the «line», constitutes a problem. In Derrida's words, «[j]e retiens le mot de *problème* pour une autre raison: afin de le mettre en tension avec cet autre mot grec d'*aporia* [...] ce mot il devait y aller du 'ne pas savoir où aller, du non-passage, ou plutôt de l'expérience du non-passage»²². Derrida postulates that such experience of non-passage, which may be paralyzing, is not to be viewed necessarily as a form of negative separation: «devant une porte, un seuil, une frontière, une ligne, ou tout simplement le bord ou l'abord de l'autre comme tel»²³. Therefore, the negative presence of a form of separation as the one of non-passage, the existence of «border» as impediment, is transformed into a positive occasion of retrieving the etymological meaning of the term «*problema*» that «peut signifier en somme *projection* ou *protection*»²⁴. Derrida explains:

[j]’ai cédé à ce mot d'*apories*, au pluriel, sans bien savoir où j’allais et si quelque chose se passerait, me permettant de passer avec lui, sauf à me rappeler toutefois que ce vieux terme grec et usé jusqu’à la corde, l'*aporia*, ce mot fatigué de philosophie et de logique s’était souvent imposé à moi depuis de longues années et de façon plus insistante ces derniers temps²⁵.

Derrida points out that the word «*aporie*»

apparaît en particulier dans le célèbre texte de la *Physique IV* (217b) d'Aristote. Celui-ci reconstitue l'*aporie* du temps *dia tōn exoterikōn logōn*. Le petit texte en forme de note que j'avais consacré [...] à une note de *Sein und Zeit* sur le temps, je me permets de le rappeler ici parce que [...] il traitait du présent, de la présence et de la présentation du présent, du temps, de l'être et surtout du non-être, plus précisément d'une certaine *impossibilité* comme non-viabilité, comme non-voie ou chemin barré [...]²⁶.

Derrida also specifies that the term «*aporie*» «signifie aussi passage, traversée, endurance, épreuve du franchissement, mais peut être une traversée sans ligne et sans frontière indivisible»²⁷. According to the philosopher, there is the possibility of experiencing

the entity represented by the term «aporie» - which is pervasive in our life whenever there is a question of decision and responsibility or choice (ethical, legal, political, etc.) in front of any kind of border or division line – in a provocative and propositive way:

[p]eut-il jamais s'agir [...] de dépasser une aporie, de franchir une ligne oppositionnelle *ou bien* d'appréhender, d'endurer, de mettre autrement à l'épreuve l'expérience de l'aporie? Et s'agit-il à cet égard d'un *ou bien ou bien*? Peut-on parler et en quel sens d'une *expérience de l'aporie*? De l'aporie *come telle*? Ou inversement: une expérience est-elle possible qui ne soit pas expérience de l'aporie²⁸?

It is in this sense of aporia as paradoxical possibility of going beyond - an envisaged track to follow rather than the total impediment of passage - that we assume the Derridean concept applied to Tomlinson. For Tomlinson the border is porous and permeable, it provides access to other realities, even contrasting ones. The opposition of contraries becomes unified in the poet's consciousness, experience and poetic expression. As Derrida writes, «je me servis à un moment donné du mot d'aporie et proposai une sorte d'endurance non passive de l'aporie comme condition de la responsabilité et de la décision. Aporie plutôt qu'antinomie [...]»²⁹. In front of contrasting and/or opposite realities, Derrida invokes the notion of aporia rather than antinomy, «[l']antinomie mérite ici plutôt le nom d'aporie dans la mesure où elle [...] [est] une expérience interminable»³⁰.

In a further passage of the text Derrida adds:

dans un cas, le non-passage ressemble à une imperméabilité; il tiendrait à l'existence opaque d'une frontière infranchissable: une porte qui ne s'ouvre pas ou qui ne s'ouvre qu'à telle ou telle condition introuvable, au secret inaccessible de quelque *schibboloteth*. C'est le cas de toutes les frontières fermées (exemplairement pendant la guerre). Dans un autre cas, le non-passage, l'impasse ou l'aporie tient au fait qu'il n'y a pas de limite [...] la limite est trop poreuse, perméable, indéterminée, il n'y a plus de chez-soi ni de chez-autre [...]»³¹.

The similarity between Derrida's thought and Tomlinson's rendering of the notion of border as interpreted by Saunders is indeed remarkable. On her turn, Gra-

ziella Berto, the Italian scholar who translated and edited Derrida's work for an Italian edition, comments as follows: «Il pensiero 'secondo l'aporìa' – ci dice Derrida – è un pensiero 'paziente', che, se non sa dove andare, sa però dove sostare: in quell'assenza di passaggio che nasce dallo sfilacciarsi dei confini [...]»³². Even in this formulation, the juxtaposition of Derrida's thought with Tomlinson poetic posture seems appropriate. The truth is elusive, has to do with the notion of limit, of borders, of their indeterminacy, of the impossibility of fixing them once and for all, *defining* (note the Latinate root «finis» incorporated in the verb) what is inside and what is outside, just as is the case with Tomlinson's vision.

Tomlinson conceives a permeability of perception and thinking and achieves a poetic transfer of meaning, even between contrasting elements or entities – where aporetic outcomes in the negative sense would otherwise be the only option – precisely through his conviction of the porosity of borders, which allows the reconciliation of antinomies and differences, and consequently permits the passage of the amplitude of his poetic apprehension and grasp. He wonders and wanders, he knows and transmits. By means of his mental and physical *flâneries*, the poet constructs his «edifying»³³ knowledge of the world and is even able to depict it in a geometrical guise. He does so literally step by step, as can be seen in the following poetical excerpt.

Tomlinson's *Piazza*, step by step

As an example of this reading, let's consider the poem *Piazza*³⁴, which describes the human experience of the intriguing geometric architectural pattern of Ascoli Piceno's main square:

In the piazza at Ascoli Piceno
The people walk on travertine, not asphalt -
Marble that paviours patterned into squares
Each with its slim, stone borders
In a mathematic of recession.

In these opening lines, Tomlinson underlines the dynamic quality of the enjoyment of the architectural beauty of the piazza by saying that the «people walk on travertine, not asphalt». The movement of the human body is across a marble pavement, which is cer-

tainly an occasion for a passage (if we want to keep in mind the aporetic question), but the passage has «stone borders» (in a sense, the opposite of Bauman's «liquid borders»), therefore allowing no apparent permeability, and suggesting limitations, instead.

The notion of «border» here is constituted – and its corresponding function performed – by hard and solid materials (marble, asphalt, stone). Elsewhere, as Saunders notes, the same concept of liminality is conveyed by liquid, permeable, or even vaporous elements, as in the case of the relationship between water and shore: «[a] large number of poems focuses on bodies of water and the various kinds of borders they create, e.g., between water and shore, between upper air and underwater depths»³⁵.

Borders and border-crossing give a dynamic imprinting to the poetic text, as it visualizes a physical movement in constantly trespassing across the stone edges or borders. Moreover, in this *Piazza* poem, the movement takes place in a «mathematic of recession», a sort of counter-direction, implying that the motion is backwards, whether referring to the physical movement or the historical time and/or architectural dimension³⁶.

In any case, the precious stone material of the square underscores the noble aspect of the promenade: «Marble that paviours patterned into squares». Here we are intrigued by the presence of «patterned squares», which introduce the notion of geometry, to be assumed as a degree of fixity but also as dynamic parameter where the projection of the physical motion in the real experience takes place in the discursive poetic texture, as well. Furthermore, «[o]nce perceived 'entire', the piazza is transformed from puzzle to art: the seeming 'restrictions' of its lines and borders are 'a fiction,' inviting poet and readers to linger as the 'guests of symmetry'»³⁷.

Regarding the notion of symmetry, the concept runs through Tomlinson's oeuvre. As Ruth A. Grogan writes, «the beauty of pattern, depending on both symmetry and deviations from symmetry, is a function of mutually resistant forces, of bondage and freedom»³⁸. In her view, «Tomlinson's poems are a continuous, many-faceted exploration of the mutual engagements, adaptations, and responses between mind and perceived world»³⁹. The sense of pattern recurs in Tomlinson's poetry, whether in reference to nature or human artifacts (as in the case of this poem *Piazza*): «[f]or all his imagery of patterned lines, Tomlinson knows as a

painter that there is no such thing as a line in nature; 'we say / We see there meshes of water' (*World*, p. 13; my italics), the patterns seen resulting from the collaboration of nature, the eye, and language», Grogan specifies⁴⁰.

Here in the *Piazza* we are in front of patterns created by architects, a geometry of «[m]arble that paviours patterned into squares», whereas in other poems we find, for instance, the concentric ripple pattern on water surfaces, as in *Rower*⁴¹, where Tomlinson says «It is a geometry and not / A Fantasia», even though the water is constantly «[e]xpunging the track of his [Tomlinson's] geometries», as Grogan points out⁴².

With regard to these specifically «geometrical» allusions, Caroline Rouboudin's *Sense in Translation*⁴³ comes to mind. In this work, a parallel is drawn between linguistic and geometrical translation. In her thought-provoking interpretation, Rouboudin contends that «Poincaré (1902) explains how the physical body is intrinsically related to our understanding of geometry and absolute movement and establishes that translation can only be understood through a correlative movement of the body»⁴⁴. Rouboudin also advocates Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* (1939) as an acknowledgement of the primacy of bodily experience in understanding geometrical translation.

In the case of Tomlinson, the reference to translation is particularly appropriate since the poet was a translator of various authors himself⁴⁵, and no doubt constantly experienced translation living and writing in Italy, collaborating with Italian poets, absorbing the local idiom and spirit in a full immersion in the culture. The poem *Piazza* is part of a collection of Italian translations of Tomlinson's work, in a facing-page edition in which diverse Italian poets and critics try their hand at translating his texts⁴⁶.

Reading closely the text of *Piazza*, we note how the overall message of the poem is dedicated to all the human generations («*All the generations / Go their measured way*»), but the real persona in the poem, the one who thoroughly and physically experiences the complex design of the square, is «*that child, muffled against the cold*», who «*Has discovered the long line of stone / Slicing the centre of the expanse / And is following it*». Once again, we find geometrical allusions to the ontological apprehension of the squared pattern in the paving of the piazza, «*A border stretching out edgeways*». Here the reader meets with the enigmatic

and contradictory sense of the pattern itself: a space which allows for transition but also brings limitation, even implying elusiveness and ungraspability with its motion «stretching edgeways», once again a sort of Derridian aporia and *différance* (this latter to be interpreted implicitly as «deferral», therefore not only in terms of space but also time). The «edge» is constantly repeated, relocated, pushed forward.

Nevertheless, as the child comes to terms with the «border» or «edge»-like quality of the marble square – which encompasses presence and absence, what is simultaneously inside and outside – and as he steps onto the peculiar space where he is now playing, the poet claims that «*One day / [He] will put it all together*». That is, the child will be able to understand the complexity and contradictions of the «S/square» pattern, and will make sense of it all: «*time / That he does not know exists*» will be «teaching him / To eye it all entire».

At the end of his bodily and cognitive experience, over time, the child will comprehend that «*these leisurely restrictions are a fiction*», and that ultimately they will reveal the «real» out there, «*mapping our footfalls, / Our swung arms, our slow dance here, / For an afternoon the guests of symmetry, / Treading its stones in this theatre of chance*». «The guests of symmetry» that the marble squares represent seem to reconcile all the aporetic opposites, and the «theatre of chance» of which our existence is a mirror – in the chess game of the piazza's stone patterns – will become the wonder of life. Everything is played out on the border⁴⁷, at the «edge», and we wander, go on, proceed, somehow advance, and are thrilled, at the same time, almost like acrobats walking on a tightrope.

In the Tomlinsonian «border» theme, therefore, we can identify not so much an element of physical demarcation but rather a projective path for inner exploration, through whose agency the poet's writing achieves a high level of tension – and dis-tension – between two opposite poles, generated by the antinomy of conceptual apprehension⁴⁸. «The habit of laying one idea or thing against another in order to explore the interplay between them is as central to Tomlinson's poetics as to his personal philosophy» Saunders underlines⁴⁹. In fact, the «dynamics of counterpoint drive his work both thematically and technically [...] to the demonstration of antiphonal relationships. Diction, syntax, rhyme, stanza, line, and figurative usage [...] are influenced by this persistent interest [...]»⁵⁰.

Charles Tomlinson's language and translatorial identity

One might add that the existential difficulty of finding a way, an open path, through the modular stone pattern of the square in the above-quoted poem, along with the fact that in Tomlinson's world we are surrounded by antinomic parallel relationships, may in some way be compared to the notion of translation and the question of creating an equivalent text in the model of translatorial action. As Tomlinson himself asserts, «[i]n a curious way the business of translation and my fascination with translating re-duplicates or rather puts in a different manner this whole question of inwardness and outwardness, the self and the other. Your inner man [...] needs the challenge of other ways of doing things, of the other possibilities [...]»⁵¹. Once again, we are in front of a border – the one represented by different languages – a border, a line of separation, that has to be crossed.

Tomlinson devoted his attention to the process of translation, especially in his work *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (1983), even though, we might say, the agency of translation is constantly in action all through his production. Translation and the (co-)existence of other/s language/s is present in Tomlinson's oeuvre not only because of his travels, but also due to his frequent collaborations with international poets. His activity as literary translator is almost as significant as his creative writing. Being also a painter, Tomlinson was constantly performing in his creative mind a sort of intersemiotic⁵² translation, according to Roman Jakobson's tripartition. As Saunders also reports, Tomlinson undertook «substantial translation projects»⁵³.

From an early age the poet was fascinated by other languages. In his poem *Words and Water*, Tomlinson confesses: «I escaped through schooling [...] and simply reveled in learning languages: languages meant another world out there»⁵⁴. Saunders specifies: «He had a working knowledge of several languages besides his native English, e.g., Latin, Spanish, Italian, French, German»⁵⁵. As editor of *The Oxford Book of Verse in English Translation* (1980) «he has translated the work of Giuseppe Ungaretti, Antonio Machado, César Vallejo, Octavio Paz, and others»⁵⁶, Saunders states. She adds that Tomlinson «credits the task of translation with influencing and enriching his own development as a poet: it offers 'insights into ways of

broadening one's own scope,' (*Words and Water*, p. 29) often leading to valuable experimentation with new topics, forms, and tones»⁵⁷.

Following on this assumption, it is evident that Tomlinson found it challenging and beneficial to the poet-translator to interact with other languages, even in his own writing, as if the foreign words could exercise a sort of inner resistance in conveying the author's intentional meaning, forcing him to put what he has in mind in other words, so that the question of inwardness and outwardness becomes literally infused with dramatic tension. Furthermore,

[e]ven when working alone, Tomlinson frequently employs two or more languages within a single poem, drawing on his linguistic versatility to incorporate an apt word, or phrase, or line into a text composed principally in English. In exploring the possibilities of such simultaneous convergence and disjunction in his poetry, he is of course carrying on a tradition begun by early modernists like Pound and Eliot⁵⁸.

This compositional technique creates a sort of mosaic-like effect. Tomlinson «laces non-English vocabulary into his poems with a light and dexterous hand»⁵⁹ and

weaves foreign words and phrases into his poems with un-self-conscious seamlessness. Linking them closely by means of metre, rhyme, or syntax into the fabric of the poem [...] there is nothing elitist or flaunting in his approach, but simple delight in exercising multiple options for the expression of meaning⁶⁰.

According to Ruth Grogan, «Tomlinson's noticeable enjoyment of the Latinate register of English is not just a demonstration of erudition. Multisyllabic Latinate words give him an opportunity to play off, and weave meaningful patterns out of the aural, morphological, and etymological entanglements of syllables»⁶¹. «*And so we coincide / Against distance, wind and tide, meet / And translate our worlds to one another*»⁶², Tomlinson writes in a poem dedicated to Octavio Paz.

This linguistic counterpoint of the other language provides Tomlinson's writing with momentum, and there are also consequences for his stylistic choices. For instance, from a lexical vantage point Tomlinson privileges action words endowed with a conceptual core

meaning that conveys dynamic power⁶³ and resorts to grammatical deconstruction whenever he wants to charge the lexical item with renewed energy. From this perspective, «[d]iction, syntax, rhyme, stanza, line, and figurative usage [...] are influenced by this persistent interest» in dynamic motion, «to unleash 'the energies pouring through space and time'. (*Chance A*) [...] In the evocation of these 'energies', verbs play an insistent role»⁶⁴. Grogan adds that «Tomlinson counts on the sensitivity of his reader's ear for patterns of sound, and on his awareness of concomitant internal structures of words, of sequences of meaningful particles, morphology combined with phonology»⁶⁵.

In his choice of verbs, particularly, Tomlinson «demonstrates a persistent affinity for verbs formed by means of affixation, often inventing novel usages and employing them for maximum impact»⁶⁶. The two most frequent prefixes used are «un-» or «dis-» (with the meaning of: «to cancel») and «re-» (with the meaning of: «to reinstate»). A few examples are: «remurmur, remeasure, rerhymed» (with prefix «re-»), or «uncreate, unwind, unblended» (with prefix «un-»). These are clearly coinages, in which the morphological normative mechanism is reproduced in a creative and inventive way. «The play of prefixes [...] observed is obviously based on the diachronic axis of language as well», Grogan adds⁶⁷, since, according to Tomlinson's view, «the poet must rescue etymology»⁶⁸. His poetry also abounds with pairs like: «resolve / dissolve», or «told / retold», «shaping / unshaping», in a sort of «fugue-like rebounding of energies», as Saunders puts it⁶⁹.

In some cases, the lexical inventions that Tomlinson inserts in his poems somehow force or remold the original meaning of the verb, as in «re-form», for instance, which is used to signify «form anew» (see for instance *Crossing the Moor*, in *Jubilation*, 1995). Saunders underlines how

[i]n «The Chances of Rhyme» Tomlinson similarly chooses to hyphenate the word 're-lease,' noting immediately that he wishes readers to understand that word 'in both / Senses,' i.e. to juxtapose the ordinary meaning (to let loose) with something like its opposite (*The Way of the World*, 1969): to renew a contract or connection. The hyphen emphasizes provocatively contrapuntal implications of the homonym he has invented⁷⁰.

Here the openness to analytical deconstruction of all the linguistic levels of grammar (phonology, morphology,

syntax, and semantics) – typical of the translator’s sensitiveness – emerges clearly, and the close relationship and familiarity that Tomlinson has with homophonic/synonymic terms in other languages is evident.

This excavation deep into the morphological and semantic roots of the words naturally lends itself to the work and frame of mind of the translator, who is accustomed to analyzing every single element of the poetic composition, which itself becomes a veritable «field of energy» in the Olsonian sense, each element on the page carrying a magnetic force. For Tomlinson, the process of lexical deconstruction he invites the reader to activate is part of his poetic intention: as in the poem mentioned above, he wants the reader to apprehend the verb «re-lease» in both senses, that is, with its ordinary and usual meaning, but also with an invented and deconstructed meaning: «[h]yphenation draws attention to the susceptibility of an action to redirection»⁷¹.

The use of enjambment may also have this function of alerting the readers to the process of verbal deconstruction in action, most of the time by creating an overlapping of meaning, with a sort of syntactical ambiguity or polyvalence. The violation of the usual syntactical scheme in the English language, together with a «never-before-heard term» that jumps out or «an odd or unexpected use of affixation [...] demand a moment of reflection»⁷² because these variations transcend the usual confines of meaning, or «borders» of signification. And we cannot fail to recall the reechoing Poundian motto «make it new».

Conclusions

This paper is inspired by a threefold perspective: to stir renewed scholarly interest in the poetical work of Tomlinson in the Italian academic scenario; to highlight and apply the interpretive critical view of the «border» theme provided by Judith P. Saunders, in all its declinations; to identify post-modernist stances and deconstructive patterns in action in his poetry. Additionally, we also tried to highlight some of the poet’s main stylistic peculiarities.

We would like to conclude our short analysis by considering again the notion of «edge» which is so crucial in Tomlinson’s oeuvre. If we can resort once more to Saunders’ words, we would like to stretch the literal meaning of the pivotal term «edge» to its full metaphorical extension, as follows: «[e]very edge is in fact the central point for viewing a landscape much larger than the area it bounds [...] Tomlinson rejoices in the multiple views of the world made possible by exploration of successive boundary lines»⁷³. In Tomlinson’s view, borders are not to be seen as agency of separation, but rather of fusion. Diverging lines can converge in a unified poetical apprehension of the reality surrounding us. With no pretense of being exhaustive, this article intends to offer the occasion for further critical exploration of Tomlinson’s poetry, poetry beyond borders.

Notes

- ¹ Charles Tomlinson, *Una luce nuova*, in *Charles Tomlinson. Luoghi italiani*, a cura di Marco Fazzini, Lugo, Edizioni del Bradipo 2000, p. 7.
- ² Andrea Sirotti, *Vent’anni (circa) di traduzioni di poesia inglese, britannica e postcoloniale: 1995-2015*, in «Tradurre. Pratiche Teorie Strumenti», n. 10, Spring issue, 2016.
- ³ This collection contains a chain of poems in four languages, co-authored with Octavio Paz, Jacques Roubaud and Edoardo Sanguineti. As Judith B. Saunders explains, the «four contributors to *Renga* sought to create a Western equivalent for Japanese *kusari-renga*. This ancient Japanese form consists of a series of three- and two-line segments of prescribed asyllable count, corresponding to the 5-7-5 and 7-7 pattern of a tanka: [...] Tomlinson and his collaborators sought to westernize the Japanese form by creating a sequence of sonnets. [...] Every sonnet [...] is composed in four languages;

the four poets took turns composing either a quatrain or half of a sestet creating ‘both sequential and cross-wise coherence’». (Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*. Fairleigh, Dickinson University Press, London, Associated University Presses 2003, p. 63).

- ⁴ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 59.
- ⁵ Richard Swigg and Charles Tomlinson, *Tomlinson at Sixty*, in *Man and Artist*. Ed. Kathleen O’Gorman, Columbia, University of Missouri Press 1971, p. 225, cit. in Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 59.
- ⁶ Massimo Bacigalupo, *Il Golfo inglese. Da Portovenere a Lerici*, da *Il senso del Golfo. Dalla foce della Magra alle Cinque Terre*, a cura di Rossana Piccioli e Alessandro Scansani, Reggio Emilia, Diabasis 2008, pp. 101-111, p. 103.
- ⁷ Regarding the bond of Tomlinson with the American poets, Michael Hennessy points out the close relationship Tomlinson had with them in his essay *Rereading Charles Tomlinson:*

- «While several critics – Brian John in particular – have documented Tomlinson's affinities with British Romantic poetry, most have explored in greater depth the decisive influence of such American poets as Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. While Tomlinson has written widely about his debt to these figures (he knew Moore and Williams personally), his American antecedents have sometimes been overemphasized, drawing attention away from what makes his poetry unique». (Michael Hennessy, *Rereading Charles Tomlinson*, «Contemporary Literature», Volume 46, No. 2, Summer 2005, pp. 346-357, p. 347). Tomlinson himself discusses his American influence in *Some Americans: A Personal Record* (Berkeley, University of California Press 1981) and in particular in his *American Essays: Making It New* (Manchester, England, Carcanet 2001).
- ⁸ Charles Tomlinson, *Una luce nuova*, in *Charles Tomlinson. Luoghi italiani*, cit., p. 7.
- ⁹ Once again we would like to quote Michael Hennessy's comment on the thematic approach (the one of «border» which we chose to follow in our analysis) provided by Judith P. Saunders: «While Saunders's thesis appears, at first glance, rather constricted, her book turns out to be a rich and expansive exploration of Tomlinson's poetry. By the end of the first chapter, which cites poetry from fifteen of Tomlinson's collections (dating from 1955 through 1999), Saunders demonstrates that her focus on 'borders' enlarges rather than restricts our appreciation of the poetry» (Michael Hennessy, *Rereading Charles Tomlinson*, cit., p. 352).
- ¹⁰ The term «ripple» frequently recurs in Tomlinson's poems, with reference to liquidity and its sense of connotative diffusiveness, key concepts in his poetry.
- ¹¹ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 1.
- ¹² Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 15. Saunders specifies: «In a review addressing Tomlinson's work prior to 1980, Valentine Cunningham explicitly mentions the poet's preoccupation with borders, observing that Tomlinson's poems 'persistently inhabit thresholds, envisage fences, walls, treelines, frontiers' [Valentine Cunningham, *Flowing Benedictions*, «English 28», No. 130 (1979), p. 88]. Clearly Tomlinson's fascination with these and a host of similar boundary-defining features of the physical landscape has continued unabated in the ensuing twenty-plus years of his career». (Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., note 1, p. 172).
- ¹³ Charles Tomlinson, *The Flood* (1981) in *The Collected Poems*. Rev. Ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press 1987.
- ¹⁴ Charles Tomlinson, *Relations and Contraries*, Aldington (Kent), Hand and Flower Press 1951.
- ¹⁵ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁶ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁷ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 15.
- ¹⁸ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 16.
- ¹⁹ Charles Tomlinson, *The Poet as Painter*, in *Eden. Graphics and Poetry*, Bristol, Redcliffe 1985, p. 20.
- ²⁰ Charles Tomlinson, *Renga: A Chain of Poems*, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1979, p. 76.
- ²¹ For the following concepts drawn from Derrida's *Apories. Mourir – s'attendre aux 'limites de la vérité* (1996), I'm also making reference to the Italian version, edited and translated by Graziella Berto (*Aporie. Morire – attendersi ai 'limiti della verità'*, Milano, Bompiani 1999). In this Italian edition Berto provides an introduction titled «Pensare 'secondo l'aporia'», pp. ix-xiv.
- ²² Jacques Derrida, *Apories. Mourir – s'attendre aux 'limites de la vérité'*, Paris, Éditions Galilée 1996, pp. 30-31.
- ²³ *Ibidem*, p. 31.
- ²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 30.
- ²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 31-32.
- ²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 32-33.
- ²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 35.
- ²⁸ *Ibidem*.
- ²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 37.
- ³⁰ *Ibidem*.
- ³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 44.
- ³² Graziella Berto, *Aporie. Morire – attendersi ai 'limiti della verità'*, cit., p. xi.
- ³³ The term «edifying» is here understood in its double denotative and connotative meaning.
- ³⁴ Charles Tomlinson, *Piazza*, in *Luoghi italiani*, cit., p. 10.
- ³⁵ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 20.
- ³⁶ According to Saunders' *MLS* review of Tomlinson's *Skywriting and Other Poems*, «Tomlinson is no ordinary traveller; his observations of everyday occurrences are securely tied to sensitive familiarity with the history and culture of the places he visits. [...] In the intricately patterned marble squares that form the piazza at Ascoli Piceno in Italy, Tomlinson finds a metaphor sufficient to convey a way of life with its accumulated aesthetic traditions. 'All the generations / Go their measured way' here, each child discovering in turn how a plethora of beckoning stone pathways fits together 'in a mathematic of recession'». («Piazza»). (Judith P. Saunders, review of *Skywriting and Other Poems* by Charles Tomlinson, «*Modern Language Studies*», Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 2005, pp. 89-90).
- ³⁷ *Ibidem*.
- ³⁸ Ruth A. Grogan, *Charles Tomlinson: The Way of His World*, «Contemporary Literature», Vol. 19, No. 4, Autumn 1978, pp. 472-496, p. 476.
- ³⁹ *Ibidem*.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 478.
- ⁴¹ Charles Tomlinson, *Written on Water*, London, Oxford University Press 1972, p. 6.
- ⁴² Ruth A. Grogan, *Charles Tomlinson: The Way of His World*, cit., p. 480.
- ⁴³ Caroline Rabourdin, *Sense in translation*, New York and London, Routledge 2020.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.
- ⁴⁵ We can quote just a few of his books of translations, from Fyodor Tyutchev (1960) to Antonio Machado (1974), from César Vallejo (1970) to Octavio Paz (1979), and we cannot forget Tomlinson's translations of Attilio Bertolucci: *Attilio Ber-*

tolucci: *Selected Poems*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Bloodaxe 1993.

⁴⁶ Charles Tomlinson, *Piazza*, in *Luoghi italiani*, cit., p. 10-11.

⁴⁷ «The landscape of Tomlinson's poetry is dominated by seams, margins, furrows, edges, frontiers, rims, cracks, limits, brinks, bounds, rents, rifts, and barriers. And of the innumerable border markers commanding his attention, those in the physical universe assume primacy; they underlie the countless demarcations – concrete and abstract, literal and metaphoric – that impart to his vision of the world much of its special character». (Judith P. Saunders, cit., p. 19).

⁴⁸ «Michael Edwards points out that 'the vision of antithesis informs the whole of Tomlinson's work and leads one into the core of his imagining' (146) [...]. Michael Kirkman likewise notes how 'antitheses serve to identify the dialectic of Tomlinson's poetic thinking [...] that complex dynamic poise – the protean form, the diversified unity, the shifting coherence – which repeatedly Tomlinson discovers in his experience and exemplifies in his art». (Michael Kirkman, *Passionate Intellect: The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press 1999, p. 90, cit. by Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 177).

⁴⁹ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 69.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁵¹ Charles Tomlinson, in Bruce Mayer, *A Human Balance: An Interview with Charles Tomlinson*, «The Hudson Review», Vol. 43, No. 3, 1990, pp. 437-448, p. 442.

⁵² We refer to Roman Jakobson's tripartition as expressed in his seminal essay: *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, first published in *On Translation*, a compendium of seventeen papers edited by Reuben Arthur Brower, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1959.

⁵³ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 62.

⁵⁴ Charles Tomlinson, *Words and Water*, in Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 62.

⁵⁵ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 62.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 66.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁶¹ Ruth A. Grogan, *Charles Tomlinson: The Way of His World*, cit., p. 486.

⁶² Charles Tomlinson, *The Door in the Wall*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1992.

⁶³ We could consider, for instance, the poem *The Return* in which he admires an ocean view by night: «The adagio of lights is gathering / Across the sway and counter-lines as bay / And sky, contrary in motion, swerve / Against each other's patternings». Tomlinson perceives the juxtaposition of 'bay' and 'sky' not as a set pattern, but as mobile 'patternings' (to use Saunders' term) resulting from oppositional forces at play, and this is also underlined by the choice of his original -ing form.

⁶⁴ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 70.

⁶⁵ Ruth A. Grogan, *Charles Tomlinson: The Way of His World*, cit., p. 487.

⁶⁶ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 74.

⁶⁷ Ruth A. Grogan, *Charles Tomlinson: The Way of His World*, cit., p. 487.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 74.

⁷¹ Judith P. Saunders, *The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson: Border Lines*, cit., p. 75.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 76.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 16.