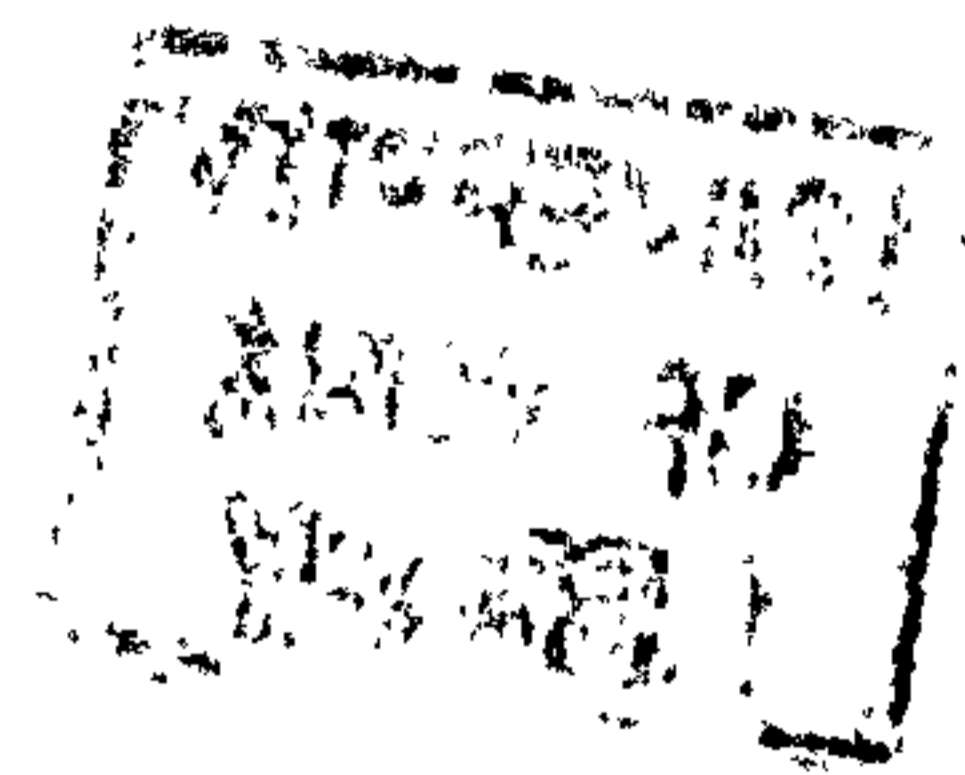


THOM GUNN
AND
THE OCCASIONS OF POETRY



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for

H.H.

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reads the majority of Gunn's *oeuvre* while exploring some overarching questions about what it means to construct a poet's career as a single story, for example, as a traditional story of development and maturation over the course of the poet's lifetime, or as a more specific coming-out tale reflecting a gradual acceptance of and growing openness about homosexuality. Exploring the failure of such narratives to explain Gunn, the thesis follows Gunn's commitment to what he calls 'the occasions of poetry', an eloquently evasive definition of writing in which the poet seeks to be authentic to the occasion rather than a singular, unified poetic self. Instead of recording a changing story of the self constituted over time, Gunn's occasional self tends to speak anonymously, dissolving into different poses and disguises, defined only in the interplay with others, in the fluid, casual, non-hierarchical contemporary world he inhabits. Tracing Gunn's tendency to foreground identification rather than identity, the thesis examines the poet's elaborate, heroic persona and his compulsive return to the plasticity of the self. While the thesis necessarily engages with some abstract questions regarding authenticity and identity, it does so mainly through the particularity of Gunn's work and the conversations within twentieth-century poetry itself on such topics, rather than through an importation of contemporary theory.

ABBREVIATIONS

Works of Thom Gunn:

OP *The Occasions of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982)

SL *Shelf Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993)

CP *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993)

BC *Boss Cupid* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000)

Other Works:

PNR33 *Poetry Nation Review* 33, 10:1, 'Thom Gunn at Sixty' (1982)

PR 'The Art of Poetry LXXII', *Paris Review* 135 (Summer 1995)

AGENDA *Agenda: Thom Gunn at Seventy*, 37:2-3 (London, Autumn-Winter, 1999)

INTRODUCTION

1

In the introduction to his selection of the poetry of Ben Jonson in 1974, Thom Gunn speaks of Jonson's poetry as 'surprisingly neglected'. The same might be said of Gunn's own, given the rich and varied body of work represented by *Collected Poems* (1993) and its coda, *Boss Cupid* (2000), and his pervasive influence on poets and readers during his half-century career.

The reasons for Gunn's comparative critical neglect within the academy are complex, and may in part be due to the elusive doubleness of his work, its strange mix of traditional poetic formality and risky or way-out contemporary subject matter. Introducing Ben Jonson, Gunn spoke of there being 'many Ben Jonsons', each of them being 'a considerable poet', and again a similar claim might be made for Gunn. There are many Thom Gunns, or rather the poetic individuality of 'Thom Gunn' is curiously plural, diffused, elusive, and even, as I will argue, paradoxically 'anonymous'. In Gunn's case, there is Gunn the poet and Gunn the critic, among other roles he adopts from time to time. Gunn's first collection of critical essays is entitled *The Occasions of Poetry* (1982), a title drawn once again from his introduction to Jonson, where he argued that Jonson's work had been neglected for 'the last century and a half' because 'so much of it can be damned as "occasional"'.¹ He then goes on to claim that, far from occasionality being a cause for damnation, 'all poetry is occasional'. In doing so, he implicitly questions the dominant post-Romantic critical ethos of the 'last century and a half' and aligns himself to the occasionality he identifies in Jonson.

I suggest, in this study, that Gunn's own poetry too is radically 'occasional', and might make us re-address and re-assess the nature of poetic individuality. To establish my own terms of reference, I will begin by looking in greater detail at a poem from *The Passages of Joy* (1982), one of his few self-conscious poems about poetry, and then at his argument for 'occasional poetry' in the Ben Jonson introduction, written at the same time. Taken together, I argue, they compose a suggestive template for thinking about the occasionality of Gunn's

¹ Jonson's editors were aware of the occasionality of Jonson's poetry, noting that 'Practically the whole of these scattered pieces of verse are what we call "occasional". They arose directly out of particular events in Jonson's experience.' (C.H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, ed. *Ben Jonson* 11 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-1952)). For a detailed discussion on Jonson's occasionality, see Jonathan Z. Kamholtz, 'Ben Jonson's *Epigrammes* and Poetic Occasions' in *Studies of English Literature 1500-1900* 23:1 (Winter 1983), pp. 77-94.

poetry—and its resistance to some of the dominant models for thinking about poets' lives and careers.

2

In 'Interruption' (378), the last section of a longer sequence called 'Transients and Residents', Gunn describes being distracted by the rain's 'thin taptapping on the pane' and his own 'reflection' in the dark, and finds himself singled out by the desk lamp, sitting ready in the chair but unable to write. Stranded on his 'own island', the spot-lit Crusoe-like poet is interrupted by his own presence; he does not want to be his own audience. The poem suggests the complicated principles Gunn works by as a poet but also the assumptions that he works against, in particular his resistance to self-expression. To interrupt his sense of self-embarrassment, Gunn 'stares against' his reflection, reaching out towards a 'damp square of earth', where he acts out his 'experiments' in a Marvellian garden, 'sowing' each poem like 'a seed' and 'watching for the birth'. The constant gardener is also a constant watcher, tending each 'species' characteristics', hoping that the plant's 'beauty' remains 'untouched by personality'. The lines show that the poet who strives to express the intimate and social feeling of 'touch' is unequivocally sceptical about his own poetic self and 'personality'. 'I trust the seedling wings', he says, 'Yet taking off on them I leave to find', seeking if not to 'lose then leave behind, / What else, the self'. The sentence pauses at the line-break with 'leave behind', leaving ahead what he seeks to leave behind, interrupting the clause with an interjected 'what else', before summoning the repudiated 'self'. On this model, poetry is associated with a self-distrusting flight to somewhere else, leaving behind all the rhetorical paraphernalia (the 'else') associated with 'the self' in post-war British and American poetry.

'I find what?', he goes on to ask. To answer his own question, he evokes what goes on in his experience of everyday occasions of writing, finding in his habits of letter-writing an analogy for his imaginary self-forgetting gardening. When replying to his friends' letters, he says, he imitates 'unconsciously the style / Of the recipients', engaging in a form of mimicry that goes well beyond self-expression, suggesting if not anonymity, then something more like Keats's 'chameleon' poet, thriving on identification with the other.² 'I answer expectations', he says, and this enables him to 'analyze' or 'drawl a page of wit' in 'letters' that range 'from literary to barely literate.' The model of poet as letter-writer emphasizes occasionality,

² Keats believes that the poet has 'no identity' but is 'filling some other Body' beyond the confines of his private self. (Keats, Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, in *Letters of John Keats*, Robert Gittings, ed. (London: OUP, 1970), p. 157.

responsiveness, suggesting a view of writing as answering rather than creating, quite free of any investment in his own literary 'personality'. Curiously this model of the poet as someone who 'answer[s] expectations' refuses to answer most current expectations about poetry. Likewise, when he says 'I manage my mere voice on postcards best', the phrase does not socialise writing but implicitly questions our habitual emphasis on the singularity of the poet's 'voice' as signifier of his identity.

Gunn's 'mere voice' is his response to the artistic struggle between anonymity and authenticity, mimicry and originality, self and other, and freedom and order, played out in debates about and in contemporary British and American poetry. Gunn neither embraces nor rejects the terms of these debates, and seems strangely untroubled by any need to identify with either term in these dualisms. 'The seedling wings' travel to those dualistic interstices where convergence meets divergence, where from 'the seen the unseen is implied', and writing is inseparable from occasion. Gunn's 'mere voice' in this poem—and generally—is direct, candid, casual, and personal but operates with an almost Augustan sense of decorum and public responsibility, as the conversational and metrical intersect and overlap, as if Samuel Johnson and William Carlos Williams had joined forces in a weave of closed and loosened forms. 'Mere' undermines self-aggrandizement ('my mere voice' suggests there are more important voices than his, but also more important things than voice) and asserts a commitment to the embrace of linguistic accuracy and limitation. The *OED* defines 'mere' as meaning 'having no greater extent, range, value, power, or importance than the designation implies.' The adjective derived from the Latin word *merus* which means 'pure, unmixed, unalloyed; undiluted, unadulterated', often used to describe wine which is 'not mixed with water'.

In this sense 'mere' overlaps with the Latin word *sincerus* (sincere), brilliantly discussed by Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), a series of lectures that tracks the idea of sincerity through its literary, social and cultural permutations across the centuries, and that has a close bearing on Gunn's sceptical engagement with 'What else, the self'. Trilling explores the historical contest between paradigms of 'sincerity' and 'authenticity' in the modern era, and questions the notion that 'authenticity of personal being is achieved through an ultimate isolateness and through the power that this is presumed to bring.'³ Gunn's 'mere voice' is not invested in Trilling's notion of 'sincerity', what he called the 'enterprise of presenting the self, of putting ourselves on the social stage' in which

³ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: OUP, 1972), p. 84.

'sincerity itself plays a curiously compromised part.'⁴ Nor does he advocate Trilling's version of 'authenticity', what Trilling called a 'more strenuous moral experience' and a 'more exigent conception of the self and what being true to it consists in'.⁵

Gunn, on the evidence of *'Interruptions'*, is drawn to neither Trilling's 'sincerity' nor 'authenticity' as a paradigm of writing. If Gunn's 'mere voice' seeks to appropriate anything at all, here, it is the occasion that prompts it. This 'occasional' voice adopts different stances at different times—to 'answer expectation' or 'drawl a page of wit'—but is defined in terms of a specific occasion (with a particular medium). The poem puts forward two distinct models of such occasional writing, doing the gardening and writing postcards. It is not clear to what extent the two activities are aligned, equated or opposed, but both offer versions of writing as forms of attention (as Frank Kermode calls them) to others, whether friends or plants. Joshua Weiner describes Gunn's 'sense of human scale in its grain appropriate to the occasion of the poem', prompting the reader to trust him 'not to exaggerate beyond the facts, yet to explore the subject beneath the given'.⁶ Indeed, Gunn's occasional poems often float free of the occasions that may have inspired them, inviting us to enter the complex worlds of his friends, lovers, and occasionally his own.

Gunn's image of the garden in his poem is both prosaically domestic and archetypal, and behind the literal garden lie the poetic gardens of Milton and Marvell. Gunn makes it an unusually loaded and self-conscious emblem of his art:

My garden is the plants that I have got
By luck, skill, purchase, robbery or gift.
From foxglove, lily, pink and bergamot
I raise leafed unity, a blossoming drift
Where once I found weed waiting out a drought. (379)

'My garden is the plants that I have got' sounds a straightforward, self-enclosed and proprietorial claim. As the sentence carries over the line-break, however, we are thrown back into a more complex sense of things, emphasising the origin of those plants in other places and the various ways in which the poet appropriated them ('By luck, skill, purchase, robbery or gift'). If he has created a 'blossoming drift' out of weeds and 'drought', it is because he has acquired things from others, by happy chance, theft, or their generosity. On this account, creativity is opportunism, a matter of responding to opportunities and occasions outside ourselves. The poet takes what is found or given, and makes use of it, whether in a 'damp

⁴ Trilling, p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ 'A Symposium on Thom Gunn', *The Threepenny Review* (Summer 2005), p. 10.

square of earth' or the poet's 'own island' defined by his 'desk lamp', both of which are places where seeds can be sown, and may or may not be 'soaring into bloom' (378).

Unlike many modern poets, Gunn rarely writes poems directly about poetry. 'Interruptions' in that respect is an exception. It is, however, an extremely suggestive one, and its account of writing offers a parallel to some of Gunn's most compelling prose reflections on his art. Noting that we nowadays 'tend to use the phrase "occasional poetry" to indicate trivial or insincere writing', in *The Occasion of Poetry* Gunn argues that 'all poetry is occasional':

The occasion in all cases—literal or imaginary—is the starting-point, only, of a poem, but it should be a starting point to which the poet must in some sense stay true. The truer he is to it, the closer he sticks to what for him is its authenticity, the more he will be able to draw from it in the adventures that it produces, adventures that consist of the experience of writing.⁷

Gunn insists on the 'it' (the occasion) but not 'he' or 'she' (the self). He says 'the truer he is to it', suggesting not Polonius's 'to thine own self be true', but the essential fidelity should be to a situation outside 'What else, the self'.⁸ For Gunn, 'authenticity' does not reside in the self, and the poet's goal, then, is not fidelity to his own identity or aesthetic project, but to the 'authenticity' of the occasions with which he is presented. In a discussion of Ben Jonson, Jonathan Kamholtz defines an occasional poem as a site of intersection that 'brings together a man, an event, a time, a place, an audience, and a speaker; its implied subject is a single example of the embodiment of shared ideals.'⁹ Unlike Jonson's, Gunn's poetry does not idealize his friends, plants, or occasions, but it does transform public and private occasions into poetic occasions. What he shares with Jonson is his devotion to the social and personal specificity of a particular occasion, which is always a poem's 'starting-point', and the source of his poetic 'adventures'.

His account of occasional poetry is not, however, as naively empirical as this might suggest. His emphasis is not only on biographical 'adventures' but the 'adventures' involved in recording them, not only writing about experience but 'the experience of writing'. Gunn's poetry tends to be about his own adventures, but this eloquently evasive definition of writing puts forward a low-key, but tough and elastic notion of poetry that goes against some of the

⁷ *OP*, p. 185. Gunn re-defines the traditional idea of 'occasion poems'—poems that are 'written to celebrate or memorialise a specific occasion, such as a birthday, a marriage, a death, a military engagement or victory, the dedication of a public building, or the opening performance of a play.' (M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (USA: Harcourt Brace, 1999), p. 197.)

⁸ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Trilling uses Polonius's speech to illustrate that Polonius 'affirms his sincerity' as he has 'conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained.' (Trilling, p. 3)

⁹ Kamholtz, p. 80.

dominant assumptions of the age, with its heavy investment in the poetics of cultural and personal identity and, indeed, poetics as such. 'I'm interested in individual poets, not in poetics', Gunn has written. Though he said he sometimes asked himself whether he had a 'poetic theory', he thought that if he had one, 'it would be full of inconsistencies'¹⁰. There is nothing here of the heroic aesthetic imperiousness of Ezra Pound, the modified romanticism of Robert Duncan or Allen Ginsberg, or the biographical imperative that drives Plath or Lowell. 'The occasions' of poetry are multiple, and Gunn's poems are defined, on this account, by their capacity to respond to them.

I alluded earlier to the Keatsian poet's lack of identity, or 'self'. We might ask, however, whether there is such a thing as an occasional self, an identity composed in response to opportunities? I would suggest that for Gunn, inhabiting an occasional self involves attending to the occasion prior to the self, imagining the occasion as a host and the self as a guest, invited to respond to the vicissitudes of experience. In this sense, rather than recording a changing story of the self constituted over time, Gunn's occasional self tends to speak anonymously, dissolving into different poses and disguises, defined only in the interplay with others, in the fluid, casual, non-hierarchical contemporary world he inhabits. Where Jonson in 'To Penshurst' writes of an 'ancient pile', 'great lord' and 'noble, fruitful, chaste'¹¹ lady, celebrating the Sidney family's 'reverenced' aristocratic house, in a poem like 'Last Days at Teddington' (237) Gunn commemorates a place that embodies the scruffy Bohemian sociability he values in a house where 'The windows wide through day and night / Gave on the garden like a room'. Instead of a great lord and ladies, he speaks of 'a shaggy dog', 'yellow-squared linoleum' and children putting 'toys to grass'. Commemorating the last party in the house, he recalls 'How sociable the garden was. / We ate and talked in given light'. With its celebration of the shifting threshold between house and garden, Gunn reproduces something of the complex social topography of Jonson's poem, or Marvell's 'The Garden', and in an alternating rhymed stanza that harks back to their seventeenth-century, like those 'wide' windows that 'Gave on the garden like a room'. At home in the contemporary, but resurrecting values associated with an earlier cultural moment, the poem is as resolutely faithful to the secular 'given light' of the casual modern occasions it calls up, as Jonson's poem is to the forms of sociability of his time.

In *The Man with Night Sweats*, a book concerned with a crisis of sociability in AIDS-torn San Francisco, Gunn has a poem called 'An Invitation, from San Francisco to my brother'

¹⁰ 'An Anglo-American Poet: Interview with Jim Powell' in *SL*, p. 227.

¹¹ Gunn, *Ben Jonson*, p. 90.

(411-2), that is clearly modelled on Jonson-style occasional poetry. In fact, it takes off from Jonson's poem 'Inviting a Friend to Supper', which begins:

To night, grave sir, both my poore house and I
Doe equally desire your companie:
Not that we thinke us worthy such a ghest,
But that your worth will dignifie our feast,
With those that come¹²

Gunn's poem begins by mirroring Jonson's opening invitation:

Dear welcomer, I think you must agree
It is your turn to visit me.
I'll put you in my room, sunk far from light,
Where cars will not drive through your night. (411)

Like Jonson, Gunn goes on to talk about food, hospitality, domestic spaces, and the pleasures of conversation, but now set firmly within the contours of contemporary America, where cars drive through the night and 'Reagan's proletariat', 'the jobless', 'whores' and 'crazies' haunt the streets. In this unsociable, hostile world, the poet invites his brother to 'come home to dinner / With my whole household, where they all excel: / Each cooks one night, and each cooks well'. Gunn's 'household' might not be immediately recognisable to Jonson, but it is to Gunn's readers, who will understand its novel forms of domestic arrangements as well as recognise its kinship with hospitable values embodied in Jonson's crisply turned, syncopated couplets. Jonson ends his poem by affirming that 'No simple word, / That shall be utter'd at our mirthful boord, / Shall make us sad next morning: or affright / The libertie that wee'll enjoy tonight.'¹³ In similar spirit, Gunn's ends by imagining 'while food lasts, and after it is gone, / We'll talk, without a TV on', evoking a comparable 'libertie' to Jonson's as he envisages them talking:

Of friends, of the estranged and of the dead
Or living relatives instead,
Of what we've done and seen and thought and read,
Until we talk ourselves to bed. (412)

If the effect of the invitation comes close to historical pastiche here, it also forges a real continuity between the sociable, occasional verse of Jonson, with its tough fidelity to the actual currency of relationships in his time, and Gunn's own moment, his own 'friends' and 'living relatives'. His poem represents what is possible now 'Among the circumstances', as he

¹² Gunn, *Ben Jonson*, p. 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*

calls them, of modern California. It thrives, in a characteristic way, on the plurality of 'ourselves' talking together. Like Jonson's *Penshurst*, the world the poem evokes becomes an emblem of a new style of household, a model of contemporary sociability, forged in a time of crisis, by himself and his friends. It is defined by the contours of the poem itself, which responds both to the imagined occasion of his brother's visit, and the earlier instance of occasional poetry represented by the Jonson poem. What he has 'seen and thought and read', in other words, bring together 'the dead' and his own 'bed'.

The poem talks of 'talk' and to identify the voice of Gunn's *Collected Poems* is to recognise an interplay of selves and voices, as if the poet distrusted the singularity of his own voice. It is as if he were wary of the equation of voice and self, and constantly seeking to disperse any rigid notion of identity. Instead he chooses to celebrate a contingent solidarity, born out of encounters with others. On the spokenness of poetry, James Longenbach observes that a poet who writes in the voices of others 'is not simply choosing to disguise...in order to reveal' him or herself, he or she is asking us to rethink the reader's 'self-consciousness about the metaphorical status of a poem's speaker.'¹⁴ Gunn's tendency to undermine the notion of a singular speaking voice is of course less explicit and violent than the poetic performances of contemporaries such as Louise Glück or Susan Howe. Nevertheless, to read Gunn's 'The Wound', 'Moly' and 'Jack Straw's Castle' for example, is to situate ourselves at the junction between self-disguise and self-revelation, as we experience Gunn identifying with the lives of early classical and rock-and-roll heroes, friends and lovers, whether in his bedroom or in a hospital.

Like Gunn, James Longenbach also reflects some unease with the constructedness of the speaking voice in lyric poetry. He observes that 'no poem extends the illusion of an individual speaker without challenging that illusion; at the same time, no poem, no matter how strenuous its challenge, manages to avoid the illusion of being spoken.'¹⁵ Longenbach puts forward a notion of poetic spokenness which neither summons the Romantic ghost of original selfhood nor pursues the Modernist vocation of poetic impersonality. In this account, 'poems inhabit the problem of their spokenness',¹⁶ and Longenbach suggests that poetry sponsors this exciting dilemma between spokenness and unspokenness, asking us to challenge the tyrannical equation of voice and self. If spokenness is unstable or not taken for granted, so is the self who speaks, as the metaphorical speaker is preoccupied with neither self nor selflessness. With Longenbach in mind, poems can be seen as shareable dreams.

¹⁴ James Longenbach, *The Resistance of Poetry* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), pp. 61, 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 71.

They foster and disperse a doubleness of illusion in which the speaker is both a resident of and alien to his poetic occasions, situated liminally on the borders between self and selflessness, identity and anonymity.

Gunn's occasional self inspires trust because his poems do not ask to be trusted. Unlike Eliot or Pound who arguably use impersonality as a form of mirror or mask to conceal the self, Gunn disarms the self by leaving it behind, leaving it to effervesce into the occasions of his poems. In this respect, in giving voice to its occasions, his voice offers a parallel to Longenbach's liminal version of poetic speech. His plain, low-key poems refuse to foreground the poet's self-consciousness but require the reader to foreground their self-consciousness, plunging into the same distrusting flight, in which the occasion is the starting-point and its experience the destination. Maud Ellman notes that Pound's 'search for self' turned into 'an odyssey to anonymity.'¹⁷ Gunn's odyssey to anonymity is not driven by the search for self but by the fidelity to occasions for poetry. In poem after poem, he thrives on the illusion of multiple anonymous identities, identifying with others in order to avoid being pinned down as Gunn the singular speaker. Nevertheless, the distinctive, formal shapes and forms of his poems often betray this illusion of anonymity, as if he needs metre and rhyme to provide a secure footing from which to launch into 'selfless' flight, to master risk and shape his material into solid forms that embody imagined solidarity.

Driven by the occasions of poetry, the poet, appropriating those 'seedling wings', is a descendant of Daedalus, the risk-taking craftsman who mastered the art of flying halfway between the extremes of the sun and ocean. Seeking to be authentic to the outside occasions they arise from, the 'mere voice' of the poet in Gunn's poems may be preoccupied by risks and risk-taking, erotic adventures and catastrophes, but is wary of setting the poetic stakes too high, or making too large claims for either himself or poetry. A notion of poetry that rises from and to the occasions of writing, to a certain extent, recalls Wordsworth's idea of poetry as spontaneity and recollection in the sense that the poet writes in response to memories of specific encounters, people, and moments, exercising his intellectual self-discipline in the face of spontaneous, shapeless occasions. But in Gunn's poetry, there is no developmental narrative of the heroic poetic self, and no providential story of imaginative transcendence. Rather than Romantic tranquillity sublimated to an 'emotion kindred to [...] the subject of contemplation',¹⁸ what is recorded is not nature, landscape, or the aesthetically validated monuments of human culture, but, as he records in 'Interruptions', 'loud music, bars, and boisterous men.' The occasions of writing, that is, are thrown up by the poet's opportunistic investment

¹⁷ Maud Ellman, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (UK: The Harvester Press, 1987), p. 8.

¹⁸ Wordsworth and Coleridge, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems* (1802).

in modern, urban, gay culture in contemporary America. As John Donne or Ben Jonson reflected and reflected upon the coteries of Elizabethan or Jacobean London, so Gunn's poems respond to the contours and coteries of his own milieu in late twentieth-century San Francisco, reshaping and locating the spontaneous inside the body, bringing formal life to the most intimate but also shared and shareable personal and social experiences. The occasions of Gunn's poetry, Clive Wilmer observed, 'constitute the "shape" of experience',¹⁹ and the task of the poet is to be 'true to their occasions', not necessarily to be sincere or loyal to the self, nor to some ideology or faith, nor even to the 'occasion of the imagination', but to the facts of experience.

In '*Interruption*' Gunn hopes that the 'beauty' of his plants and poems are 'untouched by personality'. Alternating the construction of confessional poetry in the 1970s, Donald Davie wrote that 'a poem in which the "I" stands immediately and unequivocally for the author' is held to be 'essentially and necessarily superior to a poem in which the "I" stands not for the author but for a *persona* of the author's'.²⁰ Working against the tyranny of confessional identity prevalent in his time, Gunn distrusted 'personality' and chose to play with persona, mimicry and anonymity, creating a poetry of identifications, or in Marianne Moore's sense 'observations', rather than identity. Though Gunn's poems sometimes relish the poses of others and his own, his personae lack the stylised theatricality of Wilde's poses or the systematic mythology of Yeats's masks. Their underside is not the self, but anonymity, suggesting a poetry of identification rather than identity.

Gunn sees confessional 'personality' (his own 'reflection' on the windowpane in '*Interruptions*') as an uninterruptible ghost, haunting him on the transparent glass and prompting him to ask: 'What makes me think / The group of poems I have entered is / Interconnected by a closer link / Than any snapshot album's?' (378-9) This question is addressed to both poet and critic. Like the 'you' in '*Interruptions*' who starts from the 'outside', I aim to make my critical 'interruptions' to Gunn's poems as 'accurate' as possible, to 'try / At least to get my snapshots accurate.' (379) Gunn's own impressive (but occasional) body of poetry criticism is always focused primarily on individual poets and poems, rather than critical theory or even historical, cultural or theoretical situations. I have taken my cue from him in this respect. Clearly, as a critic, I am interested in the 'link' between poem and poem, and poems and their author, but I am also impressed by the poet's resistance to totalising readings, his scepticism towards 'the self', his outward-looking notion of the poem as photograph ('any snapshot album's'), and his plural emphasis on the occasions of poetry.

¹⁹ *OP*, p. 14.

²⁰ Donald Davie, 'On Sincerity: From Wordsworth to Ginsberg' in *Encounter*, October 1968, pp. 61-66.

His younger contemporary Robert Pinsky wrote a book called *The Situation of Poetry*, and inevitably Gunn's complexly situated occasional poetry reflects back upon his and our cultural situation. Even reading Gunn poem by poem, we can see his lyric postcards as reflexes of a larger story, reports of a journey undertaken from and to specific places under specific cultural conditions, during a time when homosexual identity was under threat and under the spotlight as never before.

3

With *Fighting Terms* (1954) Gunn appeared on the poetic scene as part of a movement of tough realism and renovation in Post-War British poetry. From the outset he was associated with both the strenuous seriousness of Leavis's Cambridge and what came to be called The Movement, symbolised by Robert Conquest's *New Lines* anthology (1956). He ended his career half a century later, after the appearance of his final book *Boss Cupid* (2000), a valedictory collection which reflected back on the poetic journey embodied in *Collected Poems* (1993). In the intervening years Gunn had established himself in California as a chronicler of homosexual experience in the era of Gay Liberation, AIDS and its aftermath, a poet who moves freely between Britain and the United States, poetic formalism and experimentalism, traditional culture and alternative life-styles, the academic and the way-out. Still paying allegiance to his early conservative mentors Yvor Winters and Donald Davie, Gunn wrote with increasing candour of areas of experience associated with an entirely different, newer world of Gay bars, drugs, AIDS, rock-and-roll, casual sex, and alternative forms of sociability associated with post-60s California.

After his death in 2004, the shape of his career became visible in a new way, and for the first time, in its light. But if the shape is visible, its meaning remains surprisingly elusive. Gunn's second book was called *The Sense of Movement*, and in its title poem he said 'One is always nearer by not keeping still'. As a poet, Gunn was indeed restless, mobile, committed to moving on. Nevertheless the nature of his actual poetic journey remains a curiously enigmatic one. Modern poetry offers a set of models for thinking about poetic transformation. Is his career one of constant poetic and personal development, like those of the early moderns, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot? Or of cultural displacement and self re-invention like W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Bishop? Or does it reflect a developing biographical, indeed autobiographical project, comparable to the 'confessional' work of Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath? Or do these questions put things the wrong way round?

Should we instead be looking at different kinds of literary and biographical models? Could it be said that Gunn's painful but ultimately successful journey towards self-acceptance and self-revelation is a version of the classic trajectory of the 'coming out' story? The history of his coming to terms with himself as a homosexual poet during the extraordinary period of late twentieth-century gay culture before and after AIDS?

These questions about Gunn's development propose and suppose different models of identity as well as different notions of origin and destination. Gunn's quest for poetic identity, if that is the right term, involves identity in many other senses. His career coincided with a battle over different notions of poetic identity—competing notions of poetic tradition and the individual talent—but also with a period of ferocious conflict over identity politics, especially within minority cultures, fought out in terms of race, gender, sexuality among other 'identifiers'. In these contexts, it is tempting, and perhaps plausible, to view Gunn's writing in terms of the dialectic between poetic identity and sexual identity, a development from the literary closet and erotic underworld into the clear light of gay politics in the post-Stonewall era. This move is embodied in the transition from the coded poetics of *Fighting Terms* to the candid, autobiographical reports of sexual life in *The Passages of Joy* and the terrifying realism of the AIDS elegies of *The Man With Night Sweats*. This can be mapped against the move from the Movement, and post-war British poetry, represented by Larkin and others, to the West Coast poetry scene, represented by *City Lights*, the Beats, Robert Duncan and the Williams tradition.

Gunn's story, however, is both more complex and more opaque. This thesis takes its bearings from many of the questions I have outlined, but offers a reading of Gunn's career that is not easily mapped against them. Gunn's career does offer a story of transformation and change, but one with an uneasy, indeed unsettled relationship to the poetics and politics of identity, as usually understood. The career narrative, that is, is not only a story about these schematic binary oppositions, or that of a poet's progress. Gunn has said that his 'life insists on continuities—between America and England, between free verse and meter, between vision and everyday consciousness.'²¹ In his autobiographical essay, 'My Life up to Now', written in the late 70s, he said that even in the sixties, 'at the height of my belief in the possibilities of change...I knew that we all continue to carry the same baggage: in my world, Christian does not shed his burden, only his attitude towards it alters.'²² Wary of Bunyan's teleological (not to say theological) story, Gunn said 'it has not been of primary interest to develop a unique poetic personality'. Indeed, he admitted to rejoicing in 'Eliot's lovely remark

²¹ OP, p. 184.

²² Ibid, p. 182.

that art is the escape from personality', and was happy to describe himself as 'a rather derivative poet'.²³

In other words, if Gunn's story is in part a classic coming-out story, analogous to Isherwood's in *Christopher and his Kind* or Edmund White's in *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, he refuses to portray it in these triumphantly progressive terms. Not only is he not interested in developing a 'unique poetic personality' or investing in his aesthetic, cultural or political identity, his art is born out of a struggle between the personal and impersonal, the intimate and the anonymous, the candid and the masked. Rather than offering us another version of the poetics of identity, in other words, I suggest that Gunn's *oeuvre* is constituted of a poetics of identification, a self-distrusting as well as self-revealing exploration of a series of identifications which never propose the consolation of secured selfhood or existential affirmation, and are more interested in the 'occasion' than the self. Alongside the Coming Out Story, *Tom Goes to San Francisco*, or its negative double, *The Rake's Progress*, is another one, a more oscillating and unsettled one that ends with *Boss Cupid*. Though Gunn is one of the most eloquent reporters from Gay America, he never wrote as its spokesperson, or as representing anyone other than himself, a self that he imagined as almost anonymous. If he was devoted to the poses of others, he was wary of posing even as himself. In his introduction to Jonson, Gunn spoke of occasional poetry as being 'elicited by external events', giving the examples of 'a birthday' or 'a war'. That word 'elicited' suggests that the motive for the poem comes from outside rather than inside, and that outside might be defined by the poet's 'situation' in both a local and more general sense. 'A Sketch of the Great Dejection', from *The Man with Night Sweats*, for example, like *Misanthropos* earlier, is a situation report from the heart of the AIDS crisis, which we can see as 'elicited' by it.

Gunn's poetry offers a strange mix of realism and stylisation, candour and disguise. It also offers an unlikely hybrid between the raw and the cooked, contemporary and traditional, played out in his unswerving allegiance (indeed identification) with the high formalist poets of Elizabethan and Jacobean England under whose aegis he began his career, and whose spell persists long after his seduction by poets like William Carlos Williams. Gunn's editions of Ben Jonson and Fulke Greville catch something as essential to his poetic project as his selection of Pound or essays on Bunting and Duncan: a love affair with versions of poetic identity that survived his immersion in the contemporary American poetic scene. One of the most powerful sources of his poetic force is the sense of tension between

²³ *OP*, p. 186.

traditional poetic decorum and the journalistic stuff of everyday life on the streets of San Francisco—and his identification with both.

The 'Unsettled Motor-cyclist' is committed to movement, but not necessarily development, recording journeys, but not arriving anywhere fixed. This is not a reflex of the gospel according to post-modernism, but of the founding identifications of the young Gunn, pondering the contradictory nature of his sexuality. What is interesting is that, even after his chronicles of Gay Liberation, and the Beat culture of hallucinogenic experiment, and his coming-out, Gunn remains strangely disenchanted by his own cult of hedonistic enchantments. It seems telling that one of his last essays was on Rochester, not only one of the great erotic explorers in English verse, but one of the most sceptical of English poets, driven by the acutest sense of human limitation. In Gunn's story, the poetry of sexual, imaginative and hallucinatory liberation was succeeded by a poetry of saddened, but unchastened reflection on the vanity as well as beauty of human wishes. In Gunn's career, the moment of *Moly*, *Jack Straw's Castle* and *The Passages of Joy*, gives way, not only to the beautifully freighted elegies of *The Man with Night Sweats* but the disenchanted domain reported on in *Boss Cupid*.

Modern criticism of poetry is often built around two related developmental models, one biographical, the other aesthetic. Both tend to be teleological, depending on or projecting a sense of (often heroic) development in the poet's life and poetic career, and writ large in a narrative of origins and final destinations. In reviewing Gunn's long and varied career, I argue by contrast that the sense of movement it traces cannot be reduced to any straightforward developmental or teleological story. Gunn moves from an early phase dominated by his investment in disguises, shields and poses, organised around iconic figures of male power, to a later phase built around autobiographical candour and overt homosexual identity, anchored in the sociable and social world of Gay California, peopled by real friends and lovers rather than icons like Elvis and the Wolf Boy. Nevertheless, this movement is vexed and complicated, and not easily contained within a narrative of biographical self-transformation or poetic development. One major reason for this is to do with Gunn's apparent scepticism about the notion of both 'poetic identity' and 'personality'. His insistence on 'continuity' tends to efface stories of 'development' in favour of more sceptical, but less dramatically organised models of contingency, versatility, and what I am calling 'occasionality'.

Gunn is equally wary of his biographical self. In his 'Postscript' to 'My Life Up to Now', he wrote that 'the danger of biography, and equally of autobiography, is that it can

muddy poetry by confusing it with its sources'.²⁴ He gave as an example of this confusion in Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and His Kind*, a book he said he 'wouldn't wish unwritten' but thought likely to 'confuse his novels and stories' with their biographical sources. In contrast, he argued that a poem's 'truth' may be 'its faithfulness to a possibly imagined feeling, not to my history'.²⁵ As to his history, in 1983 he wrote that 'I am a completely anonymous person—my life contains no events, I lack any visible personality...I lack motivation, circumstances, viewpoints on vital subjects, and illuminating personal data'.²⁶ It may be that Gunn protests too much at such points, and that these claims to anonymity provide a necessary cover for a poet so engrossed in intimate experience. Nevertheless, his words suggest a striking contradiction, or tension, between his candid commitment to exploring highly intimate, personal experience, including sexual pick-ups, erotic friendships, fantasies, drug trips, and other highly 'exposed' topics, and his sense of anonymity, his lack of interest in himself as a 'self', his lack of 'illuminating personal data'. The data Gunn works on, in poem after poem, at all stages of his career, are turned into 'occasions of poetry', but somehow side-step the categories of biography. Or so, at least, he would have us believe. His poetry depends on treating himself as if he was someone else, or nobody in particular, an occasional person. In this sense he never claims the Orphic privileges of the 'Poet' or a 'Poet's Life' but stays within the republic of contingency.

Gunn's approach to his medium is also pragmatic, occasional, and adaptable, rather than programmatic. If we are thinking of the formal dimension of his work, set beside his English contemporary Philip Larkin, Gunn may look like a wild boy. On the other hand, set beside American peers such as Allen Ginsberg, he can look tame or academic. If Gunn proved himself an intensely original poet, it was not due to any particular formal innovations or embrace of a new, experimental poetic. In that sense, though obsessed with risk, Gunn was not formally a risk-taker. Gunn's early poetry took its bearings from Elizabethan and Jacobean verse, while from the 60s he responded to the possibilities associated with American modernists such as William Carlos Williams, but the change does not represent only a 'development'. Gunn never leaves his commitment to traditional closed forms behind, witness *Boss Cupid*, which is his last but in some respects most traditional book. Though we can see a stylistic breakthrough with *My Sad Captains* and *Moly*, in the sense of a broadening of the technical repertoire, he continues to write within earshot of his early mentors like Shakespeare, Jonson and Fulke Greville, moving back and forward between open and closed

²⁴ *OP*, p. 187.

²⁵ *OP*, p. 188.

²⁶ *Literature Online*, 'Thom Gunn', February 2002.

http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/authors/full_r...&file=../session/1013446399_23817&id=2709

forms, traditional metrical moulds and contemporary experience. He picks and chooses models and forms, metres and stanzas, from the available repertoires, reviving and restoring traditional devices as he rises to the occasion of new subjects. Charged with being 'a traditional poet' by Alan Sinfield, Gunn affirmed it. He said the 'structure of the poem' enabled him to bring 'new experience to something I know already' and put the two 'in combination', linking 'the new experience to the traditional form'.²⁷

In that sense Gunn does not devise a new poetic but revives meter and rhyme in *Moly* and *The Man with Nights Sweats*, for example, to respond to the changing cultural and historical situations in which he finds himself. What Lowell calls those 'blessed structures' 'plot and rhyme' are used to process Gunn's experiences with drugs, Gay liberation, AIDS. Gunn does indeed explore free verse, at the time he is experimenting with sex, drugs and rock-and-roll, but even his free verse is never 'free' in the expansive manner of Ginsberg, Olson, or Duncan. It reads more like a controlled experiment by a writer with a strangely assured sense of his own poetic project, whether using the studious syllabics of 'My Sad Captain', the hallucinatory free verse of 'The Geysers', or the traditional metrics of 'Moly'. Gunn's originality, that is, has more to do with his capacity to respond to the changing situations or occasions of poetry, than to the formal imperative to make it new. It is the imperative to adapt to the cultural and historical situations he lives in that leads to the ongoing 'sense of movement' of his poetry. That sense of movement, in other words, is not of poetic movements, but of the moving forces of social and cultural change, in all their contingency. His poetry responds to such transformational occasions but insists stubbornly on its own continuities, its abiding formal predilections as well as its passing sexual ones. Gunn the formal Elizabethan is never far away, even when he is cruising a Californian bathhouse or looking for sex in a Gay bar. It is as if he needs the security of particular literary models (like an armour) to survive his exploration of risky new subject matter.

In other words, Gunn's career is not easily mapped in terms of one-directional developmental models. It involves versatility and adaptability, but not, I argue, a unified poetic journey, nor a unitary self beyond its own occasions. If this seems a negative assessment in conventional terms, the result has to be understood in its own changing terms. Gunn's refusal to be defined or 'identified' in terms of styles and movements, different poetics 'camps' or Camp, made him a uniquely mobile reporter from the front-line of Gay America in the latter twentieth-century.

²⁷ SL, p. 224.

My account of Gunn's career is broadly chronological, organised around particular collections, volume by volume. My standpoint is neither biographical or developmental, but looks at Gunn's succeeding books as pragmatic responses to the changed occasions he found himself within, offering close readings of key poems, but also tracing the structures of feeling and iconographical principles working within them. In doing so, I am conscious of how his poetry has been shaped by the social and cultural changes of his time, and I attempt to view it as responding to the new historical occasions he found himself presented with. My argument involves recognising that in order to do that, he must simultaneously respond to the occasion of his own writing. The density of the medium, in Gunn, is a reflex of the density of the social experience it records. In this way, Gunn is paradoxically a more public poet, an occasional poet in the manner of Ben Jonson or Samuel Johnson, than his sceptical commitment to personal experience might lead one to believe.

CHAPTER ONE

THREE BODIES AT RISK: ICONIC MASCULINITY IN GUNN'S EARLY POETRY

1

The Shield & The Pose

An illuminating way of looking at Gunn's first three collections—*Fighting Terms* (1954), *The Sense of Movement* (1957) and *My Sad Captain* (1961)—is to explore the various representations of the figures of the soldier, the motorcyclist and the snail. These three individual 'bodies' loom large in Gunn's early poetry in which the idea of shield operates as a recurring poetic medium. We find Achilles' 'armour' in 'The Wound', the motorcyclist's 'goggles' and 'gleaming jackets' in 'On the Move', and the hunting snail with its shell in 'Considering the Snail'. These three martial poems, taken from Gunn's each three books, feature different forms of shield and shielding integral to the development of Gunn's early poetic persona involved in the identification with erotic, marginalized icons rather than his own sexual identity. By exploring Gunn's investment in shielding and posing in this chapter, I suggest that Gunn's early icons operate as poetic disguises, enabling the poet to articulate a concealed (or shielded) sense of homoeroticism that resists autobiographical exposure.

According to the OED, 'shield' as a noun means 'an article of defensive armour carried in the hand...as a protection from the weapons of the enemy.' As a verb, it means 'screen off' or 'prevent someone from being seen'. The Old English *scild* (noun) and *scildan* (verb) of German origins are related to Dutch *schild* and German *Schildi*, from a base meaning of 'divide, separate' (OED). The Latin *corium*—'skin, hide'—is somewhere in its history too. While Gunn's late poetry is poised between the Californian sexual openness in the 70s and the poignant report of the AIDS epidemic in the 90s, I suggest that his early poetry invests in the idea of a shield which one needs to be protected, but it is shielded by a series of iconographical 'poses', such as the soldier and the motorcyclist, when he was writing in 'the closet' in the 50s and 60s.

'Even in bed I pose': the speaker in 'Carnal Knowledge' (15) flirts with 'an acute girl' who suspects that 'my self is not like my body, bare.' Being aware of using the Audenesque *you* in the poem,¹ Gunn, the other 'competent poseur' hidden behind the poem, flirts with pronouns: 'I know you know I know you know I know.' The unpunctuated line undercuts our received equation of pronoun and identity, as well as the limit of 'carnal knowledge'. Both 'shield' and 'pose' concerning the body, posing identifies with shielding because to pose in front of a photographer or painter involves the complex strategy of giving the viewer 'a false impression' (*OED*). To pose, in a way, is to 'separate' (*Schildi*), to remove one's self from the everyday fixture of identity and to identify with the other. It is like role-play or a mild kind of acting without a script. 'In sex do I not dither more than either / In verse or pose', (47) Gunn writes in 'A Plan of Self-Subjection', acknowledging the playful dialectic of poetry and pose—and playing on that between poetry and prose.

The early Gunn is a poseur and there are many mythical, heroic, literary and pop-cult poses he adopts: Achilles, Lazarus, Shelley, Shakespeare, Elvis, a wolf boy and the motorcyclist. Interviewed by John Haffenden in 1981, Gunn looked back his early career and said, 'I was trying to be the twentieth-century John Donne.' (36) In the autobiographical 'Cambridge in the Fifties' (1977) published two decades after *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement*, Gunn said that 'an actor trying to play a part provided for rich material for poetry',² and more openly confessed that his poetic 'pose' is 'based partly on the dramatics of Donne...on Yeats's theory of masks, and most strongly on the behaviour of Stendhal's heroes.'³ He goes on detailing 'the theory of pose':

everyone plays a part, whether he knows it or not, so he might as well deliberately design a part, or a series of parts, for himself. [...] One who is neither is left in an interesting place somewhere in between the starting point—the bare undefined and undirected self, if he ever existed—and the chosen part.⁴

Gunn is a stylistic poseur who uses poetic anonymity, showiness and self-ridicule to avoid the risk of being labelled and categorized,⁵ and 'the bare undefined and undirected self'

¹ 'The women in *Fighting Terms* were real women, yes. But I was guilty of using the Audenesque *you* to cover both sexes.' (*PR*, p. 178)

² *OP*, p. 162.

³ *OP*, pp. 161-2

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Talking about the downside of posing, Gunn wrote, 'It also provided opportunities for falling flat on my face once I forgot the more ridiculous possibilities implicit in the whole theory. One of the poems I wrote during this year was called 'A Village Edmund' [uncollected], referring to Edmund in *King Lear*.' (*OP*, p. 162) The same kind of self-criticism occurs in many occasions. 'I got into rather a mess with my next book, *Touch*, and some of that book seems to me distinctly inferior in that I really wasn't quite

articulates this contingency. Neil Powell points out 'the trouble of Gunn's poses' is that the reader is 'rarely certain of their exact purpose or nature: unlike Yeats' masks, to which they clearly owe something.'⁶ Later, Gunn himself realized that 'One of the limitations of my first books is that I had been reading so much Shakespeare, Donne and Stendhal, and I was writing about the heroic. I wasn't able to bring in too much of my experience because so little of it fitted in with this vague idea of the heroic.'⁷ In a sense the poet's own experience is shielded by the pose of the heroic. A poetic pose may act as a shield, but a shield is not a pose. Gunn's pose undermines poetic immediacy but it channels a kind of raw, edgy poetic energy that sponsors the cryptic expressiveness of 'The Wound'.

The early Gunn writes about shields and wears a metaphorical one. Poems such as 'Tamer and Hawk', 'A Plan of Self-Subjection', 'In Santa Maria del Popolo', and 'My Sad Captains' create a contained tone of the precise untouchedness (and untouchableness)—charged with an existentialist or heroic rectitude that at times seems over-dramatised. But later in *The Man with Night Sweats*, after the death of many gay friends, Gunn writes in the title poem: 'My flesh was its own shield: / Where it was gashed, it healed.' (461) The shield here has become the speaker's own flesh; it is no longer a pose but a disarmed and disarming metaphor for self-defence. 'I suspect the word shield is something of a dead metaphor as I use it there,' Gunn said, 'but it certainly calls into question the concept of taking risks.'⁸

I will carry this dead or live metaphor of 'flesh as shield' back to the reading of Gunn's early works and the 'three bodies' in this chapter. Gunn's soldier, motorcyclist and snail are not shields as such, though they all wear some form of protective shield. They are shielded, or armoured bodies. The three bodies are 'at risk' because they are literally exposed to danger in Gunn's poems, and yet they thrive on being at risk because they are shielded in armour, leather gear or shell. Gunn is interested in the dialectic of his icons being exposed to but shielded from risks. By articulating the erotic soldier and the motorcyclist as poetic poses or identifications, Gunn imagines himself shielded from being self-identified as a 'gay poet' when he was writing in 'the closet'.⁹ This chapter mainly explores this dialectic through close readings of individual poems. It also seeks to map out some the consistent threads that

sure how to connect the poetry of everyday life and the heroic poetry (which is greatly to oversimplify the two kinds).' (PR, p. 152)

⁶ Neil Powell, 'Thom Gunn: A Pierglass for Poets' in *Carpenters of Light: A Critical Study of Contemporary British Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1979), pp. 24-5.

⁷ John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber, 1981), p. 38.

⁸ PR, p. 185.

⁹ 'Yet even the phrase "the closet" as a publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues is made available, obviously, only by the difference made by post-Stonewall gay politics oriented around coming out of the closet.' (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 14)

run through Gunn's entire *oeuvre*, in particular his obstinate investment in the notion of the male body at risk.

2

The Soldier

As a post-war poet writing in peacetime, Gunn establishes a curious association between the roles of the poet and soldier. Looking back on his first book *Fighting Terms*, Gunn defined the act of writing in martial terms: 'Writing poetry became the act of an existentialist conqueror, excited and aggressive. What virtues this collection possesses, however, are mostly to be found in an awareness of how far I fell short of being such a conqueror.'¹⁰ Its title *Fighting Terms* questions the ambivalent language of warfare in post-war Britain, as well as the language used on a fighting occasion. The book paradoxically captures a non-assertive kind of martial virtue, in the sense of that most soldiers in the book are resigned, wounded and frustrated—atypically 'unsoldierly' but humanely tender. Poems such as 'The Court Revolt', 'The Right Possessor', 'Captain in Time of Peace' and 'Incident on a Journey' depict the iconic figure of the soldier as an intellectual, erotic and poetic model, at the same time it remembers the literary legacy of First and Second World War Poetry, Shakespearean drama, French existentialism and Homeric legend.

Gunn's soldier icon serves as a mirror of the poet's troubled relationship to his own masculinity or sexuality, embodying a clandestine battle being fought out, not on behalf of, but against his own society. Gunn's half-sublimated, half-stifled expression of his erotic attraction to the masculine icon of the soldier also expresses his flirtatious love affair with the heroic poetry of Homer and the sixteenth-century which he re-translates and re-translated him. Gunn's anonymous soldiers are often haunted by an imaginary heroic war, and the poet, too, is possessed by the heroic anonymity he created for his persona, exploring in his early poetry the 'forbidden' zone of homoerotic masculinity through his complex soldier icon. Although Gunn was a poet writing in the Cold War in the wake of the Second World War, he is not a War Poet and his poetry is not directly concerned with pity or war. The rhetorical world of early Gunn is often highly literary, often abstract, but it is also, as

¹⁰ OP, p. 173

Gunn's early life was, overshadowed by a sense of war. Even though he is not in any sense a war poet, he is from the outset of a post-war one. He naturally dramatizes the world in the 'fighting terms' that he invokes in the title of his first volume.

Many soldiers in *Fighting Terms* too are wounded, aimless, demobilised, forgotten, however promiscuous, fierce and vigorous they once were. Despite Gunn's obstinate investment in the figure of the heroic male, he does not glamourize soldiers. He was a national serviceman for two years before going to Cambridge in 1952. The ambivalence Gunn felt towards the masculine role of soldier during National Service shaped his later treatment of war and the military:

The image of the soldiers recurs in this book, as it does I suppose throughout my work. First of all he is myself, the national serviceman, the 'clumsy brute in uniform', the soldier who never goes to war, whose role has no function, whose battledress is a joke. Secondly, though, he is a 'real' soldier, both ideal and ambiguous, attractive and repellent: he is a warrior and a killer, or a career man in peace-time, or even a soldier on a quest like Odysseus or Sir Gawain.¹¹

Of course it is not just the difference of war and peacetime, but between professional career soldiers and those doing a couple of years of National Service. Is being a soldier in peacetime posing as a 'real' soldier? Is the role of a soldier in danger of losing its meaning? Does this liminal status make a soldier less or more vulnerable?

This identity crisis finds a voice in 'The Wound' (3). The wound in the poem is one of the most mysterious wounds in English poetry. The poem examines two entwined yet separate selves: the speaker is, simultaneously Achilles, a real soldier in a real war, and at the same time the self who dreams of or poses as Achilles. The poem holds an emblematic position in Gunn's poetic career. Being moved to first poem in his first *Fighting Terms* for the new Faber edition in 1962, 'The Wound' continued to occupy that role and became the first poem in his *Collected Poems* (1993). It opens when the open wound is closing: 'The huge wound in my head began to heal / About the beginning of the seventh week.' (3) However, in reverse, it closes with the re-opening wound: 'My wound break[s] open wide. Over again / I had to let those storm-lit valleys heal.' 'Heal' in the first line rhymes with 'heal' in the last. With one of the speakers being Achilles, we can associate 'heal' with Achilles's heel, the only place he can be wounded beyond healing. The speaker has survived the dangers of the battlefield but continues to be at risk due to his bodily and mental injuries: 'I did not move

¹¹ OP, p. 173.

and dared not speak'. Bodily stillness goes with temporal slowness, as 'not doctor would cure it, but time, its patient skill.'

The incurable injury in 'The Wound' is both literal and symbolic. It is symptomatic because the poem features a localised head injury that seems to disassociate the speaker's head from his body. It is also symbolic because it is an imaginary war wound that calls up memories of Patroclus' death, one of the most horrific episodes of the Trojan War. The poem's wound is a psychological one that captures the psychology of wounding. In war, wounding is a sign of injury, and becomes an emblem of surviving exposure to maximum risk. It is a heroic insignia inscribed on the body, an approved tattoo etched in the name of national glory, as Gregory Woods observes about wounding and masculinity:

To be wounded, as much as to be in love, is justification of involvement in war: it gives the whole thing some point—just as orgasm is the aim of desire. Particularly in the First World War, when men seldom knew if the shots they fired had actually hit or killed an enemy, getting wounds was more to the point than giving them. This has something to do with the euphemistic way in which a man can describe his distinguished war record in terms of the number of injuries he sustained, rather than the number of men he maimed or killed. [...] Not to be wounded is not to be fully involved.¹²

Woods gives wounding an erotic touch, and acknowledges it as one of the stereotypical requirements for the heroic. Behind Gunn's idiosyncratic head wound, we might identify others inscribed in earlier First and Second World War poems. Robert Graves,¹³ Siegfried Sassoon,¹⁴ Herbert Read¹⁵ and Wilfred Owen¹⁶ not only depict the horror of open wounds on the battlefield, but the psychic injury inflicted by the war—'ache of wounds beyond all surgeoning'. Graves and Gunn's speakers both recall war and suffer from the incurable mental wounds commemorated by so many soldier-poets in the First World War.¹⁷

¹² Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 57.

¹³ For example, Robert Graves's 'Recalling War': 'Wine, meat, log-fires, a roof over the head, / A weapon at the thigh, surgeons at call. / Even there was a use again for God— / A word of rage in lack of meat, wine, fire, / In ache of wounds beyond all surgeoning.' (Jon Silkin, ed. *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 121-122).

¹⁴ For example, Sassoon's 'The rank stench of those bodies haunts me still': 'To-night I smell the battle; miles away / Gun-thunder leaps and thuds along the ridge; / The spouting shells dig pits in fields of death, / And wounded men, are moaning in the woods. / If any friend be there whom I have loved, speed / God sends him safe to England with a gash.' (Silkin, p. 125).

¹⁵ For example, Read's 'The End of a War': 'BODY // I speak not from my pallid lips / but from these wounds. / SOUL // Red lips that cannot tell / a credible tale.' (Silkin, p. 167).

¹⁶ For example, Owen's 'Strange Meeting': 'I would have poured my spirit without stint / But not through wounds; not on the cess of war. / Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were. / I am the enemy you killed, my friend.' (Silkin, p. 208).

¹⁷ Gunn is a keen reader of Graves. He reviewed Graves twice within the span of five years: 'The Well-Turned Poet' in *The Spectator*, 9/6/1957, p. 311 and 'In Nobody's Pantheon' in *Shenandoah* 13:2, 1962, pp. 34-35.

'The Wound' is a post-war poem, and as a post-war poet, Gunn explores war as a metaphor for other kinds of contest and risk. From the private bed to the public battlefield, the poem swings us back and forth between the peace of the bedroom and the turbulence of the Trojan War. Gunn's iambic pentameter, tight rhymes and well-trimmed stanzas create a closed, claustrophobic world, with the Elizabethan tune resounding in the modern room-scape. We are ushered into the ancient Greek war scene at the beginning of the second stanza: 'And constantly my mind returned to Troy.' 'Returned' uncannily suggests mental repetition and even the possibility that the speaker could be Achilles or confuse himself with the Greek hero. The soldier's mind returning (or being forced to return) the scene of battle is characteristic of post-war psychological shock. Such 'mental return' is a defining feature of many First World War poems such as Owen's 'Mental Cases'.

But in 'The Wound', the speaker's head-wound not only reminds us of the hangover of the poetry of World War I and II, but opens up a traumatized psychology of an imaginary soldier unable to escape from the battlefield. Returning to a different war, Gunn's mental case offers a more intimate voice than Owen's first-hand anti-war poems:

And constantly my mind returned to Troy.
After I sailed the seas I fought in turn
On both sides, sharing even Helen's joy
Of place, and growing up—to see Troy burn—
As Neoptolemus, that stubborn boy. (3)

Unlike Achilles, Gunn's speaker fights 'on both sides'. But in the backdrop another consciousness is at work: 'I lay and rested as prescription said.' The elusive, elegiac mood of the speaker(s) resonates with what Freud saw as a feature of mourning:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on. [...] Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of a loved person, contains the same feeling of pain, loss of interest in the outside world – in so far as it does not recall the dead one – loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love, which would mean a replacing of the one mourned, the same turning from every active effort that is not connected with thoughts of the dead. It is easy to see that this inhibition and circumscription in the ego is the expression of an exclusive devotion to its mourning, which leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests.¹⁸

At the centre of 'The Wound' is a loss complex. On the one hand there is the invalid trapped in bed in a state of mourning, 'constantly' tuning his mind to return to the Trojan War. On the other there is Achilles mourning for the loss of Helen, and above all, his beloved friend

¹⁸ Freud, *Collected Papers Vol. IV*. trans. Joan Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press and Institution of Psychoanalysis, 1971), p. 158.

Patroclus's death. Freud helps us understand the circularity of thought enacted in mourning, and the psychological wound in Gunn's poem with its obsessive preoccupation with loss.

The formal and rhetorical expressiveness of 'The Wound' conceals Achilles's intimate and dramatic mourning for Patroclus. In the eighteenth book of *The Iliad*, Homer describes Achilles's 'Grief darkened all his powers', throwing his body 'upon the shore / Lay as laid out for funeral'.¹⁹ With Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* in mind, Clive Wilmer suggests that 'Shakespeare seems to depict Achilles and Patroclus as homosexual lovers.'²⁰ Gunn however downplays Achilles's hysteria, suppressing the homoerotic reference in 'The Wound':

And while my belt hung up, sword in the sheath,
Thersites shambled in and breathlessly
Cackled about my friend Patroclus' death. (3)

Toning down Homeric violence and Shakespearean homoeroticism, Gunn sets up an unstable equation between the invalid's imaginings and the real action of Achilles. This ambiguous balance makes the double narrative of the poem believable, and suggests an imaginative parallel between Achilles's loss and the invalid's. Holding the Homeric and Shakespearean drama firmly in the background, Gunn shields the poem from sentimentality and himself from being identified as homosexual. One of its earliest readers Peter Thirlby noted: 'The main interest of all his work is loss of life, not in a personal, but in a social sense, or rather in the former only through the latter.'²¹

'I was myself: subject to no man's breath: / My own commander was my enemy.' This notion of selfhood in 'The Wound' counters the anonymity of the speakers, pushing the poem towards the complex dynamics of identity and identification at the heart of so many Gunn's poems. The sense of nobility raised from self-assertion, as Wilmer observes, 'removes the poem from the modern world.'²² These two lines capture 'intimations of unbound energy' that Gunn says owe a great deal to Sartre and Camus,²³ Shakespearean tragic heroes and his 'revelation on the road in France'.²⁴ It is interesting to note that Gunn's exposure to risk, that

¹⁹ Allardyce Nicoll, ed. *Chapman's Homer: The Iliad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 373.

²⁰ Clive Wilmer, "'Those Wounds Heal Ill': Thom Gunn in 1954 & 1992', *AGENDA*, p. 19. When Achilles sulks in his tent, dispirited about his inaction and the injury to his reputation it has caused, he says, 'My fame is shrewdly gored,' and Patroclus replies: 'O, then, beware:/ Those wounds heal ill that men do give themselves.' Wilmer suggests 'this must be the original source of the image, though I am not sure Gunn makes much of it.'

²¹ Peter Thirlby, 'Violence and Toughness' in *Delta* 8, 1956, p. 17

²² *AGENDA*, p. 20

²³ Interviewed by Haffenden, Gunn said, 'I was very influenced by Sartre, obviously, and in particular by a short book called *Existentialism and Humanism*.' (p. 36)

²⁴ In 'Cambridge in the Fifties', Gunn writes: 'The summer vacation [in his first year] was in fact as important as the whole of the preceding year. I read the whole of Shakespeare, and doing that, Helena

is his memory of the hitch-hiking trip, leads to one of the key spiritual epiphanies of his life. Although 'The Wound' is distilled from Gunn's personal experience, it re-captures the sense of 'intimations of unbounded energy', as it curiously calls on Homeric and Shakespearean heroes for reassurance.

With Gunn's theory of pose in mind, I suggest that for Gunn literary allusions operate as poses. 'I was myself: subject to no man's breath': the Homeric hero in 'The Wound' is seen through the lens of Shakespearean tragic drama.²⁵ The title poem of Gunn's third book *My Sad Captains* is a self-referential poem about heroes and friendship underpinned by literary allusions with Shakespearean dimensions. The title comes from Mark Anthony's speech in *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Facing foreseeable defeat in the battle of Actium, Anthony, like Achilles in 'The Wound', recomposes himself and pronounces his leadership. By calling his 'sad captains'²⁶ to the battlefield, Anthony regains his military rigour and heroic vision. The poem's opening suggests an autobiographical reading in which Gunn says farewell to his early literary models and intellectual mentors. Gunn's allusion to Anthony's 'sad captains' puts the question of the heroic in his poetry into sharp focus:

One by one they appear in
the darkness: a few friends, and
a few with historical
names. (129)

The anonymous, collective pronoun 'they' ('the sad captains') may point to Gunn's friends, his obsession with 'historical names' such as Achilles, Anthony, Shakespeare, Homer,²⁷ his literary heroes such as Jonson, Fulke Greville, Pound, Winters, and other literary heroes, or

Shire remarked, adds a cubit to anybody's stature.' (OP, p. 159) And he continues: 'one day, hitch-hiking along a long narrow dusty road in France, I experienced a revelation of physical and spiritual freedom that I still refer to in my thoughts as the Revelation. It was like the elimination of some enormous but undefined problem that had been across my way and prevented me from moving forward.' He then connects the Revelation with Shakespeare's heroes: 'I was to find support from other sources, notably in *King John* and *Coriolanus*, and later from Sartre. It was, as you can see, literary in character, but its principal source was the Revelation on the road in France, its intimations of unbounded energy.' (OP, p. 162)

²⁵ Many Shakespearean heroes put forward similar claims for selfhood and self-definition, especially at the point of violent action. 'I am the Prince of Wales,' Prince Henry confronts Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part I*, 'and think not, Percy,/ To share with me in glory any more'. Hamlet characteristically announces his own death: 'Horatio, I am dead;/ Thou livest; report me and my cause aright'. Caged together with Cordelia, King Lear gathers himself towards self-realization: 'Pray, do not mock me:/ I am a very foolish fond old man [...] I fear I am not in my perfect mind.' Prince Henry, Hamlet and King Lear, like Achilles, face the risk of death in political turmoil and collective warfare. All these tragic heroes identify themselves as *themselves*, consolidating and defining the sense of self when they are on the verge of death.

²⁶ Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra* (Arden Edition) ed. John Wilders (London: Routledge, 1995), Act III, xiii, pp. 183-189.

²⁷ In 'A Plan of Self-Subjection' Gunn writes: 'As Alexander or Mark Anthony/ Or Coriolanus, whom I most admire,/ I mask self-flattery.' (p. 46)

unnamed and unnameable lovers in the 50s and 60s. Placed as the coda to *My Sad Captains*, this title poem completes the sequence of Gunn's exploration in syllabics and a shift from the iambic. A lot of criticism has been developed on Gunn's transitional change from strict metrics to exploratory syllabics to a mixture of metrics and free verse,²⁸ yet 'My Sad Captains' is not only Gunn's elegiac farewell to his earlier devotion to rhyming and his obsession with heroism, but it sheds a particularly sharp light on his icon of the soldier. Jay Parini points out that 'Gunn's elegy is a tender yet fiercely self-critical piece, a farewell to what has been, a resolution to approach life and art from now on with greater flexibility and humanness.'²⁹

The poem plays on distances and self-distancing, and this relates to the ideas about posing and shielding I discussed earlier. As the second stanza ends with marking out distances ('They remind me, distant now'), the final stanza re-establishes the presences of the sad captains:

True, they are not at rest yet,
but now that they are indeed
apart, winnowed from failures,
they withdraw to an orbit
and turn with disinterested
hard energy, like the stars.

Gazing at his shiny captains in the dark, Gunn witnesses their transformation from humans to distant planets. 'Apart', 'withdraw' and 'disinterested': the poem insists on distancing yet suggests the legacy of imaginative intimacy. 'Disinterested' reminds us of the Kantian critique of the beautiful and Hazlitt's notion of art, and Gunn is more interested in inviting us to experience the transformation of his icon than in foregrounding his poetic transformation from iambics to syllabics. When the soldier icon is transformed into the star, consolidated in its form, reflective and emanating light in the space, Gunn, as a reader of his work, has made the sky into the living album of the past. This sky, borrowing Freud's words, is a screen memory; his icons are the stars. 'The stars' here are clearly classical and astronomical, but they also suggested 'the stars' of modern celebrity culture. The poem certainly offers a modern take or classical metamorphoses of people into stars, like the apotheosis of Augustus at the end of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* or of Keats at the end of Shelley's *Adonais*. Gunn suggests modern cosmology with 'orbits' and a kind of psychological translation of the scheme to reflect on his personal needs. Though we may or may not think this admirable, it reveals the

²⁸ See Section 3 of Neil Powell's essay, 'Thom Gunn: A Pierglass for Poets' in *Carpenters of Lights: Some Contemporary English Poets* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979). Powell offers a thorough discussion on how Gunn's syllabics works as a poetic transmission from other poets such as Marianne Moore, helping Gunn to re-invent his poetic voice through a different form. (pp. 39-47)

²⁹ Jay Parini, 'Rule and Energy: The Poetry of Thom Gunn', *Massachusetts Review* 23:1, 1982, pp. 142-3.

degree to which he is a poet of admiration, a poet with an inveterate investment in the idea of the heroic.

'Disinterested / hard energy, like the stars': this line is not only applicable to the intimacy between the poet and his subject, its self-critical tenor invites us to interpret the soldier icon in Gunn's *oeuvre*. Most of Gunn's soldiers share a disinterested attitude towards their comrades and the outside world. They are single and singular, distanced and resigned as if existentially isolated. Despite the fact that they are individuals, they are never individualistic, as the collective military identity subverts individuality. The question of anonymity lies deep in the soldier icon, in which Gunn's idea of pose is in play. The iconography of battle and the figure of the soldier who hold the stage in so much of Gunn's early work, are not simple reflexes of twentieth-century warfare or even his period in national service. In his early poetry, Gunn never strays far from the field of battle, a battle that is inherently literary, full of memories of classical epic and Shakespearian historical dramas. 'The Wound' embodies this perfectly, as we have seen, with its concentration on the patient fixated upon Homeric stories of the Trojan wars, somehow condemned to re-enact them in feverish form upon his sickbed. Though the speaker rises to the existential heroes of 'I was myself: subject to no man's breath,' he is also caught up in a life-or-death battle between opposed armies, fighting 'in turn / On both sides.'

Gunn's cast of estranged, anonymous soldiers haunt his early poetry, reflecting and reflecting on his own estranged masculinity through the lens of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature. 'The Court Revolt' (17) feels like a condensed and obscured version of a Shakespearian history play, full of competing kings, conspiracies, the rebellion of subjects. Like the unnamed 'sad captains', no names suggest when or where this civil war takes place, but here the terms of reference seem too abstract to suggest a specific war, whether in the Middle Ages or the present. 'A Mirror for Poets' (24-5) is more explicitly a return upon Elizabethan Age, and looks back to that time as not only a 'Mirror for Poets' but a distorted image of the present: 'It was a violent time. Wheels, racks and fires / In every writer's mouth, and not mere rant.' Chronicling 'Hacks in the Fleet and nobles in the Tower', it names Shakespeare and Jonson and invokes the 'diseased and doubtful Queen' Elizabeth, insisting that both Sidney's 'Arcadia' and Shakespearian and Jonsonian dramas, need to be seen as mirrors of a society where 'the boundaries met/ Of life and life, at danger' and 'the faint and stumbling crowds were dim to sight.' The poem suggests that the 'huge magnanimity' of the 'Paphlagonian King' in Sidney's *Arcadia* (and indirectly in *King Lear*) is a product of that 'violent time'. The poem ends saying that 'In street, in tavern, happening would cry/ "I am myself, but part of something greater, / Find poets what that is".' 'The Mirror for Poets',

according to Gunn, is the violent Elizabethan and Jacobean age, and it is this in part that he mirrors in his early books.

'Captain in Time of Peace' (30) seems to take up the same conceits, using metaphors of war to discuss peacetime romantic relationships. Set in a world of 'trite cinema endearments', however, it talks of 'raising a siege' and honouring the town of peace, quite as if back in the Tudor period. In this case, however, the 'lumpish soldier' referred to is a contemporary ex-soldier, not too unlike Thom Gunn in the wake of national service. He tells the expressively non-gendered addressee, 'Pity a lumpish soldier out of work, / And teach him manners with a look.' Excusing his gaucheness and apparent violence, he says 'the habit of soldiers is to loot', and then 'So please forgive / all my inadequacy: I was fit. / For peaceful living once, and was not born / A clumsy brute in uniform.' The 'uniform' here is no longer a heroic attribute, but a mark of the brutalizing effects in the military life. The poem seems to be about a clumsy and inappropriate sexual advance of some kind, 'begun / Crudely', and it is partly excused because 'the habit / Of soldiers is to loot.' It is strange that the speaker should find 'peace' so difficult, so alien even, but this is the lot of most of Gunn's protagonists, conceived in peacetime 1950s Britain. Why should this be? Is that military taste for 'loot' an image for the sexual predatoriness of the male? Is the conflict the poems obsessively mirror, that of post-war masculinity, or a young gay man's struggle with the ambivalent iconography of masculinity? Even that 'Captain in Time of Peace' takes all his bearings from war, and his role as active soldier.

Gunn's soldiers stand ambiguously at a crossroads: they are trained for and hardened by their exposure to the dangers of the battlefield but they also put other people's lives (enemies and civilians) at risk. Such ambiguities come into focus in the last stanza of 'The Wound', when Achilles 'rose', ready for combat but then halted:

I called for armour, rose, and did not reel.
But, when I thought, rage at his noble pain
Flew to my head, and turning I could feel
My wound break open wide. Over again
I had to let those storm-lit valleys heal. (3)

The action of the Trojan War ends after this line as well, as Gunn in the next line instantly brings back the invalid's state of mind, suspending Achilles's action in the air. The 'noble pain' is ambiguous. It may be Achilles or Patroclus, and suggests the speaker's investment in the noble military ethos of Homeric epic. According to mythology, Achilles's body should have been invulnerable except his heel, since his mother plunged him into the river Styx. 'Reel', 'feel', 'heal' suggest the unspoken 'heel' and map out psychological hesitation,

emotional turmoil, physical repair and mythological construction, embracing two speakers within the same dramatic I. The stanza is governed by the movement of active verbs ('called', 'rose', etc.), though no actual action has happened except the breaking wound. The breaking wound also marks the breaking of Gunn's metaphysical conceit, as the double ambivalence, that is, the physical and psychological wounds of both the invalid and Achilles are compressed (or collapsed) altogether when the wound violently breaks open. The two worlds and voices embrace in a kind of vertiginous convergence. The last line returns to 'those storm-lit valleys', resembling the opening gloomy landscape, the ancient warscape of Achilles, and above all, the wound itself.

'The Wound' launched the young Gunn as a poet of shield, armour, body and skin—but instead of affirming these masculine sites, the speaker is caught between risk and vulnerability which counter most critics' preoccupation with Gunn's 'toughness'³⁰ and 'intellectualism'.³¹ The poem ends with the speaker called for armour but 'did not reel', as if the shield alone provides adequate security for his psychological turmoil. By articulating the soldier's vulnerability, Gunn calls for his own armour, concealing his sexual identity, which perhaps is the internal battlefield in the background of the soldier poems. Gunn's soldiers haunt his career but their iconic status gradually diffuses as Gunn incorporates the figure into his erotic, autobiographical poems in later collections. I will end this part of my discussion by looking briefly at two of Gunn's later soldier poems, 'The Corporal' from *Jack Straw Castle* (1976) and 'A GI in 1943' from *Boss Cupid* (2000). These two later poems represent

³⁰ Early critics stereotyped Gunn as a tough poet obsessed by violent subjects. As early as 1956 Peter Thirlby in an article revealingly entitled 'Violence and Toughness' highlights Gunn's 'rhetoric under stress of the impossible task of explaining life from violence, destruction of life, death.' (*Delta* 8 (1956), p. 18) P.R. King confirms that '*Fighting Terms*, as its title suggests, promotes a tough, hardened stance towards the world and personal relationships.' (ibid, p. 78) With 'On the Move' in mind G.S. Fraser claimed that 'Gunn is a poet who should have a peculiar direct appeal not for angry, but for fierce, young men.' (*Critical Quarterly* 3:4 (1961), p. 366)

³¹ Gunn's early lines are often mapped out by tight threads of intellectual ideas, interwoven with clear arguments embodied in the muscular criticism of F.R. Leavis and Yvor Winters. He told Haffenden in an interview, 'In Leavis's Cambridge sentimentality was one of the great awful words, but if you're not going to write about sentiment you're cutting out a large part of human experience. But it is tricky.' (Haffenden, p. 54.) In 'To Yvor Winter, 1955' (CP 69), Gunn strikingly opens the poem with a departure: 'I leave you in your garden.' His mixed feelings towards Winter's systematic thinking is shown in a poem where he describes Winters by two conflicting phrases: the 'boxer's vigilance and poet's rigour'. Recalling Winters, he wrote: 'I fought Winters a lot at first. I mean, I quarrelled with him and disagreed with him. He kind of liked that. I said once, writing about him, that I felt like the rebellious soldier in the sergeant's platoon in one of those Hollywood war movies.' (James Campbell, *Thom Gunn in Conversation* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 30) 'I heard someone calling Yvor Winters a maverick', Gunn wrote in his introduction to *Yvor Winters: Selected Poems* (2003) confirming Winters's literary influence, 'I could go further than this and call him the maverick's maverick.' (xvii) A. E. Dyson noted: 'From Cambridge days, Gunn has been an intellectual poet, nearer to the late Elizabethan and Jacobean 'metaphysics' than Eliot ever was (as near, say, as Auden); and with something of the deliberate cleverness (in *Fighting Terms*, mainly) that could mar even Donne.' (A. E. Dyson, "Watching You Watching Me...": A Note on "The Passages of Joy" in Dyson, ed. *Three Contemporary Poets (Casebook Studies)*, (London & HK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), p. 83.)

the soldier's uniform as a site of anonymity, identity and sexuality, and bring out into the open implications largely repressed or sublimated in the early books.

'The Corporal' (233-4) records the speaker's (probably Gunn) teenage obsession with soldiers:³² 'Half of my youth I watched the soldiers / And saw mechanic clerk and cook / Subsumed beneath a uniform.' Gunn associates soldiers with artistic 'control', describing them as aerobatic like 'Ballets with symmetry of the flower'. It is a poem about seeing as well as dressing, as the last stanza points out:

Yet something fixed outlined the impulse.
His very health was dressed to kill.
He had the acrobat's love of self
—Balancing body was his skill
Against the uniform space of death.

The last line is a slightly varying refrain that runs through the poem. Each stanza, therefore, ends with death in association with 'tool and instrument', 'pure precision', 'small forgettings', and 'my passion and concern'. 'Unsoldierly as an animal'—the soldier is both sexy and dangerous, natural and artificial. If being 'dressed to kill' is a sense of charm, it is also set 'Against the uniform space of death.' 'Dressed to kill' is a deadly, but also a witty pun. The uniform gives him certain glamour—yet it is designed as a form of dress for killing. 'Uniform' here ironically transforms into an adjective, mapping out the unmappable, abstract 'space of death' where individuality is finally lost.

Possibly Gunn's last poem about the soldier, 'A GI in 1943' (BC 56) is about his earliest erotic response to the image of a man in uniform. It picks up the idea of 'the uniform as an object of desire' and develops it. Published in 2000 when Gunn was 70, the lyric poem records a memorable moment experienced by Gunn 'fifty-three years' ago on 'the bus-top / that May afternoon in / Richmond' as he looked down from the deck and found a boy in military uniform:

He melted into
his uniform, the blond hair
uniform too
rough animal stubble above
the undisturbed beauty
of the farm boy's face.

³² 'My childhood was full of soldiers. I tried to write about this in a poem called "The Corporal." I was ten at the beginning of World War Two and sixteen when it ended, so my visual landscape was full of soldiers. Of course, I became a soldier for two years of national service and so that was another kind of soldier. It was a strange kind of role I had to measure myself against.' (PR, p. 155)

Uniform is a crucial 'turn-on' in this sexy encounter. 'Melted / into his uniform': it is as if the uniform were a mould, turning the boy into pure anonymity, pure masculine stereotype. Then the attention shifts to 'the blond hair', which is a 'uniform too', suggesting a kind of stereotypical male beauty and power the poem explores later. The poem details the boy's body parts: his 'boy flesh / in man's tunic', his 'hands too / regulation-pink.' The openly acknowledged homoerotic passion aroused by the young soldier's body is hidden in Gunn's early poems about soldiers. But this boy is not merely a soldier, he is a sweaty sportsman 'coming back / from rowing-practice / on the Thames.' As the poem flirts with the idea of the male gaze, the young soldier is exposed to objectification and passivity. However, the poem changes gear when the first person comes in, bringing us back to the present:

Nowadays I see
forward boys in backward caps
armoured in hide that
adorns to hide
every fallibility,
cruelty or awkwardness
with smooth look
of power.

Gunn offers us a contrast to a different kind of male gaze of fifty-three years ago. The young 'forward boys', dressed in hip-hop uniform with their 'backward caps', are 'armoured in hide' like soldiers in uniform. They pose to defend themselves against 'every fallibility / cruelty or awkwardness', and such a pose, Gunn suggests, is a 'smooth look / of power.' They are as sexy as the farm boy in uniform but also different. Their power comes from beauty, not military affiliation, as the poem restages the Keatsian complex of 'beauty is truth, truth beauty' with the casts of 'power' and 'beauty':

Power
as beauty, beauty
power, that
is all my cock knew or
cared to know, taught
by the focussing eyes, as it
isolated the god
from the crowd.

This is a far cry from the Grecian urn. Playful, funny and self-mocking, the fluid verse harbours a sense of freedom about casual looking and sexual fantasy. The tone allows juxtapositions of power and beauty, aesthetics and erotics, his cock and eyes, the god and crowd, past and present, Keats and Gunn to intermingle. 'That / is all my cock knew or / cared to know' travesties the words of an earlier Hampstead poet with an investment of the erotic. It is a risky poem as it plays on the edge of perversity without being overtly perverse.

In this last poem about the image of the soldier, there is a new 'innocence', as well as erotic candour. The poet openly acknowledges the sexual change elicited by the G.I., thereby transforming his earlier poetic investments in this iconic figure. If this seems a world away from the 'fighting terms' of his early work, his exploration of the soldier's erotic masculinity still acknowledges the aura of 'cruelty' and 'power' which may contribute to his fascination with anonymous soldier boys.

3

The Motorcyclist

For Gunn, the motorcyclist is a peacetime icon that resonates with something of the dangerous masculine glamour of the image of the soldier in war. In some sense the biker is a civilian, Beat variant of the soldier. Gunn's motorcyclists are as much courtiers as motorcyclists, secular reincarnations of Fulke Greville, adepts of philosophical speculation and metaphysics: 'My human will cannot submit / To nature, though brought out of it.' (54) While Gunn's soldier is resuscitated from the Trojan War, Shakespearian drama and the two World Wars, his motorcyclist is drawn from the contemporary iconography of Marlon Brando, James Dean and Elvis Presley in the 50s and 60s. Dark studded leather jacket, tight leather pants, long black leather boots, thunderous Harley Davidson—the motorcyclist's outfit is the armour of the post-war urban soldier, knightly emblem of heroic muscular masculinity. Gunn creates his own intellectual yet athletic motorcyclist, a variant on his soldier icon. In his fight with the marshy fertility of 'the natural', the biker seems an emblem of a hidden autobiographical self, which surfaces in the last section of *Jack Straw's Castle*.

Peter Willis in *Profane Culture* (1979) points out that the motorcyclist culture 'was offensive to wider society, with its intimidating motorbikes, extreme appearance and loud music. There was also a general kind of lawlessness, a propensity to fight and steal that was anathema to conventional society.'³³ In 'Black Jackets' (108-9) in *My Sad Captains*, instead of deifying or demonising the motorcyclists 'extreme appearance', Gunn introduces the eye-catching outlook of a 'red-haired boy who drove a van / In weekday' but becomes part of a motorcyclist gang on Sunday, when he:

³³ Peter E. Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 49.

Wore cycle boots and jacket here
To suit the Sunday hangout he was in,
Heard, as he stretched back from his beer,
Leather creak softly round his neck and chin.

Before him, on a coal-black sleeve
Remote exertion had lined, scratched, and burned
Insignia that could not revive
The heroic fall or climb where they were earned.

Stripped off the ordinary 'weekday overalls', the young leather boy rises to soldierly status supported by 'insignia' and 'the heroic fall or climb'. Gunn's rather clumsy muscle-bound rhythm re-enacts the motorcyclists' 'concocting selves for their impervious kit'. It is as if the poem too, is trapped by the black jacket, a symbol for a kind of rebel formalism constricting rhythmic fluency. Gregory Woods in *Articulate Flesh* observes 'the will-powered man is uniformed as a type (cowboy, biker, fireman, soldier, quarter-back, sailor, cop...) long before he reveals himself, or is exposed, as a mere individual. Even naked, he is clad in iron, tattooed and tense, forever on his guard.'³⁴ Gunn is interested in the way the motorcyclist's uniform operates as a heroic pose, subverting a world obsessed with 'security', 'success' and 'normality'. This heroic pose however is embedded in 'loss': 'If it was only loss he wore, / He wore it to assert, with fierce devotion, / Complicity and nothing more.' The 'loss' associated with the leather outfit asserts 'complicity', a sense of the sociability of playing a part in the motorcyclist gang, having a drink at night 'in the Bay' and living in 'the present'. The poem ends with a parody of such a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, recording that on their shoulders 'they had put tattoos': 'The group's name on the left, The Knights, / And on the right the slogan Born To Lose.' The ironic group tattoos play out an almost camp travesty of chivalrous masculinity, yet this public display of loss shows self-mockery as much as self-knowledge.

The biker adopts the name of 'Knights', and Gunn places it after 'The Byrnies' (106-7), a poem which looks at earlier armoured gangs which opens with 'The heroes' pausing 'upon the plain' and the 'sound of the byrnie's knitted chain'. It speaks of 'the great grey rigid uniform', and asserts it 'combined safely with virtue'. 'Loss' is their fear, as they fashion a 'defence' against it as they pause 'above the foreign wood.' For 'The Byrnies', in their real armour, lose 'in their fear'. For the bikers announcing they are 'Born to Lose' is a way to turn 'revolt into style' (57), as Gunn captures the homoerotic rebelliousness of the pop star Elvis Presley. In the poem Elvis is not a motorcyclist, but his glossy, tasselled leather show-wear resembles the motorcyclist outfit. 'Panting, stretches out / In turn, promiscuously, by every

³⁴ Woods, pp. 212-3.

note', Elvis's wild image sponsors an erotic articulation of his music. In *The Listener* article 'The New Music' (1967) Gunn underlines the artistic and sociological significance of 'new music'. He observes 'pop music since the Beatles started astonishing the world by the daring of their experimentation.'³⁵ Its 'rebellious tone' and 'appeal to young people' became a form of new articulation of post-war instability and anxiety. Elvis emblemizes Gunn's idea of 'new music'. Turning 'revolt into style', Elvis 'poses' but also operates as one of Gunn's poses:

Whether he poses or is real, no cat
 Bothers to say: the pose held is a stance,
 Which, generation of the very chance
 It wars on, may be posture for combat. (31)

Revolt into style is also a style of revolt. 'The pose held is a stance': Gunn is speaking of Elvis but the words refer back to the poet's attraction to poseurs and commitment to poetic poses. Elvis's 'pose' 'wars on', transforming singing into a 'posture for combat' as he 'wields' a guitar like a machine gun. From the metaphorical 'pose' to the bodily 'posture', Gunn externalizes Elvis as a canonical rock icon yet simultaneously internalises him into a version of the Gunnian soldier. Despite its stylised, formal rhythm, there is a sense of tension in rhymes between the serious and the trivial—as 'combat' is rhymed with 'cat', 'stance' with 'chance', destabilising Elvis's vigorous certainty and directing the reader towards the uncertainty of 'may be' in the last line. The poem thrives on the cultural clash and convergence between Elvis's 'revolt into style' and The Movement-style poem's conservative good manners.

'Black Jacket' offers a sociological and anthropological take on the motorcyclist gang whereas Elvis Presley thrives on the symbolic associations of Gunn's iconography. With these two contrasting yet interconnected poems in mind, I look at the way Gunn in 'On the Move' frames the motorcyclist within a philosophical context, exploring the cultural icon as an intellectual rebel moving 'with an uncertain violence'. The poem opens Gunn's second book *The Sense of Movement* (1957) inviting us to look at 'the sense of movement' from the perspective of his iconic motorcyclist.³⁶ In response to James Campbell's question about its 'very up-to-date American subject-matter in "On the Move"', Gunn replied:

³⁵ Gunn, 'The New Music' in *The Listener*, 78:2001 (1967), p. 129.

³⁶ *The Sense of Movement* (1957) opens with the noise of approaching motorcycles, and the book itself also created a lot of noise. On the one hand, a group of critics such as Robert Conquest, Frank Kermode, G.S. Fraser and A. Alvarez believed that its achievement is a consolidation and reassurance of *Fighting Terms*. On the other hand, a large group of critics, most notably Kenneth Allott in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse, 1918-60* commented on its over-formalised intellectualism and insistence on Sartrean existentialism evident in the abused word 'will', which Gunn himself later admitted in several interviews. Interestingly enough, critics, including even Gunn himself, have come to regard poems like 'On the Move' as period pieces, whose significance has faded away after the rebellious sixties.

I thought of doing a series of poems, based on Marvell's mower poems, about the motorcyclist. This was the year after Marlon Brando's *The Wild One*, and the myth was just starting up. [...] It's such a period piece. I say that, not because it's based on a short book by Sartre, or because it's also based on *The Wild One*, but because of its tremendous formality, which I really dislike.³⁷

What is striking about the poem is just that combination of modern, popular culture and 'tremendous formality'. 'On the Move' is still one of Gunn's most anthologized poems, demonstrating that, even though the heyday of biker has gone, the heroic noise of the motorcycle still resounds in his fame. Little of Marvell's mower is visible in Gunn's motorcyclist, but it is interesting to know that the icon is a hybrid of Marvell, Brando and Sartre's literary, pop-cult and philosophical figures from different cultures and centuries combined to construct this rather marginal, sub-culture icon.

Set in the countryside rather than the modern city, 'On the Move' (39-40) opens with an urge to penetrate indecipherable meanings, as the fidgety blue jay 'scuffling in the bushes follows / Some hidden purpose'. Gunn has little touch with nature poetry and the natural world only comes alive with the violent sound of the motorcycles. While 'the gust of birds' are

Seeking their instinct, or their poise, or both,
One moves with an uncertain violence
Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense
Or the dull thunder of approximate words.

Hidden in the firm iambic pentameter is a sense of uncertainty, emptiness and an urge towards meaning. The abstract 'one' runs through the whole poem, referring to 'we' in general, yet curiously underlying the specific, singular 'one' the poem struggles to create. The motorcycles offer neither 'noise' nor 'sound', but 'a baffled sense' and 'the dull thunder of approximate words'—a linguistic experience under the veil or in the process of formulation. Such abstraction attracts, and as the poem moves on, invites to be interpreted. In a sense the poem is about *one's* compulsion to interpret, like the thundering in the final section of *The Waste Land*.

The second stanza dwells not on meaning but the appearance of the motorcyclists. In a long shot, they arrive 'Small, black, as flies hanging in heat' then in a close-up 'their hum / Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.' 'Thunder' here signals the noise of the motorcycle itself: it is given a 'sense', however 'baffled'. This 'baffled sense', however, is not restricted to the motorcyclists' movement, but applicable to their 'donned impersonality':

³⁷ Campbell, p. 29.

In goggles, donned impersonality,
In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—
And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

The gleaming jacket, as in 'Black Jacket', is a leather armour that sponsors anonymity. Poised on the bike, the biker thrives on a 'donned impersonality' that cancels self-doubt: the impersonation of robustness generates something like meaning. Gregory Woods suggested Gunn's concealed homosexuality between the lines: 'Self-doubt seemed to be one of the primary characteristics of masculinity as delineated by Gunn; and it often manifested itself in a pose of certainty. The closet can have similar effects.'³⁸ I will explore Gunn and the closet later in Chapter 3 in the context of *Jack Straw's Castle*, but it is suggestive that the masculine 'pose of certainty' adopted by the bikers in 'On the Move' involves 'hiding' self-doubt.

Such a 'pose of certainty' becomes more salient in the third stanza, when we contrast the motorcyclist's 'direction where the tyres press' with the disturbed 'flight of birds across the field', casting an ironic light on the nature-culture complex:³⁹

Much that is natural, to the will must yield,
Men manufacture both machine and soul,
And use what they imperfectly control
To dare a future from the taken routes.

Here it is the bardic Gunn speaking, almost in Yeats's voice. Even though the iambic pentameter fosters 'a pose of certainty', the lines offer a powerful version of Gunn's anti-deterministic view of the world, as the (free) will holds responsibility for the cause of 'natural' actions, like scaring the flight of birds when the motorbike cuts across the field. Instead of confirming the will, Gunn captures the dangerous gamble inherent in the existential commitment to using 'what they imperfectly control / To dare a future from the taken routes.' Gunn argues that such forward movement 'is a part solution' because we are

Afloat on movement that divides and breaks.
One joins the movement in a valueless world,
Choosing it, till, both hurler and the hurled,

³⁸ AGENDA, p. 93

³⁹ The threatening features of the motorcycle are perceived as a source of interruption and disturbance but also a form of rebellion. In Ted Hughes's 'A Motorbike', for instance, the machine is run side by side with the destroyed city warscape: 'We had a motorbike all through the war/ In an outhouse - thunder, flight, disruption/ Cramped in rust, under washing, abashed, outclassed/ By the Brens, the Bombs, the Bazookas elsewhere.' Hughes, too, concentrates on the analogy of the bike and the war. The thunderous noise generated from the motorcycle's engine has a strong resonance and reminiscence of the explosion in war. Its suddenness and loudness make us alert to the fact that we are living in such a risky world. (Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems, 1957-1994* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 194.)

One moves as well, always toward, toward.

The motorcyclist's movement is situated within the larger picture of 'movement in a valueless world'. Even though the stanza clearly delineates movement, the rhythmic flow, half-halting and interrupted by commas, is burdened with the obsession to move 'toward, toward'. There is an identity crisis implicit in 'hurler and the hurled' as the controller is also the controlled. 'Fear to lose' and 'lose to keep' in 'Tamer and Hawk' prefigure the withheld destination that leaves the process open but also unconsummated, like the motorcyclist's tattoo 'Born to Lose'. In fact most of Gunn's early icons are obsessed with loss and self-control. The idea of control is particularly central to Gunn's early poetics, and, as Peter E. Willis observes, it is essential to the motorcyclist too: 'Their attitude was not one of submission to the motor-bike, but one of assertion which stressed the importance of control. If the machine would not be subjugated by their will, then it was to be distrusted, not valued.'⁴⁰ The strictly controlled stanzas of 'On the Move' too, as Colin Falck sees it, is 'a formal equivalent of the protective gear of his motorcyclists.'⁴¹ The five eight-line stanzas are rhymed in the pattern of *abaccddb*, where the delayed second rhyme is like the time gap between acceleration and movement of the motorcycle.

Gregory Woods emphasizes that it is 'the attempt to control one's own destiny—which demands that one man be both controller and controlled unto himself.'⁴² A kind of existentialist consciousness is clearly in play in 'On the Move', and though the poem is about control and self-control, it is also about the limit of control. The final stanza depicts the motorcyclist as 'the self-defined, astride the created will'. Gunn compares the motorcyclist's cyclical, ongoing journey with 'birds and saints [who] complete their purposes.' The poem ends with an existentialist quest that in itself is a critique of the existentialist will:

At worst, one is in motion; and at best,
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,
One is always nearer by not keeping still. (40)

There is a sense that one is condemned to movement, 'reaching no absolute' and 'not keeping still.' It is as if Gunn's motorcyclist has become Camus's Sisyphus, torn between the movement of rolling the stone and stasis as time and again it falls back at the foot of the hill.⁴³

⁴⁰ Willis, p. 16.

⁴¹ Colin Falck, 'Uncertain Violence', *New Review* 3:32, 11 (1976), p. 40.

⁴² Woods, p. 214.

⁴³ At the heart of the myth of Sisyphus, according to Camus, is his return to the fallen stone and when he faces the meaninglessness of his futile and hopeless labour. Camus believes that Sisyphus's 'silent joy' lies in his insistence to return to the stone and his wasted labour: 'I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth

The poem generates a myth of movement, in which 'not keeping still' is a way to get 'nearer' the limitless (or 'absolute'). Gunn told James Campbell about his dissatisfaction with the last line: "One is always nearer by not keeping still." Nearer what? Well, yes, the motorcyclist is nearer the destination, but what's the destination of human beings? Aha! It's a question that seems to answer itself but doesn't.⁴⁴ Gunn's lines hover between cynicism and existentialist conviction,⁴⁵ emptiness and meaning, frustration and hope, and movement and stasis. In a sense the final motto is as 'manufactured' as everything else in the poem, a form of 'donned' masculine impersonality that reflects the poet's own pose.

While there is a sense of overflowing life in 'On the Move' constantly moving 'toward, toward', the sister poem 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death' (54-5) allows the motorcyclist to speak in the first person and continues Gunn's poetic quest for the 'existence complex'. Written in Marvellian couplets, Gunn must also have Yeats's 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' in mind. Where Yeats's airman speaks of fighting to 'balance with this life, this death',⁴⁶ Gunn's motorcyclist is caught up in an existential crisis in which 'death and life in one combine'. Set in 'the open countryside' like 'On the Move', the poem focuses on the relationship between nature and culture but in more grandiose and personal terms: 'Now we're at war: whichever wins / My human will cannot submit / To nature, though brought out of it.' Though all that is at issue is motorcycling, the speaker speaks like a soldier ('Now we're at war') and as of taking part in a heroic struggle (with nature). He is caught in a martial struggle between the 'instrument' (the bike) and 'embodiment' (nature). This is quite unlike the political dilemma of Yeats's airman ('Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love), even though there is a similar kind of regimental mentality in play. Like the bikers in 'On the Move', the rider is moving 'toward, toward' in balladic march, cutting through 'two shrubs of glazed insensate green' that symbolize the 'gigantic order' of nature. But unlike the destination-less end of 'On the Move', the motorcyclist, as he moves, foresees his own death that ends all movement:

I used to live in sound, and lacked
Knowledge of still or creeping fact,

without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Justin O'Brien, trans. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1973), p. 99.)

⁴⁴ Campbell, p. 29.

⁴⁵ John Holloway writes: 'Some might be inclined to see these passages as wholly cynical, wholly without sense of values. That is exactly what they are not. Over the course of the poem, Gunn traces a great deal of pointlessness and emptiness. But the curiously recurrent alternate sharpness and vagueness of the style well mirror the sense of some genuine good somewhere, although one can hardly say where or what it is.' (John Holloway, 'The Literary Scene' in Boris Ford ed. *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: 8. From Orwell to Naipaul*. (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 77.)

⁴⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1982), p. 152.

But now the stagnant strips my breath,
Leant on my cheek in weight of death.

The speaker's stagnancy in the poem is psychological as well as physical, anticipating his agency suspended by the ultimate passivity of death. In the phrase 'Leant on my cheek', death is close to the skin, as Damon in Marvell's poems mowing the lawn as if each blade of grass is a human head.

The acceleration of the motorbike exposes the biker to the experience of speed and risk that, paradoxically bring him closer to death. But it also allows the biker to 'through substance move' and find a way out of the oppressive natural world, to feel disembodied rather than caught up in the 'embodiment' of 'the dark earth that is not mine'. Towards the end the motorcyclist envisages his rotting body among the tubers which 'reflesh my bones with pallid knot', 'swelling out my clothes' to make 'this dummy...a man again'. This horrific image of decomposition 'refleashes' the body with vegetation. But the motorcyclist argues that even though he is absorbed by the tubers, his human consciousness makes him distinctive from the plants:

Cell after cell the plants convert
My special richness in the dirt:
All that they get, they get by chance.

And multiply in ignorance.

Through the motorcyclist's voice, Gunn affirms human consciousness of choice against the ignorant, contingent, vegetable state of existence. He creates an almost parodic portrayal of a motorcyclist obsessed with his existentialist struggle to define himself as 'human' even in his death. In attributing such philosophical urgency to the motorcyclist, he makes us rethink the stereotype of the biker as wild, lawless rebel. Gunn is frequently photographed wearing a motorcyclist's uniform, with his black leather jacket, motorcycle boots, a gold earring and a panther tattoo on his right forearm [PLATE 1]. The image appeared on books and in magazines, as self-consciously adopted and projected as Yeats's image of the airman.

The motorcyclist surfaces again in two poems in *Positives* (1966), serving as a subtle criticism of this early icon. In the book Gunn's free verse and his brother Ander Gunn's photographs counterpoint and reinforce each other, creating a multimedia collaboration of words and visual images unique in the 60s. Unlike the cerebral Marvellian motorcyclist of *The Sense of Movement*, the motorcyclist in the more exploratory free verse of *Positives* suggests less-defined, more personal experience. In one of the poems 'the external world becomes / abstract' (32) as the biker rides on full speed. The motorcycle's 'roar' and 'music' is described

as 'an impetus', not the perpetual forward movement of 'On the Move'. The photograph captures the motorcyclist in full leather armour, with little of his face shown against the abstract landscape [PLATE 2]. The poem suggests that riding the motorbike is 'mastering' the body, and yet it is also 'mastered by the body.' Such technical reciprocity is experienced through 'the hurler and the hurled' in 'On the Move'. Gunn explains that motorcycle's source of impetus comes from 'resistance':

it resists, but resistance
defines the impetus,
of which the hard centre
is a gentleness
projected at great speed

The lines recall the concluding lines of 'In Santa Maria del Popolo' in which Gunn takes off from Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul* and describes the opening arms of Saul at the moment he falls from his horse: 'For the large gesture of solitary man, / Resisting, by embracing, nothingness.' (94) St. Paul's conversion is a self-destabilizing moment but Gunn's 'embracing nothingness' further destabilises religious belief with the embraced 'nothingness' recalling the existential dialectic of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. The motorcyclist is not St. Paul, though they are both riders. While the ending of 'In Santa Maria del Popolo' captures a static moment of resisting and embracing, the motorcyclist poem in *Positives* suggests that 'resistance/ defines the impetus'. 'The hard centre' refers to the motorcyclist's inward sense of bodily self, redefined as 'a gentleness / projected at great speed'. The motorcyclist's athletic tenderness, like that of a ballet dancer or an ice skater, is charged with kinetic intelligence as well as intellectual muscle.

The motorcyclist icon was part of the new subject matter in poetry explored by Gunn in the 50s and 60s. Several poets in the 80s and 90s, such as Douglas Dunn and Diane Wakoski deployed the figure in their poetry but they tend to constrict it within the descriptive stereotype of the motorcyclist, rather than changing its cultural status. Gunn effectively abandoned the icon after *The Sense of Movement* but something of the motorcyclist's bodily and intellectual athleticism, his high-risk balancing of life and death, penetrated Gunn's later work. We see this in 'A Trucker' (126) where the lorry is 'like a beast / barely controlled by a man' and the athletic stevedores of 'Diagrams' (230), who 'pad like cats / With wrenches in their pockets and hard hats.' Later in *Moly*, in a poem called 'From the Wave' (198-9), Gunn recasts the motorcyclist gang as a group of young and sexy Californian wave-surfers:

Their pale feet curl, they poise their weight

With a learn'd skill.
It is the wave they imitate
Keeps them so still.

The marbling bodies have become
Half wave, half men,
Grafted it seems by feet of foam
Some seconds, then,

Late as they can, they slice the face
In timed procession:
Balance is triumph in this place,
Triumph possession.

The wave-rider controls the surfing board 'with a learn'd skill', as the motor-rider his motorbike. The existentialist conflict between 'the chosen instrument' and 'the mere embodiment' is internalized and resolved here as the surfers are 'Half wave, half men', Proteus-like figures whose 'sheathed bodies slick as seals / Loosen and tingle'. The wave-riders' movement is not 'manufactured' by the machine but initiated by people responding to the rhythm of the natural world. 'From the Wave' can be read as a coda to the 'movement complex' articulated in the last line of 'On the Move'. 'From the Wave', however, ends with the art of 'keeping still': 'Then all swim out to wait until / The right waves gather.' For the wave-rider, the aim is not to be 'nearer' but 'right'. This is a new sense of movement, and suggests there are different senses of movement.

4

The Snail

'Considering the Snail' (117) in *My Sad Captains* is the only animal poem in Gunn's early poetry. The poem is placed in the second part of the collection where Gunn explores syllabics for the first time. The title, asking the reader to consider, shows a detached sense of precision, presenting the snail as a case history and serious subject of study. I argue that this idiosyncratic emphasis gives the snail an iconographical significance similar to the soldier and motorcyclist. Gunn's snail is at war like the soldier. 'What is a snail's fury?' he asks. This question, unlike the soldier's and motorcyclist's armoured intellectualism, celebrates openness. Gunn here has entirely disarmed himself of the willed intellectual self of the earlier books, as the poem features a sense of unknowingness and disorientation, a freer meditative

mind in search of unfixed meaning in the world. Even though the speed of Gunn's snail is the opposite of the motorcyclist's, it too thrives on confronting nature in the veil of night:

The snail pushes through a green
night, for the grass is heavy
with water and meets over
the bright path he makes, where rain
has darkened the earth's dark.

Timothy Steele observes that 'the enjambment from line 2 to line 3 gives a sense of the impending weight of the soaked grass, and the way it arches and meets over the snail is well suggested by the turn from line 3 to line 4.'⁴⁷ Even though the snail struggles to move on the 'heavy' grass, with each line tidily trimmed to seven syllables, Gunn achieves a freer sense of movement here than in the iambic pentameter of *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement*. The rhythm is freer (almost free verse), though occasionally punctuated by iambic echoes. The snail's silent crawl is captured in two long relative clauses, which delay the deliverance of meaning, echoing the snail's slow motion. This subtle, exploratory idiom, which like the snail seems to find its way, is hard to capture within the frame of rigid metrics. The active verb 'pushes' gives the snail a sense of movement, as it struggles to penetrate the heavy grass soaked with water. Nature, for the first time in Gunn's work, is described as independent of human interference, 'where / rain has darkened the earth's dark.' The colour contrast between 'the bright path' and 'the earth's dark' starkly underlines the snail's progress without the 'dull thunder of approximate words' associated with the motorcyclist.

The icon of the snail can be related to the soldier and the motorcyclist not because they all meet on the common ground of a similar landscape, but because the snail is a hunter who fights for his survival:

He
moves in a wood of desire,

pale antlers barely stirring
as he hunts.

Gunn uses the fantastical image of antlers to capture the aggression of the snail's antennae. He offers us little physical description of the snail, and yet by giving it a pair of antlers, he makes it not only male ('he') but a more aggressive creature than usually represented. The snail's phallic 'antlers' and semen-like trail subliminally evoke a world of homoerotic fantasy in 'a wood of desire'. The snail is a perennial poetic image usually portrayed with its

⁴⁷ Timothy Steele, *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1999), p. 259.

defensive shell in focus.⁴⁸ Unlike his predecessors who portray the snail's shell as a house, a 'secure' dwelling and hiding place for 'danger imminent', Gunn gives his snail a number of soldierly qualities: he hunts, he attacks, and he is armoured. He is everything but 'hermit-like'. Curiously Gunn leaves the snail's armour, his shell, undescribed, diminishing the stereotypical attribute of defensiveness and imposing a more active, empowered image of the snail. Compared to Gunn's snail, Marianne Moore's 'The Pangolin', another armoured animal, is altogether less lethal. While Moore subverts the pangolin's aggressiveness, Gunn subverts the snail's gentleness. Moore, like Gunn, is another poet interested in shields and poses. Writing on Moore in an essay called 'Her Shield', Randall Jarrell points out that Moore's armoured animals are 'models of exactness' as if she 'thought of the animals as models and of the exactness as armour—and for such a writer, there was no armour like exactness, concision, irony.'⁴⁹ Gunn too in his essay on Moore writes of her 'armoured animals that flocked in to her poetry as she got older, protecting herself from the surrounding pressures'.⁵⁰ Moore's 'obscurity' and her armoured animals, Gunn continues, seem to emphasize 'intelligence more than feeling (though there is feeling in the poetry, usually just below the surface'.⁵¹

Though partly inspired by Moore's syllabics, 'Considering the Snail' tells of neither the snail's 'machine-like / form' nor 'graceful...adversities' but its 'fury':

I cannot tell
 what power is at work, drenched there
 with purpose, knowing nothing.
 What is a snail's fury?

Most of Gunn's syllabic poems share a sense of swiftness and agility since the shortness of line subtly accelerates the movement of subject and tone. The first person speaker 'I' refocuses the poem, giving the portrait a more personal intensity. The speaker is actually considering 'what power is at work' and the snail's 'fury'. Even though Gunn's 'I' is sometimes a pose, the first person pronoun suggests an emergence of a central voice, an impersonal 'I' with the voice of embodiment. August Kleinzahler pointed out that, in Gunn 'the I of the poetry carries almost no tangible personality':

⁴⁸ John Clare in 'Evening' describes the snail 'with his home on his back'. (John Clare, *Oxford Authors: John Clare* ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell (Oxford: OUP, 1984), pp. 383-4.) William Cowper highlights its shy, solitary qualities in his poem, 'The Snail': 'Within a house secure he hides, / When danger imminent betides' (William Cowper, *The Poetical Works of William Cowper* ed. H. S. Wilford, (London: OUP, 1959), p. 158)

⁴⁹ Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber, 1973), p. 180.

⁵⁰ SL, p. 44.

⁵¹ SL, p. 40.

This can be upsetting to American readers acclimated to the dramatic personalities of recent poetry, Lowell, Berryman, Sexton, Ginsberg et al. Even in Larkin, the poet who perhaps Gunn most resembles stylistically, there is a strong persona, no matter how stunted or obnoxious. This is by design in Gunn's poetry. The 'I' in his poems is disinterested 'I' of the Elizabethans, and going further back, the 'I' of the ballads, and out of the ballads the 'I' in Hardy's poetry.⁵²

Gunn's impersonal 'I' in 'Considering the Snail' possesses a touch of intimacy which attracts the reader to identify with the speaker, however detached and disinterested he sounds. 'Drenched there / with purpose' echoes the drenched post-war devastated landscape featured in another syllabic poem 'Adolescence', in which the speaker walks 'through the wet spring', with his knees 'drenched from high grass charged with water', thinking of himself as 'part, still, of done war.' (225) Jay Parini observed: 'There is no will here. [...] Gunn examines the life-force at its most elemental level, and this snail's low fury is not finally of a different substance from that of the gang-boys gunning their motorcycles in "On the Move" merely of a different order.'⁵³ The search for power in the poem—'I cannot tell / what power is at work'—suggests the power preoccupied with the figures of the soldier and the motorcyclist, but it also opens up a very different and more elusive kind of power.

What is it that Gunn wants the reader to consider about the snail? The poem ends with the first person speaker departing from an urban landscape:

All
I think is that if later

I parted the blades above
the tunnel and saw the thin
trail of broken white across
litter, I would never have
imagined the slow passion
to that deliberate progress.

At first glance the stanza is governed by a sequence of real movements and places. On closer inspection, it is rather the imaginative movement that Gunn is concerned with. The time marker—'if later'—shows that the action has not been executed, and this subtle dreaminess is highly reminiscent of 'The Wound'. Unlike the motorcyclist poem in which Gunn maps out a clear direction of thought (ingrained in will) but an undecided movement (the vagueness of moving 'toward, toward'), 'Considering the Snail' presents us with a very different picture. At the heart of the poem is a non-directed thought in which the first person voice thrives on a sense of uncertainty and exploration. The speaker doubts,

⁵² AGENDA, p. 44.

⁵³ Jay Parini, 'Rule and Energy: The Poetry of Thom Gunn', *Massachusetts Review* 23:1 (1992), p. 141.

questions and imagines, but does not comment, philosophise or conclude. On the other hand, the poem shows the clear direction of the snail's movement. While the motorcyclist rides in the 'direction where the tyres press', we see the snail's 'thin trail of broken white / across litter'. The motorcyclist's movement is in real time, undetermined and undone, whereas the snail's movement is in the past, completed and fixed. Notably, it is a movement across 'litter', intimating the wastefulness of the modern city. We can imagine that Gunn's delicate but fearful snail crawls across the litter and hunts with his antlers. The setting suggests that the snail, with his well-formed shell and formlessly slimy body, is at risk in a polluted human environment. Yet, for Gunn, it is more important to remember that the snail also possesses a body that will inflict potential harm on his prey. With this study of a micro-scale life form in motion, Gunn makes a contrast with the high-sounding noise and the movement of the motorcyclist. As Jay Parini points out, 'Gunn moves quietly here toward a poetry of celebration. His early preoccupation with the heroic ideal is subtly undermined by the snail's deliberate progress across a heap of litter.'⁵⁴ Gunn's snail, however, has his own heroic grandeur. Gunn does not abandon heroics that easily. He has 'the slow passion' of crawling to achieve his 'deliberate progress', the 'thin trail of broken white' is marked upon a littered, war-like landscape. There is a sense of power and danger, as Gunn insists on the risk-taking inherently in the process of life itself.

Gunn is a snail-like poet. In response to W. I. Scobie's question: 'How do you start a poem? What is the germ?', he answers:

The impulses vary a lot. Sometimes you take mental snapshots of something you feel, and only later do you realize why. The meaning comes from your preoccupation with that subject. I never start from a concept, always particulars. I may take a few notes on a page, without form, without syntax. Then I may not look at those notes again for weeks. I'm a very slow worker.⁵⁵

Gunn, like his snail, has a 'slow passion' of writing, and the poems in syllabics were all experimental pieces, reflecting a 'deliberate process' to change.⁵⁶ This chapter has explored Gunn's investment in risky icons—the soldier, the motorcyclist and the snail in his first three collections. This 'iconographical plot' seeks to map the ways the poetic process is brought together by the thread of the poet's thought, especially in his early career when finding a voice is central to forming his own poetics.

⁵⁴ Parini, p. 141.

⁵⁵ W. I. Scobie, 'Gunn in America', *London Magazine*, 17:6 (December 1977), p. 7-8.

⁵⁶ Gunn says, 'I admired a lot of American poetry in free verse but I couldn't write free verse. The free verse I tried to write was chopped-up prose, and I could see that was no good. [...] And I found a terrific example in some poems by Donald Hall. [...] His was a short line...which involves combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. It was virtually free verse or prose, arranged in lines, but each line simply depended on a mechanical count. I found the short line adaptable and interesting.' (PR, p. 163)

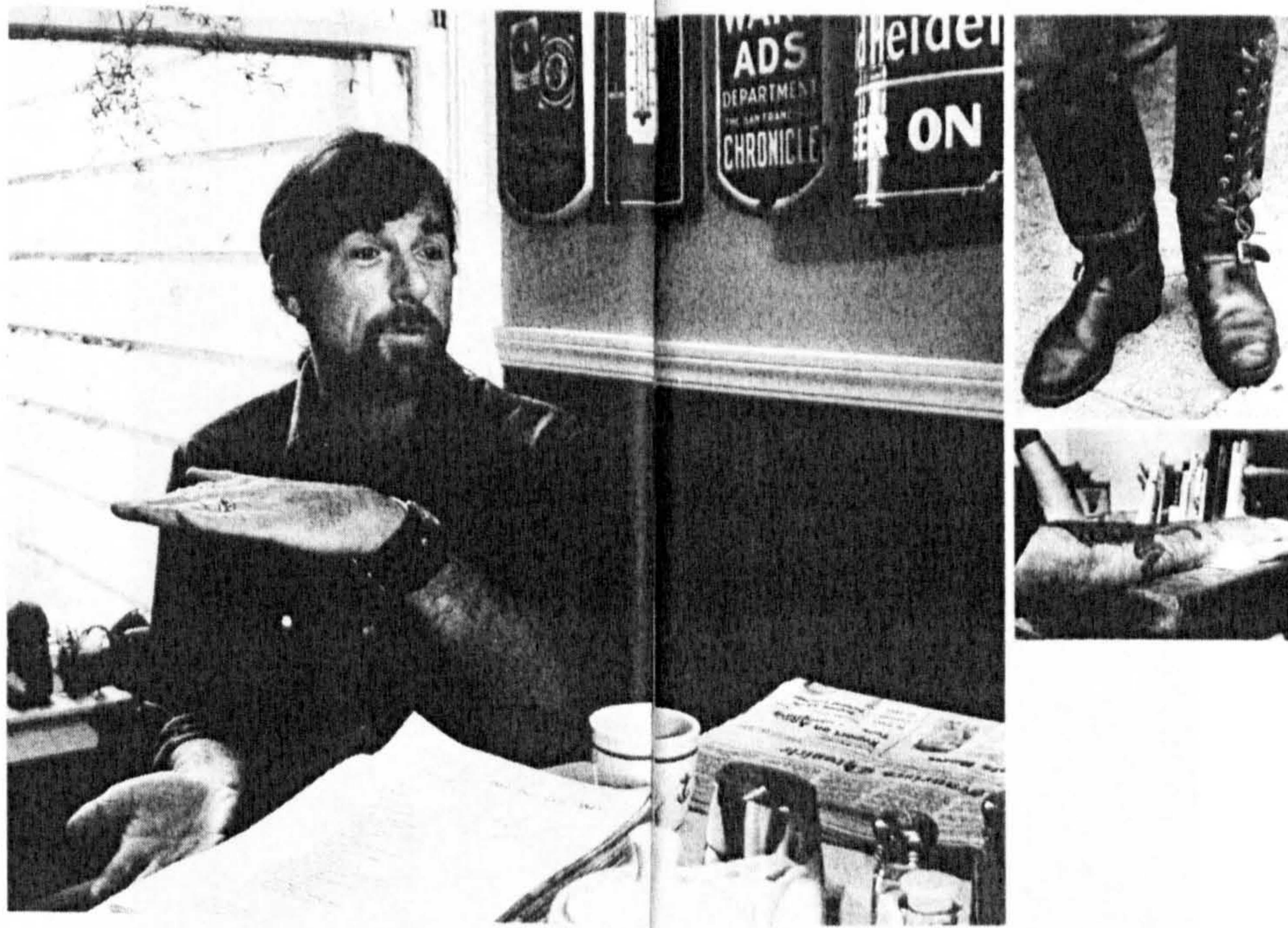
My review of Gunn's work up to *My Sad Captains* is not meant to be comprehensive or systematic. My aim has been to explore the poet's investment in a series of usually anonymous male figures who inhabit a world defined in terms of war or competition and who are themselves defined in terms of risk. Gunn's investment in these figures is intimately bound up with his quest for poetic identity, and presumably the dilemma of his biographical identity as a homosexual poet unable to explicitly identify his erotic interests. What is involved is a poetry of identification rather than identity, where the poet is drawn to theatrical postures of heroic masculinity and confident self-assertion, but always aware of the degrees of imposture and impersonation this involves. The poet remains a curiously anonymous figure in these early books, either drawn to glamorously anonymous others, like the bikers or soldiers in 'Black Jackets' and 'The Byrnies,' or to figures of heroic stature. These include historical 'captains' from Achilles in 'The Wound' to Julian the Apostate, Jesus and 'Rastignac at 45' in *The Sense of Movement* and on to Caravaggio's St. Paul and 'Claus Von Stauffenberg' in *My Sad Captains*. Besides these there are modern icons of masculinity such as 'Elvis', 'Blackie the Electric Rembrandt' and 'The Fallen Rake' of 'Modes of Pleasure', all of whom are associated with the dangerous world of contemporary selfhood.

In all this, the image of the anonymous soldier is primary. Later in the narrative sequence 'Misanthropos' (1965), Gunn explores the experience of 'The Last Man' surviving the bleak, ruined body of the earth in the wake of nuclear holocaust.⁵⁷ Perhaps this is a hangover from the war, a legacy from Gunn's coming to adolescence during the war-years when notions of masculinity were inevitably dominated by the image of the soldier in uniform. Though World War II does come into play in 'Innocence' and 'Claus Von Stauffenberg' from *My Sad Captains*, the omnipresent sense of 'violence' and conflict, of battle and danger, that pervades his first two books, is not culturally specific. Much of it seems a reflex of Gunn's reading of Homeric epic and Shakespearian historical drama. It becomes fused, however, with the drama of self-invention and masculine identification, associated with Gunn's discovery of existentialism on the one hand, and the risk of self-identification as a homosexual in a homophobic post-war Britain where homosexual acts were illegal. Gunn does publish one poem, 'The Inherited Estate' (71-2) which is dedicated to his lover Mike Kitay ('an American in Europe') which, though it refers to 'generations of ganged village boys,' makes no allusion to the nature of their relationship. What is inherited in the early work is a poetic estate built around a warrior culture, which Gunn develops into a self-

⁵⁷ A detailed discussion on 'Misanthropos' is expunged from the earlier draft of this thesis due to its length. The narrative sequence clearly shows the question of poetic and thematic continuity after the first three books, as if to venture into the fluid, psychedelic world of *Moly*, Gunn has to 'destroy' the previous poetic world of heroism he created.

conscious investigation into the masculine will to power, a drama of self-posturing within a world of ruthless competitiveness and threat.

I will end by returning to 'My Sad Captains,' the poem with which Gunn closes his third book, and puts an end to this early poetic period. Like so many of his poems, it offers an account of 'men' that he is drawn to, whom he re-stages in the poem as 'sad captains' on the model of the soldiers addressed by Shakespeare's Mark Anthony before the battle of Philippi. They include both anonymous 'friends' and a few with 'historical names,' and even in this syllabic poem, they seem wrapped in a Shakespearian aura of heroic self-assertion. We might see this as prefiguring the more candid, playful, openly homoerotic mode of the later verse that culminates in *Boss Cupid* but it also functions as something like a farewell to the heroic mode of his early work, with its strange theatre of obscure conflicts and theatrical displacements, where soldiers, kings, saints, pop-stars and bikers, strut their existentialist parts on the poetic stage, though with something palpably missing from the script.





CHAPTER TWO

'COMPOSING UNCOMPOSED': RISK, DREAMS AND DRUGS IN *MOLY* (1971)

1

'Definition' & 'Flow'

Dream and risk, the Californian Sun and LSD dominate *Moly*. 'Much of *Moly* was about dreams',¹ Gunn told Clive Wilmer. Indeed, *Moly* is a book of recording Gunn's LSD experience, as well as a waking dream about such phantasmagoric subjects as men turning into horse and swine, the heart-broken Phaedra, the 'half wave, half men' Californian wave-riders, the lovers and centaurs, the pastoral landscape full of gods, Odysseus meeting Hermes, a lot of LSD and sunlight. Those are not the kind of tough hero-worshipping dreams of *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement*, nor the nightmare no-man's world of 'Misanthropos'. The dreams in *Moly* are set against the currents of the everyday world where our senses and perceptions are obstructed by habits and routines. Gunn wrote that *Moly* 'could be seen as a debate between the passion for definition and the passion for flow'.² The poems in *Moly* stretch out to seek a sense of clarity and definition in the psychedelic world of flow as Gunn's reverberating metres march through the book. *Moly* is therefore a book of daring dreams and wakefulness that takes the risk of finding what is constantly lost in myth, pastoral idyll, childhood and words. It is a book that takes us through the darkness of Circe's styes to the brightness of moly and sunflower.

The tension between 'definition' and 'flow' is played out in the dialectic of dreaming and waking,³ risk and control, identity and identification. 'I'm not much a risk-taker myself

¹ PR, p. 176.

² Thom Gunn, 'Picture Odysseus...' in *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 1961.

³ The twilight zone between dream and wakefulness is a mysterious state of mind which is commonly associated with the use of drugs. Thomas De Quincey in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822) wrote that opium allows us movement 'between our present consciousness and the secret inscriptions on the mind... a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain'. (De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings* (Oxford: OUP, 1990.), p. 46.)

but I've always found the taking risks rather admirable in a wonderful and showy kind of way',⁴ Gunn said. Wilmer says that Gunn is 'a strikingly homely person who finds it hard to separate himself from his house, the friends he shares it with and the city he adopted more than thirty years ago.'⁵ He is a poet who dreams of different heroic lives and discovers heroism in everyday life. His reticence about showing his own life in relation to the heroic dreams and discoveries makes his poetry a striking exploration of the ambiguous domain between anonymity and autobiography. I would like to think that even though Gunn is open to all kinds of risk in life and verse, he prefers to be a master of risks than a blind risk-taker. This form of mastery is shown in his deliberate play between control and release in his use of rhyme and free verse, and his adventurous exploration of new forms and experiences in every book. *Moly*, therefore, can be seen as an example of mastery over the risk of LSD, as Gunn explained when discussing the genesis of the book:

Metre seemed to be the proper form for the LSD-related poems, though I first didn't understand why. Later I rationalized about it thus. The acid trip is unstructured, it opens you to countless possibilities, you hanker after the infinite. The only way I could give myself any control over the presentation of these experiences, and so could be true to them, was by trying to render the infinite through the finite, the unstructured through the structured. Otherwise there was the danger of the experience's becoming so distended that it would simply unravel like fog before wind in the unpremeditated movement of free verse.⁶

This sense of careful poetic discipline is the spine of *Moly* that most critics missed. Gunn's openness to LSD owes much to poets like Allen Ginsberg, but, the employment of his conscious mind to shape the formless drugs experience into metrical verse makes his poetry distinct from the deliberate spontaneity of Ginsberg and Beat poets. He chooses to be most disciplined and guarded on a formal level when his material is most blistering and on edge. This choice goes against the grain of most of the Post-Second World War American poetry, such as the Black Mountain poets Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, and the thematic transgressions of Beat poets. Gunn, therefore, embraces the risk of taking LSD as a source of poetic release and he masters it by sheer control. In doing so, he also brings established metre a new life.

The opium-influenced edge of waking life also appears in the well-known footnote of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. Composed from the 'still surviving recollections in his mind', 'Kubla Khan' becomes an irresistible creative process for poets who are fascinated by the possibility that such poetry can be sprung from the opiated edge of dream and wakefulness.

⁴ PR, p. 185-186.

⁵ Clive Wilmer, 'Introduction' of 'Thom Gunn at Sixty', *PN Review* 16:2 (1989), p. 26.

⁶ OP, p. 182.

In fact some of Gunn's most memorable poems evoke the sensual and private setting of the bed, situating the speaker between dreaming and waking, risk and control. In 'The Wound' we find an invalid trapped in bed for days where his mind 'constantly [...] returned to Troy.' (3) 'Touch' pictures two lovers in bed, one half-awake and one asleep, in 'a / dreamed pogrom' (169); their touching is described as a 'continuous creation, dark / enclosing cocoon'. Later in 'The Man with Night Sweats', Gunn's speaker says 'I wake up cold' and 'Prospered through the dream of heat' (461), confronting the nightmarish threat of HIV infection. Written in different stages of Gunn's career, these three poems not only capture his 'cool fantasy' (188) in and about dreams, but also the state of vulnerability that the dreamer is thrown into while dreaming and thrown out of in the moment of waking.

The debate between 'definition' and 'flow' in Gunn's early poetry is limited to the muscular will and intellect that run through the shielded icons of the soldier and the motorcyclist. But 'Flooded Meadows' (215) in *Moly* evokes the mystery of natural forces where the poet's shield and human intentions become peripheral:

In sunlight now, after the weeks it rained,
Water has mapped irregular shapes that follow
Between no banks, impassive where it drained
Then stayed to rise and brim from every hollow.

The California sun becomes a recurrent image in *Moly* and gives rise to a new poetic energy that I will discuss in the conclusion of this chapter. In contrast Gunn's early poetry lacks the energy of the sun. Titles such as 'Merlin in the Cave', 'La Prisonnière' and 'In the Tank' tell of a confined, unlit space where human activity is governed by indoor environments. *Moly* is the first glimpse of sunlight in Gunn's poetry and we will see a lot of it throughout his later works. Stephen Romer wrote that 'the bright yellow cover of the original hardback (the joy of acquiring that!) announced the sundrenched poetry within. Of that whole period in the "sixties, in San Francisco", Gunn has said "we moved between ecstasy and understanding",⁷ which is another way of translating 'definition' and 'flow', dreaming and waking.

'Flooded Meadows' conveys a cool wave of ecstasy and climatic transformation within the loose form of a disguised sonnet. The landscape is photographic rather than pictorial: it jumps from one detail to another by the use of spatial verbs such as 'mapped', 'drained' and 'stayed'. The interaction between water (the floods) and land (the meadows) is subtly shown by a sense of unpredictability, as the quatrain is flooded by words that entail absences and inconsistency—'irregular shapes', 'no banks', 'impassive' and 'hollow'. As a

⁷ AGENDA, p. 31.

result, the clear movement of action verbs is set against the vague, to-be-formed natural landscape where the potentiality of spatial transformation is implied but indirectly told. Monosyllabic rhymes such as 'rained' and 'drained', and later on, 'mud' and 'flood' emphasize the force of contradiction and incorporation, mimicking the way floods invade the land and the way they accommodate each other. The poem ends with a sense of suspension, a process of scenic transformation in delay:

Yet definition is suspended, for,
In pools across the level listlessness,
Light answers only light before the breeze,
Cancelling the rutted, weedy, slow brown floor
For the unity of unabsorbed excess. (215)

For the early Gunn, definition is rarely suspended but explicated. It yields chiselled, strong-willed lines such as 'Men manufacture both machine and soul, / And use what they imperfectly control' (39) which display a kind of Poundian clarifying power. 'Flooded Meadows', however, explores a world of 'level listlessness' from which we see that Gunn's former intellectual lucidity is fully disarmed, allowing undefined, 'unabsorbed excess' of thoughts when the poet's mind is visited by the flood of spontaneous, creative currents. Charles Leftwich compares Gunn's water with Isherwood's at the end of *The Single Man*, saying that the poem

evokes[s] with a natural ease of movement, flowing enjambment, a vision of water 'brim[s] from every hollow'. The movement and images are so easy on the pleased sense that one realises, when one does, with a start that this a perfect sonnet—a hybrid of Shakespeare and Petrarchan forms. [...] 'unabsorbed excess' 'cancel[s] the rutted, weedy, slow brown floor' of mundane consciousness, and the pain inherent in it stemming from early experience. What is substituted is a vision of fluid wholeness.⁸

Reflecting Gunn's position as a formalist in hippie San Francisco, the poem celebrates the freedom of fluidity but it is definitely not a free-flowing poem. The verb 'cancelling' delivers a sense of selection against the crowded landscape, giving the undirected flow of waters an intended action. What remains is not 'unabsorbed excess' but 'the unity of unabsorbed excess'. The potential destructiveness of floods is transfigured to an embracing agent, in which its gathering power is extended to create a world of wholeness. The result is that all elements in the poem are unified by this strange, dreamy and unresolved power of nature, taking us back to an equivalent of 'the slow passion / to that deliberate progress' Gunn had articulated in 'Considering the Snail', with its mysterious vision of volition.

⁸ AGENDA, p. 54-5.

One of the key problems arises from reading 'Flooded Meadows', or other poems in *Moly*, is whether it can be described as a LSD poem. Leftwich straightforwardly takes 'Flooded Meadows' as a LSD poem. And indeed, Gunn gives us an explicit relationship between *Moly* and drugs in several interviews: 'nearly all the poems in my fifth book, *Moly*, which I wrote between 1965 and 1970, have some relation to acid.'⁹ The poet himself sets us a specific social background effecting his circuit of creative process. On the one hand, we benefit from this sense of given direction that assists our understanding of poetic consistency and unity in *Moly*. On the other hand, given this inherited mapping, we are exposed to the risk of over-reading or misreading when we set about deciding which poems are written under drugs influence and to assume that such an influence is the overpowering source of the poems of *Moly*.

Looking at some negative reviews of *Moly*, the critical attacks hinge largely on this dilemma of reading. Howard Sergeant wrote that *Moly* seems the product of a 'strangely distorted imagination that can equate a drug-induced start of mind with an escape of "brutishness"¹⁰. In similar vein, Neil Rennie in 'Mystic Wisdom' commented harshly that it is a failure of Gunn's 'intellect to discover and of his imagination to invent. His theme is an escape—an escape from the confines of separateness and distinctiveness, and an escape from another and that divides them. [...] Some poems also describe the perceptions resulted from LSD, but do not transcend the conventional psychedelic imagery.'¹¹ Anne Cluysenaar dismissed the book with unhesitating confidence: 'The poems are statements rather than discoveries, and this is all the more damaging in view of the themes. The LSD and colour-machine poems amount to an admission that the excitements of mere reality are not enough, that as the stimulant wears off "there is little left to shine". The role of the moly is perhaps not what the poems most strive to suggest it is.'¹² The poet Douglas Dunn also disparaged the book: 'There is a failure of technique evident in almost every page of *Moly*. Gunn really needs that magic plant. His rhymes are dull, the rhythms are limiting.'¹³ Acknowledging Gunn's achievement, Richard Kell also expressed his concern about the use of LSD: 'The use of drug to recover Eden is unfortunate. Whatever the dangers of LSD, however (and these are probably moral as well as physical and psychological: the greatest spiritual teachers have never approved shortcuts to Paradise), Gunn has made remarkable poetry out of his

⁹ Scobie's interview of Gunn in 1982, p. 12.

¹⁰ Howard Sergeant, 'Poetry Review', *English*, 20:108, London (Autumn 1971), p. 107, Omnibus Review.

¹¹ Neil Rennie, 'Mystic Wisdom', *London Magazine*, 11:2, London (June-July 1971), pp. 129-132, Omnibus Review.

¹² Anne Cluysenaar, 'New Poetry', *Stand*, 12:4 (1971), pp. 68-75.

¹³ Douglas Dunn, 'Damaged Instruments', *Encounter*, 27:2, London (August 1971), p. 129.

experience.¹⁴ Most critics of *Moly* seem to have a hidden moral agenda against drugs-inspired poetry, suggesting that LSD as a poetic subject is almost too risky for traditional metre and rhyme.

Discussing drugs as inspiration in 'The Poem of Hashish', Baudelaire wrote that 'Man will not escape the fatal thrall of his physical and mental temperament: hashish will be, for a man's familiar impressions and thoughts, a magnifying mirror, but still just a mirror.'¹⁵ Baudelaire's unglamourising attitude towards the use of hashish shows neither contempt nor cynicism. He not only puts the fantasy of drugs into a realistic perspective but also emphasizes the need for introspection and self-examination for any drug taker because hashish works like 'a magnifying mirror' to the mind. A real admirer of Baudelaire, Gunn sounds a less guarded note on LSD, though he also believes that drug taking involved a process of self-discovery rather than a mystical means of forced creativity. Looking back to the period of *Moly*, he wrote:

These were the fullest years of my life, crowded with discovery both inner and outer, as we moved between ecstasy and understanding. It is no longer fashionable to praise LSD, but I have no doubt at all that it has been of the utmost importance to me, both as a man and as a poet. I learned from it, for example, a lot of information about myself that I had somehow blocked from my own view.¹⁶

Gunn's positive stance shows his preparation to embrace risk. Before LSD opens the doors of perception, we need to open ourselves to the self-challenge involved in passing through those doors. We take risks to transcend the banal, routine nature of everyday life, to escape by resisting the oppressive reality through the ajar doors of perception. On this view, drug-takers are real risk-takers, though usually referred to as an inferior group of people 'at risk'. The labelling of 'at risk' often operates to reinforce the marginalized or powerless status of individuals. Deborah Lupton in *Risk* highlights the concealed political ground of the label 'at risk':

Certain social groups have tended to be singled out as 'at risk' of a constellation of harms—children and young people, members of the working class, pregnant women, people who use illicit drugs, the elderly, sex workers, the homeless, the mentally ill. The 'at risk' label tends either to position members of these social groups as particularly vulnerable, passive, powerless or weak, or as particularly dangerous to themselves or others. In both cases,

¹⁴ Richard Kell, 'Recent Poetry', *Critical Survey*, 5:4 (Summer 1972), p. 268.

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *On Wine and Hashish*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus Press, 2002), p. 43.

¹⁶ Gunn, 'My Life Up to Now', *OP*, p. 182.

special attention is directed at these social groups, positioning them in a network of surveillance, monitoring and intervention.¹⁷

Is a Faber poet, who graduated from Cambridge then moved to San Francisco with his gay lover and started taking LSD, putting himself and his poetic talent 'at risk'?¹⁸ Or by putting forward this kind of politically sensitive question, can we escape from Lupton's limited idea of what counts as self-empowering and surveillance?

Even though Gunn's poetry does not suggest that a drug-user is a heroic risk-taker, the art of control displayed in risky forms of behaviour does involve a certain heroism. In 'Risk and Pleasure' Lupton makes the point that 'drinking to excess and taking drugs, speeding in cars, engaging in petty theft and train-surfing are way of adding thrills to life, testing one's boundaries of fear and endurance'.¹⁹ Featherstone in *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (1995) refers to this kind of mastery of risk-taking as the 'heroic life', which involves deeds of virtuosity, courage, adventure, endurance and the capacity to attain distinction and higher purpose through the risk-taking life itself. He says that 'the heroic life is the sphere of danger, violence and the courting of risk whereas the everyday life is a sphere of domesticity, reproduction and care'.²⁰ This idea of risk-taking heroism not only enlightens our understanding of the internal drive of drugs-users but brings us back to the formal, heroic romance of the soldier and the motorcyclist elaborated in early Gunn. But instead of displaying heroic lives as in his early poetry, *Moly* embodies Gunn's pursuit of risk-taking in poetry itself. Even though the word 'risk' only appears once in the title poem 'Moly', it carries its weight throughout the book akin to the way moly plays as a controversial equivalent of LSD.

¹⁷ Deborah Lupton, *Risk* (London and NY: Routledge, 1999), p. 114.

¹⁸ See Donald Davie, 'Thom Gunn' in *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain 1960-1988* (UK: Carcanet, 1989). Davie criticised Gunn's sexuality and 'hospitality to American influences' as one of the reasons for his weakened poetics. 'The liberation or emancipation of homosexuals was only one of several "progressive" causes which agitated poets and their readers in the 1970s. Two others were sexual equality and racial equality. And it is disconcerting to reflect that any poet who wanted in his or her verses to promote such causes would, it seems, have to make the same sacrifice that Gunn made'.

¹⁹ Lupton, p. 157.

²⁰ M Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 55.

On 'Moly'

The opening of 'Moly' (186-7) dwells in the interstices between dreaming and waking, a significant place in Gunn's poetry where we find the ideas of dream and risk combine: 'Nightmare of beasthood, snorting, how to wake. / I woke. What beasthood skin she made me take.' (186) In the first 2 lines Gunn lets us step into the speaker's unconscious with a sense of rhythmic security (the clear-cut rhyme of 'wake' and 'take') that disguises the complexity of thought. 'Nightmare of beasthood' opens up a specific locale of bestial dreams. The dream, however, is interrupted by 'snorting', a rather ambiguous word which suggests both the snort of beasts and the restless dreamer's snort. One of the risks involved in dreaming is exposed by the question (though without a question mark), 'how to wake.' The dreamer in 'Moly' is sealed from the world, struggling to wake up from the nightmare of beasthood. This struggle puts us at the margin of dream and reality, unconsciousness and consciousness, where we are uncertain whether the speaker is speaking of his own dream or recalling the experience from his past dreams. 'Moly' centres on the experience of a waking dream and has been preceded and followed by other poems, such as 'The Wound', 'Touch' and 'The Man with Night Sweats', in which the phantasmagoric character of a waking dream is depicted.

These opening lines of 'Moly' evoke a complex Homeric world of an unwaking dream. The identity of the speaker of the poem is indeterminate, though many critics believe that he is one of Odysseus's companions turned into pigs by Circe.²¹ However I argue that the problem of this speaker's identity is central to the poem and it becomes more complicated as our reading proceeds, like the speaker of Ted Hughes' 'Wodwo' (1967) situated at the centre of identity crisis, asking 'What am I?'²² At this stage we are informed that it is a conscious human mind speaking about the struggle of waking up from the nightmare of beasthood. The struggle, then, seems to be resolved by the instantaneous interruption when the second line opens with a sharp, clear-cut, minimal report: 'I woke'. This interruption (waking up)

²¹ 'The title poem, spoken by one of Circe's pigs in a slightly comic tone' in John Fuller, 'Acid-Head Allegories', *Listener*, 85:2191, London (25 March 1971), p. 381, Omnibus Review. And also, "Moly" itself, the monologue of one of Circe's pigs, beginning as little more than a series of grunts, acquires as it develops the precision and symmetry of a sequence of epigrams' in Clive Wilmer, 'On New Poetry', *Spectator* 226:7457 (29 May 1971), p. 743.

²² Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 87.

separates two states of mind and what follows is a self-reflection of the speaker as he questioning his horrific self-entanglement.

The meaning of 'I woke' is also questionable because what the speaker wakes up to is a world of magic and disguise in which his human form is animalised. Gunn precisely captures this uncanny experience of waking up into an animal body by reiterating 'beasthood' twice, each time with a different emphasis. 'Nightmare of beasthood' belongs to the dream world, an internal human reality in the speaker's psyche, whilst the 'beasthood skin' indicates an external reality where the dream of beasthood is realised on his animalistic skin. Though the two occurrences of 'beasthood' are lexically identical, they operate in two contrasted states of mind. Both lines embody the voice of the speaker but in different contexts: the first line stresses the psychological question of 'how to wake' but is not yet formed as an utterance, whereas the second line is delivered as a question, demonstrating a sense of emergency and transformation. The exploration of dualistic poles shown in these first two lines—the mental against the physical, dreaming against waking, thoughts against utterance—is integral to 'Moly', a poem that negotiates the dualism of animality and humanity.

The poem then moves on to the description of various kinds of beasthood, displaying a vivid gallery of non-violent bestiality:

Leathery toad that ruts for days on end,
Or cringing dribbling dog, man's servile friend,

Or cat that prettily pounces on its meat,
Tortures it hours, then does not care to eat

The straightforward rhymes in each pair of couplets not only create a 'fearful symmetry', but also insist on a transparent clarity in which the sheer bestiality of toad, dog and cat is pictured. As Clive Wilmer points out, Gunn displays an 'alertness of mind and sense [that] shapes the poems themselves. Though the verse is only incidentally mimetic, the forms used are forms of conscious intelligence, their movement informed, but not dominated, by the energies they describe.'²³ The energy in 'Moly' runs close to madness, as we see in the following list of random beasts, aiming towards a collection of the whole *sense* of animality: 'Parrot, moth, shark, wolf, crocodile, ass, flea. / What germs, what jostling mobs there were in me.' The effect is a powerful voice clinging onto the meaning of random names, a sense of desperation pushing towards the edge of madness. The speaker characterizes bestiality as

²³ Clive Wilmer, 'On New Poetry', *Spectator* 226:7457 (29 May 1971), p. 742.

'jostling mobs', terms which carry a strong sense of mutiny and disorder. The phrase 'in me' suggests the speaker's embodiment or incorporation of beasthood—is set against the idea of the hidden humanity in 'Oh a man's flesh already is in mine.'

In 'Moly', the animal/human skin becomes the site of an identity conflict when the speaker observes its (or his) own skin: 'These seem like bristles, and the hide is tough.' Hiding and posing are two similar forces running throughout Gunn's work. While his early poetry dwells on the pose of different personae which help him create an impersonating voice from the impersonal 'I', the idea of hiding for Gunn is strongly allied with the sensuality of skin. Portraying sexual intercourse in the image of the centaur in 'Tom-Dobbin' in *Moly*, Gunn writes 'skin melting downward into hide' (200). Or in 'Touch' (1967), a lover finds his 'skin slightly/ numb with the restraint/ of habits, the patina of self' (168). It is an armour that protects by hiding our skin, and as a result, the hiding shows (or reveals) the raw animality in us (with the animal skin on us). 'Moly' dwells relentlessly the unresolved doubleness: the fact that a clear human consciousness is trapped in the pig's body. This sheer madness of metamorphosis recalls Bottom in *The Midsummer Night Dream* and Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The force of Gunn's verse derives from its power to create the speaker's disturbing and possessed voice:

Like ham, streaked. I am gross—grey, gross, flap-eared.

The pale-lashed eyes my only human feature.
My teeth tear, tear. I am the snouted creature

That bites through anything, root, wire, or can.
If I was not afraid I'd eat a man.

Gunn's intention to emphasize the speaker's physical degradation somehow twists positive self-affirmation into a sense of irredeemable desperation. The verse becomes more angular sounding due to the awkward placing of punctuation and broken syntactical patterns. The pairing of 'human feature' and 'snouted creature' is disconcerting and heartbreaking. It presents the conflict between animality and humanity looming in the background of the poem. In-between them Gunn puts a haunting visualization of 'My teeth tear, tear', creating a sense of emergency, an out-of-control state of mind, that drives the speaker to 'bite through anything'. The recoil from cannibalism brings us back to the speaker's humanity, and this vertiginous swing between animal and human, release and control, is a powerful pendulum in reading of 'Moly'. We travel in and out of the duality of human mind/swine head and human body/swine skin. Gunn summarizes the speaker's problematic body in two lines: 'Oh a man's flesh already is in mine. / Hand and foot poised for risk. Buried in swine.' The disturbed

boundary between human and animal body is not an isolated incident in Gunn's poetry. In 'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy' in *The Sense of Movement*, Gunn describes the duplicity of a young werewolf, asking 'how to guess he hides in that firm tissue / Seeds of division?' (61) But in 'Moly', Gunn pushes the idea of the human body at risk to the margin of both morality and mortality. 'A man's flesh buried in swine' is one of the magical moments in Gunn that challenges our everyday conceptions about the body and the intellect. Like the speaker's 'Hand and foot poised for risk', the line risks displacing the human itself. Gunn's poetry, at its best, always shows an elegant poise of risk in form and content. Like the unstoppable Odysseus on the way to Circe's stone-built sties to save his comrades, Gunn's poems insist on the idea of not having 'the risk diminished.' (103)

The speed of 'Moly' accelerates when the speaker says, 'I root and root, you think that it is greed, / It is, but I seek out a plant I need.' Up to this point in the poem, Gunn's speaker seems to possess the knowledge of moly. The action of seeking the plant, therefore, is a conscious search, quite unlike the Homeric story in which Hermes gave Odysseus a sprig of moly, a herb 'of great virtue' that would make him immune to Circe's spells. It is this unrelenting search for moly, driven by the rhyme 'greed' and 'need', that gives the poem a high voltage of urgency and emancipation. The voltage reaches its highest point in the invocation of gods: 'Direct me gods, whose changes are all holy, / To where it flickers deep in grass, the moly'. In *The Odyssey*, moly is a holy plant untouchable by mortals:

This said, he gave his Antidote to me,
Which from the earth he pluckt, and told me all
The vertue of it, with what Deities call
The name it beares—and Moly they impose
For name to it. The roote is hard to loose
From hold of earth by mortals, but Gods' power
Can all things do. Tis blacke, but beares a flower
As white as milke.²⁴

Like the Buddhist image of the white lotus growing from dark, foul mud, the shape and colour of moly itself tells of a seductive story of transcendence. Richard Kell points out that 'animality is to be humanized, not suppressed: this, perhaps, is the meaning of the "protection" afforded by the moly, whose white bloom grows from black root like the spiritual from the bestial.'²⁵ If moly is the plant of virtue that protects Odysseus from Circe's spell, it is also, in Gunn's words, 'Cool flesh of magic', terms that keep the protective plant fleshy. It is this aspect of magic and emphasis on flesh, rather than the didactic force of

²⁴ George Chapman, *Chapman's Homer* ed. Allardyce Nicoll (USA: Princeton, Oxford, 1956), p. 179.

²⁵ Richard Kell, 'Recent Poetry', *Critical Survey*, 5:4 (Summer 1972), p. 268.

morality, that makes 'Moly' a powerfully mysterious poem. Gunn gives us a useful note on magic and moly:

It is magic, but if magic transforms us or keeps us proof against transformation, then it enters everybody's life. Magic is not completely separate from ordinary processes: it works by strengthening or inhibiting an impulse in us, even if that impulse is something we didn't recognize as being there. We can all take on the features of pigs—or what humans interpret as those features—we all have in us the germs of the brutal, greedy, and dull. And we can all avoid becoming pigs, though to do so we must be wily and self-aware.²⁶

Moly opens with the magical and paternal poem 'Rites of Passage' (185) about a man transforming into a horse. The poem records the slow process of transformation ('Something is taking place'), putting stresses on the dialectics of skin ('Skin that was damp and fair / Is barklike and, feel, rough.') and the protean meaning of light ('My blood, it is like light'). The metamorphosis motif and key elements of skin and light are developed throughout the book as in 'Tom-Dobbin' (200-1) in which two men are depicted as the mythical centaur intermingled with each other's bodies in orgasm ('light is in the pupil / luminous seed'). However, Gunn also explores the possibility of countering metamorphosis in the title poem 'Moly'. 'From this fat dungeon I could rise to skin / And human title, putting pig within.' (187) Underlining the swine's humanity, Gunn suggests that all of us could be Circe's pigs if we are not conscious of our own brutality and stupidity. We need moly not because of the animal in us, but because of our humanness. *Moly*, therefore, is a book of metamorphosis but also is a book about resisting metamorphosis.

The mythical moly, as Gunn wrote, 'can help us to know our own potential for change: even though we are in the power of Circe or of time, we do not have to become pigs, we do not have to be unmanned, we are as free to make and unmake ourselves as we were at the age of ten.'²⁷ Gunn's secularism works against the idea of sex, excess and drugs that the poet is supposed to celebrate in the period. Justin Quinn points out that 'in this light the poems appear to be indulging in all the above pleasure of change while simultaneously looking for escape from them.'²⁸ Thus much of the pleasure of reading *Moly* comes from this conflict and marriage of control and liberation, or in Gunn's words, 'the passion for definition and the passion for flow'.²⁹ After he takes us through the 'foul rag-and-bone shop' of the speaker's dilemma, the poem returns to the fluid mood of the dream world, where dreaming

²⁶ 'Picture Odysseus...' in *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* (Spring 1972), p. [1].

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Justin Quinn, 'Thom Gunn's American Dispersals' in *ENGLISH*, 52:204, London (Autumn 2003), p. 226.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

and waking are inseparably intimate to each other. 'Dreaming the flower I have never seen' is an exhilarating ending that dwells between the margin of illusion and reality. It brings back the memory of the dreams that start the poem and conjures the idea of a mythical flower that only exists when we dream of its existence. In this sense our trust in dreams empowers the drive of imagination; it enables us to see what cannot be seen, like moly.

3

LSD & The Pastoral

Pastoral is the poetry of illusion: the Golden Age is the historiography of wish-fulfilment.³⁰

— Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance*

Among other things Gunn's LSD poems offer another version of pastoral. Writing on Ginsberg, Gunn stresses that 'the main sources of his visions are drugs and dreams, in fact, and his poetry makes a specific and unusual emphasis on such sources.'³¹ Drugs and dreams are also driving forces in Gunn's work at this time. Overshadowed by the compelling influence of Ginsberg, Gunn succeeded in writing his own unique pastoral poems such as 'The Fair in the Woods', which are utterly unlike 'Wales Visitation' and other drug-pastoral poems of Ginsberg. In 'Wales Visitation', Ginsberg gives us a record of taking LSD on a Welsh mountainside, where he sees 'White fog lifting & falling'.³² With a kind of Whitmanque expansiveness, the poem not only travels through the classic landscape of English countryside depicted by Blake and Wordsworth but gives us the quotidian presence of modernization:

Remember 160 miles from London's symmetrical throned tower
& network of TV pictures flashing bearded your Self
the lambs on the tree-nooked hillside this day bleating
heard in Blake's old ear, & the silent thought of Wordsworth in eld
Stillness
clouds passing through skeleton arches of Tintern Abbey—

³⁰ Harry Levin, 'Prehistory' in *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (London, Bloomington, 1970), p. 9.

³¹ Thom Gunn, 'A Record: Allen Ginsberg's Poetry' (1989) in *SL*, p. 108.

³² Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* (USA: HarperPerennial, 1984), p. 480.

Ginsberg's pastoral landscape has direct references to his specific locality and time but sceptically juxtaposes the ideal past with the present degeneration. The pastoral elements such as 'the lambs' and 'the tree-nooked hillside' are put against the presence of 'London's symmetrical throned tower'. However, In 'The Fair in the Woods' (209-210), Gunn creates an ideal pastoral setting independent of any modern and geographical reference. He pictures the serene landscape of countryside where the woodsmen dwell and 'close the day', as if the poem were an episode in Sidney's *Arcadia*:

The woodsmen blow their horns, and close the day,
Grouped by some logs. The buckskins they are in
Merge with ground's russet and with tree-trunk's grey,
And through the colour of the body's skin
Shift borrowings out of nearby birch and clay. (209)

This could not be more different to Ginsberg. The poem insists on a sense of retreat from human activity at dusk, as the rhyme of 'day', 'grey' and 'clay' captures the release of breath and pictures a kind of natural harmony in which the day responds to its twilight colour and the sun sinking in the clayish horizon. There is also a sense of primitive joy and simplicity in 'Grouped by some logs', with the implication that the woodsmen are going to light a fire, huddling in the warming flame against the cool, darkening night. The human body seems to be at home in the wild nature not only in the way the woodsmen's buckskins 'merge with the ground's russet and with tree-trunk's grey', but also the way their 'colour of the body's skin/ Shift borrowings out of nearby birch and clay.'

The poem moves on to the mysterious announcement that 'a mounted angel came and went / Sturdily pacing through the trees and crowds'. Gunn's description is reminiscent of Renaissance classical pastoral paintings in which we see cherubs in forests embracing pristine lights and looking down from dense tree boughs, flooding with innocent smiles and warmth: 'Children of light, all different, through the fair, / Pulsing among the pulsing trunks. And they, / The danglers, ripened in the brilliant air.' What is underneath the boughs is 'The whole speed-family' in glee enjoying the dancer's movement: 'The whole speed-family in a half round clapped...They raced toward stillness till they overlapped'. Gunn's portrayal of the carnivalesque brings the communal (almost ceremonial) use of LSD in line with the trouble-free world of *Arcadia*, where human and nature together makes joy. The pastoral landscape recalls Sir Philip Sidney's exclamative songs from *Arcadia*: 'O sweet woods, the delight of

³³ Ibid.

solitariness! / O how much I do like your solitariness!³⁴ Though Gunn's woods in 'The Fair in the Woods' lack both desolation of 'Misanthropos' and solitariness of Sidney, it is loaded with a sense of purity in nature. However, unlike Sidney's singular pursuit of the pastoral paradise, Gunn's pastoral landscape works at the symbolic level because it is also the 'Landscape of acid'. Very often in *Moly* Gunn shows us his athletic ability to sharpen the detail of physical world by putting it through the lens of abstraction. An example in 'The Fair in the Woods' there is the breathtaking encounter with a commonplace experience such as how the lights fall onto the ground:

Landscape of acid:
 where on fern and mound
 The lights fragmented by the roofing bough
 Throbbled outward, joining over broken ground
 To one long dazzling burst; as even now
 Horn closes over horn into one sound. (210)

The landscape of acid is charged with the energy of mysteriousness but Gunn's descriptive abstraction is never humanly abstract. The abstract idea of the 'fragmented' lights is the result of 'the roofing bough' that 'Throbbled outward'. 'Throbbled' captures the pulsing of human heart just as 'the roofing bough' recalls human architecture. The pattern on the ground, therefore, is simply 'broken' by the shadows of boughs above; it is not totally out of place since it joins 'one long dazzling burst', the source of light.

While 'The Fair in the Woods' recreates San Rafael countryside in the image of Edenic Renaissance pastoral, 'To Natty Bumppo' (212) takes off from Leatherstocking novels of J. Fenimore Cooper and explores the possibility of the discovery of the New World and The Golden Age. The poem begins with the eyes catching a glimpse of the new continent:

The grey eyes watchful and a lightened hand.
 The ruder territory opening up
 Fills with discovery: unoutlined land
 With which familiar places overlap.

The landscape and figures in the open are clearly related to the Renaissance woodsmen in 'The Fair in the Woods'. Continental discovery in the poem can be read as a metaphor of mental discovery.³⁵ 'By so incorporating the things of the New World you can realize a new

³⁴ Sir Philip Sidney, *Arcadia* (1598) in *The Major Works* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

³⁵ Opening up new territories in the mind was an obsessive trend in mid-60s as investments in Zen and other oriental mysticism are salient in the poetry of Snyder and Ginsberg.

world of poetry,³⁶ Gunn wrote on William Carlos Williams's 'new world'. The idea of undiminishing 'hold' on perception is central to *Moly*. The 'unoutlined' experience Gunn risks by experimenting with LSD makes *Moly* a daring book of self-discovery. In 'My Life up to Now' he quotes the ending lines of 'To Natty Bumppo' and suggests that drug experiences two centuries on from the time of Bumppo recuperate something of the excitement of the discovery of the New World:

San Francisco in mid-1965 was only a little behind London in the optimism department and was prepared to go much further. It was the time, after all, not only of the Beatles but of LSD as well. Raying out from the private there was a public excitement at the new territories that were being opened up in the mind. Golden Gate Park, the scene of so many mass trips and rock concerts, seemed like: 'The first field of a glistening continent/ Each found by trusting Eden in the human.'³⁷

Most LSD poems in *Moly* come out as a record of social experiences in Gunn's life, a strong sense of community and friendships that becomes indispensable in his later poetry. Poems such as 'Listening to Jefferson Airplane: at the Polo Grounds, Golden Gate Park' and 'At the Centre: LSD, Folsom Street' not only serve as a record of discovery fuelled by LSD, but also as Gunn said, 'could be seen as a history of San Francisco from 1965-9, or as a personal memoir of myself during those years.'³⁸ Gunn's comments on Gray Snyder at this time reflect his own poetic temperaments: 'He is interested not in the unique experience but in the shared or sharable experience, the successive awakenings to wonder, to awareness and to sympathy.'³⁹ As suggested by the closing line 'Each found by trusting Eden in the human', Gunn's 'sniff of the real' is robustly rooted in this sense of treasured communal life. Compared to Baudelaire, Gunn is more at ease with the salutary aspect of LSD.⁴⁰ *Moly* is a book about drugs but also a new version of solidarity. It is not about solitary indulgence. Instead, it is a book populated with dedications, people, and real events. Gunn celebrates LSD as a useful and communal drug if taken in careful doses. With heterodox defiance it goes against stereotypical accounts of drug experience, which regard it as self-destructive and alienating.

³⁶ Gunn, 'A New World: The Poetry of William Carlos Williams' (1965) in *OP*, p. 23.

³⁷ *OP*, p. 81

³⁸ *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, p. 48.

³⁹ *OP*, p. 45.

⁴⁰ In 'On Wine and Hashish', Baudelaire contrasts the different versions of sociability offered by wine and drugs, taking a negative view of the latter: 'Wine elevates the will, hashish annihilates it. Wine is a physical aid, hashish a weapon for the suicidal. Wine makes one good and outgoing. Hashish is isolating. One is hard-working, so to speak, the other is essentially idle. [...] Hashish belongs to the class of solitary joys; it is made for wretched idlers. Wine is useful, it produces results that will bear fruit. Hashish is useless and dangerous.' (Charles Baudelaire, *On Wine and Hashish* (London: Hesperus, 2002), p. 27.)

'Each found by trusting Eden in the human' also carries another meaning. Bridging the marginalized experience of LSD with the pastoral ideal, Gunn puts the turbulent sixties into the context of The Golden Age. Octavio Paz argued that 'drugs take us back to the center of the universe, the point of intersection of all the world's paths, and the place where all contradictions are reconciled. Man returns, so to speak, to his original state of innocence.'⁴¹ In *Moly* the result is captured in curious, powerful poems such as 'Three', 'The Garden of the Gods' and 'Grasses' in which the harmonic pastoral world is juxtaposed with the abstract world of LSD to create a dream world where 'the constant vision of the race' (213) is to be found. Gunn's interest in the pastoral is strongly influenced by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets such as Shakespeare, Johnson and Marvell. In his review 'Enmeshed with Time' (1991) of Emrys Jones' *New Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse* (1991), Gunn points out the originating impulse of the sixteenth-century poets is that they 'still considered verse a natural medium for the recording truths, whether practical or moral':⁴²

The pressure to record has always been the starting point of poetry, now as four hundred years ago, and if we disregard the primitive mnemonic urgency that underlies all writing, we do so at our cost. It was particularly visible in a century in which English poetry had to, if not create itself, create itself afresh.⁴³

Moly takes the similar flight of recording in the way it combines new cultural experience of drug taking into the established sixteenth-century forms.

In 'A Mirror for Poets' from *Fighting Terms* offers us a useful link to Gunn's investment in the pastoral. The poem explores the 'violent time' of Tudor England when 'the act of thought perceived its error' (24) and how it pushes the collective poetic imagination to pursue the idea of Arcadia, providing us a key to understand Gunn's pastoral preoccupation in *Moly*:

In this society the boundaries met
Of life and life, at danger; with no space
Being left between, except where might be set
That mathematical point whose time and place
Could not exist. Yet at this point they found
Arcadia, a fruitful permanent land.

In terms of geography, Arcadia is situated in the mountainous hinterland of the Peloponnesian Peninsula and is celebrated in the Homeric hymn to Pan, the 'tutelary god of

⁴¹ Octavio Paz, *Alternating Current* trans. Helen R. Lane (London: Wildwood House, 1974), p. 77.

⁴² *SL*, p. 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

its singing herdsmen, as a land of many springs and the mother of flocks.⁴⁴ It is also a literary construction, an imaginary topography where 'the currents of myth and empirical reality flow one into another'.⁴⁵ Arcadia, therefore, exists at the margin of imagination and reality, dream and wakefulness. It is a dream world, 'a fruitful permanent land' where its existence promises the idea of simplicity and innocence. Bryan Loughrey argues that 'the involvement of pastoral with classical mythology helped forge its association with the myth of the Golden Age, an elegiac lament for a lost age of innocence which shares many of the characteristics of the Christian idea of Eden.'⁴⁶ Pastoral is a complicated and long established literary genre which is constantly shaped by 'pastoral poets' and the demand of critics. It can be traced back to Hesiod's account in 8th century BC in which he describes 'the deathless Gods who dwell on Olympus...lived without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief.'⁴⁷ The dreamy, paradisaical landscape of Arcadia was richly developed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where an elaborate poetic version of 'The Golden Age' was first developed, and to have a huge impact on Renaissance verse: 'Then sprang up first the golden age, which of its selfe maintained, / The truth and right of everything unforst and uncontrainde.'⁴⁸ Ovid's portrayal of the perfect landscapes clear of human interference in The Golden Age—a world of 'loftie Pynetree', 'No horne nor trumpet', 'no sword nor helmet, 'The fertile earth... untoucht of spade or plough'⁴⁹—lies behind the escapist or Utopian elements of the pastoral genre. The return to an 'original' pastoral beauty is founded on this cultural myth of primal harmony with nature, or in Christian sense, the time before the Fall.

In 'A Mirror for Poets', Gunn suggests that the yearning for Arcadia tends to grow keener in time of chaos because the pastoral genre offers both a model for 'coherence in society' and poetic retreat. Renato Poggioli argues that

the psychological root of the pastoral is a double longing after innocence and happiness, to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration but merely through a retreat. By withdrawing, not from the world, but from 'the world', pastoral man tries to achieve a new life in imitation of the good shepherds of herds, rather than of the Good Shepherd of the Soul.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Harry Levin, 'Prehistory' in *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (London, Bloomington, 1970), p. 6.

⁴⁵ Bryan Loughrey, 'Introduction' in *A Case Book: The Pastoral Mode* (HK: Macmillan, 1984), p. 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hesiod, *Works and Days* (8th century BC), quoted by Harry Levin, 'Prehistory' in *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (London, Bloomington, 1970), p. 9.

⁴⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans, Arthur Golding (1567) in W. H. D. Rouse, ed. *Shakespeare's Ovid* (London, 1961), p. 23, l. 102-118.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral Ideal* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 1.

This sense of retreat gives the energy of release in Gunn's 'Grasses' (216), where we find the speaker and his friends are at ease with idleness. They 'sit / High on a fort' and 'watch the restless grasses lapping it.' Observant, silent and contented, the speaker of 'Grasses' seems to be free of social roles. He is neither the city dweller of 'A Map of the City', nor the traveller of 'Flying above California'. Rather he looks like 'the Good Shepherd of the Soul', not tending herds but contemplating the supple movement of grasses:

Each dulling green, keen, streaky blade of grass
Leans to one body when the breezes start:
A one-time pathway flickers as they pass,
Where paler toward the root the quick ranks part.

The grasses quiver, rising from below.
I wait on warm rough concrete, I have time.
They round off all the lower steps, and blow
Like lights on bended water as they climb.

Like Wordsworth's daffodils, Gunn emphasizes the bodily energy of vegetation to create an ecstatic dance of grasses. There is a sense of release in the movement of grasses that probably reflects the speaker's life. 'I wait on warm rough concrete, I have time' insists on the importance of indolence and escapism.

Ginsberg's grass in 'Wales Visitation' however is a medium of transcendental feelings:

The length of all England, valley upon valley under Heaven's ocean
 tonned with cloud-hang,
 —Heaven balanced on a grassblade.
Roar of the mountain wind slow, sigh of the body,
One Being on the mountainside stirring gently⁵¹

Ginsberg sings the scale of things, the 'Exquisite scales trembling everywhere in balance',⁵² with a visionary grandeur recalling Blake ('to see a world in a grain of sand / heaven in a wild flower'⁵³). Gunn, however, is more interested in the locality of one thing ('Each dulling green, keen, streaky blade of grass'). Donald Hall observes that 'if he is a poet of thought, his ideas express themselves in poetry's ethic of condensation and corrosive self-cancellation: Gunn's ideas occupy poetry not philosophy. The lines of Gunn's verse, with their pauses and contradictions, word crossing out word, express and withhold in accurate measure.'⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ginsberg, p. 481.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence' in *The Complete Poems* ed. W. H. Stevenson, (Hong Kong: Norton, Longman, 1972).

⁵⁴ Donald Hall's essay on Gunn in 'Thom Gunn at Sixty', *PN Review* 16:2 (1989), p. 29.

Instead of exhausting protean details as Ginsberg does, Gunn in 'Grasses' is keener on concentration, the focus on 'warm rough concrete' and later in the poem, the sound of 'a friend's harmonica':

From some dark passage in the abandoned fort,
I hear a friend's harmonica—withdrawn sound,
A long whine drawling after several short...
The spiky body mounting from the ground.

Bob Dylan had given the harmonica a new currency and here the harmonica is the modern equivalent of the Arcadian shepherd's pipe ('harmonica' remembers 'harmony'). Gunn injects the landscape with the nostalgia associated with the mysterious 'dark passage' and 'the abandoned fort', the sense of loss is intensified by the thin sound of harmonica. Gunn's 'withdrawn sound' in 'Grasses' evokes longings for a world of rural simplicity away from the perspective of a past-sophisticated environment. Its effect is comparable to the way most pastoral poetry expresses a 'dark passage' of nostalgia in which 'withdrawn' emotions are recollected. The poem aims at convincing us that the power of nostalgia can sharpen our senses, as it ends unendingly with the lingering music of the harmonica:

A wail uneven all the afternoon,
Thin, slow, no noise of tramping nor of dance.
It is the sound, half tuneless and half tune,
With which the scattered details make advance. (216)

The stanza stems the outflow of nostalgia by the use of tight rhymes 'noon', 'tune' and 'dance', 'advance'. But the poem does 'advance' to seek meanings, out of 'the scattered details' in the void, just as the 'half tuneless and half tune' sound of the harmonica reverberates in the vacant field of grasses. Gunn's 'Grasses' lingers in the pastoral dream world; it suppresses the dread of nostalgia by expressing it. At the centre is a strong sense of loss, a longing for retreat. As Poggioli points out 'pastoral poetry makes more poignant and real the dream it wishes to convey when the retreat is not a lasting but a passing experience, acting as a pause in the process of living, as a breathing spell from the fever and anguish of being.'⁵⁵ Even though the poem expresses a nostalgic sense of nature, it also evokes a robust, sharply focussed sense of modern realities—the 'concrete', the 'harmonica' and the Frost-like 'half tuneless and half tune'.

Gunn explores this pastoral dilemma in his short essay 'Writing a Poem', a coda to the eloquent poem 'Three' in *Moly*. He recalls that he was at this time haunted by an

⁵⁵ Poggioli, p. 8.

association of ideas: 'trust, openness, acceptance, innocence'⁵⁶ but found it impossible to articulate them into poetry. 'In what sense might you say that innocence can be repossessed', Gunn wondered. The question underlies the subliminal Romantic dimension in Gunn's work at this time. It was Blake and Wordsworth who first sponsored the conspiracy of the child, nature and innocence in English poetry. It is just this nexus that Gunn explores in 'Three', a powerful autobiographical poem which investigates a modern conjunction of childhood, the pastoral and primitive. Unlike most pastoral poems it focuses on adult nakedness with all the potentially embarrassing risk that brings.

'Three' (195-6) is set somewhere along the California coastline facing the Pacific on 'a narrow, partly-sheltered beach.' It confronts physical nakedness in the first line: 'All three are bare', as if the poem itself is prepared to bare feelings. Gunn starts with a portrayal of the father, conventionally regarded as the head of a family, but the father figure has a rather unconventional, feminine appearance of 'Long body, then long hair, / Matted like rainy bracken, to his shoulders.' We then get not a classic depiction of secluded and unpolluted Pacific coastline, but something more dangerous and dynamic:

The pull and risk
Of the Pacific's touch is yet with him:
He kicked and felt it brisk,
Its cold live sinews tugging at each limb.

The Pacific Ocean is described as a physical 'touch', in line with the sense of touch as pivotal in Gunn's poetry. The verbs 'pull', 'touch' and 'tugging' give the ocean's 'cold live sinews' an intensely physical relation to the kicking swimmer. The naked father of 'Three' is haunted by 'the Pacific's touch': 'Drying his loins, he grins to notice how, / Struck helpless with the chill, / His cock hangs tiny and withdrawn there now.' Gunn captures a strange moment when sex and the male body retreat from 'the chill' of the ocean and become 'helpless'. The withdrawal of the body after exposing to risk is everywhere in Gunn's use of icons, such as the armour of the soldier, the leather gear of the motorcyclist and 'the sheathed bodies' (199) of wave-riders. The 'tiny' and 'withdrawn' cock suggests a sense of self-defensive comfort in which the body protects itself by being submissive to new environment; it is armoured and responsive to temperature change (or unarmoured, exposed and vulnerable). The father's 'grin' also suggests that he is self-conscious but cheerfully un-embarrassed by exposing his loins. There is a hint of phallic assertiveness about this even as the poet focuses on his shrunken cock.

⁵⁶ OP, p. 151.

The mother, too, has not completely abandoned herself under the sun. Seeking a less exposed site, she 'lies back on the hot round stones' with her 'eyes half-closed'. There is a sense of tension on her body:

Hard bone, firm skin,
She holds her breasts and belly up, now dry,
Striped white where clothes have been,
To the heat that sponsors all heat, from the sky.

'Hard bone, firm skin', the 'striped white' left on her semi-naked body—all are signs of withdrawal from the naked sun. There is a sense of joyful nakedness in the way she does not protect her breasts and lets them bare to the sun, revealing where clothes are. The poem tells a story of human nakedness, but at the same time questions the possibility of totally innocent nakedness, both in body and mind. Even though the poem is set under the sun about a naked family, nothing important seems to happen around the parents. It ends with the last family member, the 'three-year' old son, 'brown all over' and 'rapt in endless play'. The line ('His three-year nakedness is everyday') reminds us of Novalis's Romantic creed 'Wo Kinder sind da ist ein goldnes Zeitalter'⁵⁷ (Where children are, there is a Golden Age). Reading Gunn's 'Three' is like meeting this little boy in real life. Gunn prosaic magic invites us to imagine literal experience. Nevertheless, in this beautifully exposed and exposing study of nakedness, child and adults experience their nakedness and their bodies differently: 'His body which is him', 'his three-year nakedness is everyday.' At the end of 'Three' is a moment 'connected with the processes of magic' (OP 152) like Odysseus meeting Hermes. The boy, Gunn says:

Runs up to me:
Hi there hi there, he shrills, yet will not stop,
For though continually
Accepting everything his play turns up

He still leaves it
And comes back to that pebble-warmed recess
In which the parents sit,
At watch, who had to learn their nakedness. (196)

With continuing enjambments the poem relaxes to imitate the pleasure and unpredictability of child's play. The act of the child reaching out towards the poet interestingly coincides with Gunn's account of searching for 'the correct incantation' in 'Three':

⁵⁷ Novalis, *Gesamelte Werke* ed. Carl Seelig (Zürich, 1945), II, 35 (Fragmente, 97), quoted in Levin, p. 4.

When I came to write the poem, it was all-important that I should be true to those feelings—even, paradoxically, at the risk of distorting the experience. And so for me the act of writing is an exploration, a reaching out, an act of trusting search for the correct incantation that will return me certain feelings whenever I want them.⁵⁸

The child reaching out and saying 'Hi there hi there' is also an act of trust in a stranger, completely defenceless ('naked') but self-contained, as in 'His body which is him'. 'To learn their nakedness' echoes 'Each found by trusting Eden in the human' and Wordsworth's 'The Child is father of the Man'.⁵⁹ 'Rapt in endless play' might recall 'as if his whole vocation / were endless imitation'⁶⁰ in Wordsworth's 'Ode to the Intimations of Immortality'.

'The retreat into childhood', Peter Marinelli argues, 'is essentially a Romantic innovation based on the notion that a clear natural vision of the child is somehow superior to that of the man.'⁶¹ The earliest age of mankind is usually associated with the verdure of springtime and purity, with the spontaneity of childhood, and often with the awakening of love. The bliss of childhood looms large in 'Three' both for the boy and the parents. They bathe nakedly with a sense of privileged irresponsibility and freedom from the domination of duty and reality. Gunn's poem represents a privileged encounter with an Edenic-like innocence, but it is firmly anchored in his own adult version of the American family on a California beach. If this almost photographic epiphany depends on the work of William Carlos Williams and other American poets, it is also aligned to the tough-minded empiricism of his English 'Movement' background and the sheath of metrical form and rhyme. If this is a song of innocence, it is by the same token a 'sturdy' song of experience.

4

LSD & Escapism

The bridge between the pastoral and LSD opens up a world of escapism seeking for recovery of Arcadia and The Golden Age. Another aspect of Gunn's LSD poems is the connection to the 'processes of magic'. LSD works like a modern version of moly that brings us and keeps us from transformation. 'It is magic', Gunn says of LSD, 'but if magic transforms

⁵⁸ OP, p. 152.

⁵⁹ Wordsworth, 'My Heart Leaps Up' in *Selected Poetry* ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: OUP, 2004)

⁶⁰ Wordsworth, 'Ode to the Intimations of Immortality'.

⁶¹ Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (UK: Methuen, 1971), p. 77.

us or keeps us proof against transformation, then it enters everybody's life.'⁶² Unlike the religious slant Ginsberg injects into his drugs poems, Gunn is more interested in the secularism of LSD. Poems such as 'At the Centre' and 'Being Born' work as a force of 'reaching out into the unexplained areas of the mind, in which the air is too thickly primitive or too fine for us to live continually.'⁶³ Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor in *Escape Attempts* (1992) point out that LSD helps explore the inner theatre of the mind and it triggers the mental magic of fantasy that 'is an escape from reality and paradoxically, also a support from that reality.'⁶⁴ Their argument established a convincing link between drugs and escape:

The drug culture is saturated with the message of alternative realities. In the various versions found in guru figures like Leary, the hippie's ideology, the identification with Eastern mysticism, the promises are extreme and marvellous: a complete rejection of formal work values, a destruction of the bonds of linearity and time, a discovery of the self, a cosmic identification with the universe.⁶⁵

According to this view LSD possesses the magic of escapism similar to ego loss and mystical insight. It provides a glimpse of an alternative reality or enhances the existing one. Aldous Huxley in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) opens with an epigraph from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.'⁶⁶ For Huxley, mescaline, a potent hallucinogen having similar effects to LSD, is a valuable key to open the doors of perception:

As a rule the mescaline taker discovers an inner world as manifestly a datum, as self-evidently infinite and holy, as that transfigured outer world which I had seen with my eyes open. [...] What it had allowed me to perceive, inside, was not the Dharma-Body in images, but my own mind; not archetypal Suchness, but a set of symbols—in other worlds, a homemade substitute for Suchness.⁶⁷

LSD, according to the *OED*, is not only mind-altering ('producing mood changes or giving a sense of heightened awareness') and mind-expanding ('giving a sense of broader awareness'), it is also, according to Cohen and Taylor, 'mind-scaping', in the sense that it creates a

⁶² Gunn, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, p. 47.

⁶³ *OP*, p. 152.

⁶⁴ Stanley Cohen & Laurie Taylor, *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life* (2nd Ed.). (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 88.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁶⁶ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell* (GB: Flamingo, 1994)

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

landscape for escape in the mind which 'inhibits the function of the normal self and its ordinary brain activity, thus permitting the "other world" to rise into consciousness.'⁶⁸

Combined with magic, dream and 'open' perception, 'At the Centre' (220-1) creates a world of its own where the outflow of hallucinogenic visions is balanced against Gunn's transparency of style.⁶⁹ This dialectical poise between the swarming-ness of subject matter and the clarity of poetic control makes Gunn's LSD poems very different from poems such as Ginsberg's 'Mescaline' and 'Lysergic Acid'. 'At the Centre' has a very clean, organised layout on the page. It is carefully divided into three sections which mirrors the structure of an unified Aristotelian narrative (i.e. a beginning, middle and end). The poem is a record of Gunn's 'biggest acid trip' in 1968 when he 'took a colossal amount and stood with [his] friend Don Doody on a roof from which you could see the sign of a brewery, which had on the top of it a magnificent image in neon lights, even during the day, of a huge glass.'⁷⁰ The first part of the poem introduces us to an elevated roof where we are exposed to a sense of openness:

What place is this
 Cracked wood steps led me here.
The gravelled roof is fenced in where I stand.
But it is open, I am not confined
By weathered boards or barbed wire at the stair,
From which rust crumbles black-red on my hand.
If it is mine. It looks too dark and lined.

The poem steps into a world of uncertainty ('What place is this') and the line break takes us to the 'cracked wood steps', probing into an unfamiliar space. Huxley recorded that during his mescaline trips 'spatial relationships had ceased to matter' and his mind perceives 'the world in terms of other than spatial categories.'⁷¹ Despite the sense of dreamy indirection, each line gives us new information about the poet's location, setting the experience firmly on the space of the roof. The first line here, with its withheld question mark and internal fracture, suggests an 'open' type of poetics. Gunn counters this, however, with the more 'confined' *abcabc* rhymed metrical verse that follows (here/stair, stand/hand, confined/lined): the verse is 'fenced off' and 'lined', but also consciously open to what is beyond. This elevated perspective is in line with 'But it is open, I am not confined' and other moments of elevation

⁶⁸ Aldous Huxley, quoted in Sybille Bedford, *Aldous Huxley: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), Vol. 2, p. 117.

⁶⁹ Henri Michaux records being 'at the centre': 'When I go out after taking hashish I am a different man. With different eyes. Hashish points out, chooses, observes and penetrates like a rigid sword. [...] I know that I am at a centre, that this centre which exists in me gives me right (and the facility) to look anyone straight into the eye, for I go beyond the features.' ('Miserable Miracle (Mescaline)' in Mike Jay, ed. *Artificial Paradises: a Drug Reader* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 148.)

⁷⁰ PR, p. 166.

⁷¹ Huxley, p. 9.

that relate to revelation in 'Flying Above California' and 'A Map of the City'. Huxley believes that 'mescaline raises all colours to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind.'⁷² That explains Gunn's attention to colours and minute objects in phrases like 'rust crumbles black-red'.

The poem then moves on to the 'pearly damp grey' sky that is 'almost infringing on the lighted sign', the advertisement of 'Hamm's Brewery'. This immediate symbol of modern commerce is put against the darkening (or brightening) sky and that contributes to the 'sinewy flux' of the second part of the poem:

What is this steady pouring that
Oh, wonder.
The blue line bleeds and on the gold one draws.
Currents of images widen, braid, and blend
—Pouring in cascade over me and under—
To one all-river. Fleet it does not pause,
The sinewy flux pours without start or end.

Gunn repeats the formation of 'What... ' at the beginning of each of its five stanzas and creates a sense of unity and questioning 'wonder'. 'Pour' is used three times in seven lines as the images spread out in a world of fluidity where we find 'this steady pouring', 'the blue line bleeds', 'currents' and 'flux'. There is an obvious syntactic crisis of the first line and the stanza form holds good (just). But terms like 'one all-river' and 'fleet it does not pause' like that interrupted 'What is this steady pouring' suggest the persona of a 'cascade' of images which is not confined within conventional sentence-structures.

In 'Lysergic Acid' Ginsberg draws on the same hyper-sensitiveness to shapes and colours but presents them on a different scale:

It is a Ghost Trap, woven by priest in Sikkim or Tibet
a crossframe on which a thousand threads of differing colour
are strung, a spiritual tennis racket
in which when I look I see aethereal lightwaves radiate
bright energy passing round on the threads as for billions of years
the thread-bands magically changing hues one transformed to another as if
the
Ghost Trap
were an image of the Universe in miniature⁷³

⁷² Huxley, p. 15.

⁷³ Ginsberg, p. 232.

the use of language to express the inexpressible, as Gunn believes that 'the acid experience was essentially non-verbal.'⁷⁷

The last part of 'At the Centre' returns as after 'the break' to 'the outside world'. Drawing from Yeats' 'terrible beauty', from 'Terror and beauty in a single board' (221), Gunn opens the last part of 'At the Centre' with the bewildering entanglement of terror and beauty, terms which have been opposed in philosophy at least since Edmund Burke's *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). But Gunn's philosophy (such as it is) is a secular one, a kind of spiritual revelation that enables him to see an inner order and proportion in things as in 'a tracery / Fronded and ferned, of woods inside the wood.' At the end of the poem Gunn brings us down from the roof back to the LSD party on Folsom Street:

Later, downstairs and at the kitchen table,
I look round at my friends. Through light we move
Like foam. We started choosing long ago
—Clearly and capably as we were able—
Hostages from the pouring we are of.
The faces are as bright now as fresh snow.

Stephen Romer argues that the lines ('Through light we move / Like foam') are 'almost Eastern in its religious perception', yet they manage also to 'sum up that world of homoerotic, hedonistic delight and metamorphosis captured throughout the book.'⁷⁸ Indeed, the return to the apartment, with the domestic scene of 'the kitchen table', takes us from the flowing world of visions to a sense of real community and friendship that goes against the antisocial notion of drugs that Baudelaire and Jean Cocteau propounded.⁷⁹ The use of 'we' four times in four successive lines creates a world of inclusiveness and solidarity, showing that being there and part of the group involved a set of conscious decisions ('We started choosing long ago'). Compared to his early poems, 'At the Centre' (and indeed many poems of *Moly*) is charged with this strong sense of communal responsibility from which real friendship and solidarity are developed. The idea of 'hostages' underlines the dominating power of the pouring visions and being 'at the centre' of hallucinogenic visions is being what he calls 'Hostages from the pouring we are of', an extraordinary visionary claim. Like the wave-riders become 'Half wave, half men' in 'From the Wave', the phrase 'Through light we move / like foam' captures the transformative quality of LSD while at the same time suggesting the self is 'at the centre' of transformation. It is the way Gunn balances 'the passion of definition' and 'the passion of

⁷⁷ *OP*, p. 182.

⁷⁸ Stephen Romer, 'Thom Gunn: A Story of Hero-worship and Beyond...' in *AGENDA*, p. 34.

⁷⁹ 'Opium dissociates us and removes us from the community. Further, the community takes its revenge. The persecution of opium addicts is an instinctive defence by society against an antisocial gesture.' Jean Cocteau, *Opium*, quoted by Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 154.

flow', holding the centre even though things are falling apart, which gives 'At the Centre' its astonishing authority as an account of the drug experience.

If LSD offers the magic of escapism, one destination is Arcadia and the other is the self. 'At the Centre' is about letting the self in the flux and being at the core of liberating visions in which the self is dissociated from the body. 'Being Born' (218-9), nevertheless, is a record of a fantastical journey in search for an autobiographical self.⁸⁰ It draws on the awakening self in a world of dreaminess where the process of being born is at stake. The poem begins with a powerful image of a tanker appearing in a 'distant ridge':

The tanker slips behind a distant ridge
And, on the blue, a formal S of smoke
Still hangs. I send myself out on my look.
But just beyond my vision, at the edge

To left and right, there reach or seem to reach
Margins, vague pillars, not quite visible,
Or unfleshed giant presences so tall
They stretch from top to bottom, sky to beach.

The opening of 'Being Born' evokes the similar Wordsworthian perplexity in the boat-stealing episode of *The Prelude*.⁸¹ The tanker in 'Being Born', too, is an anonymous object that bears a strong iconographical significance in Gunn's LSD poems. The tanker suggests a kind of slipping purposelessness as the poet seeks to make sense of it. 'A formal S of smoke' is an example of what he calls in 'At the Centre', abstracting and fencing with 'word' and 'notion'. The line breaks the boundary of vision and language in the way it plays on meta-language, seeing the physical outline of smoke as an analogue for the calligraphy the 'S' in 'smoke'. Huxley highlights the hyper-sensitiveness of linguistic-graphic associations in his account of mescaline experiences: 'The mind does its perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern.'⁸² 'I send myself out on my look' reminds us of another onlooker in 'For Signs' who tries 'to master [moonlight] and learn escape.' (188) Instead of depicting a boundless scene 'beyond my vision', the landscape in 'Being Born' insists on geographical limits such as 'at the edge', 'to left and right', 'margins',

⁸⁰ Gunn said in an interview, 'I didn't try to fabricate things. For example, there's a poem called "Being Born" which is an anthology of things I'd noticed on acid. One that I make great play with is a sense you get that of there is a shape behind you just out of the corner of your eyesight—I think because your eyeballs bulge a little when you take acid. I remember thinking that those were two people slightly behind me; and even that this was the doctor and midwife when I was born.' (Alan Sinfield, 'Thom Gunn at Sixty', *Gay Times*, 131, London (August 1989).

⁸¹ Gunn's verse remembers Wordsworth in which 'an act of stealth/ And troubled pleasure' hinges on 'The horizon's utmost boundary; for above/ Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.' About the event, Wordsworth recalls that 'for many days, my brain/ Worked with a dim and undetermined sense/ Of unknown modes of being'.

⁸² Huxley, p. 9.

'top to bottom' and 'sky to beach', each line constructing the four sides of frame on canvas. The *abba* box of the rhyme-scheme sets up an equivalent box frame.

The poem pursues the sense of human boundaries but shifts its attention from visionary landscape to the imagining of the moment of being born:

What memory loosed, of man and boundary blended?
One tug, one more, and I could have it here.
—Yes that's it, ah two shapes begin to clear:
Midwife and doctor faintly apprehended.

'What memory loosed, of man and boundary blended?' is syntactically ambiguous. It may mean both 'what memory loosed' (what memory freed) and 'what loosed memory' (what triggered memory). Again, there is an investment in Romantic childhood. The process of labour is described as a state when 'man and boundary blended', when the child is 'becoming' a man at the boundary of leaving the mother's body. The tone is more informal and relaxed, gestating the solidifying images of 'midwife and doctor'. Gunn's reconstruction of childbirth is a curious one as he takes us back to the very beginning of life when the child is first exposed, not to the mother, but to the anonymous agents of labour. It remembers Wordsworth's 'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting'.⁸³ The vision then subsides and Gunn takes us back to 'the warm sand' and 'Bright crinkling foam, headland, and level sky.'

The poem then moves on to a key moment of revelation when the self seems to have a dialogue with the self, as the poet returns to the Wordsworthian project in a more recent incantation:

Must I rewrite my childhood? What jagg'd growth
What mergings of authority and pain,
Invading breath, must I live through again?
Are they the past or yet to come or both?

Behind the stanza lies the toil of adulthood. Gunn would have Yeats' 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' in mind, in which Yeats' 'toil of growing up'⁸⁴ is in line with Gunn's 'mergings of authority and pain'. Gunn's autobiographical voice questions the possibility of re-living and rewriting childhood, making the present life a long flashback. By asking 'Are they the past or yet to come or both' Gunn disturbs the linearity of time in a way past childhood memory becomes the overlapping area of both the past and future intervals, reminding us of the

⁸³ Wordsworth,

⁸⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poem* (HK: Macmillan, 1982), p. 266.

ending of Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium': 'what is past, or passing, or to come.'⁸⁵ Time, for Gunn in 'Being Born', is ambiguous. Yeats, however, emphasizes the unending-ness of growth as in 'The unfinished man and his pain/ Brought face to face with his own clumsiness', as if a limited life span of human being is psychologically lengthened, feeling 'unfinished'. Both Yeats' and Gunn's lines ponder the possibility of ascertaining clear boundaries to perception and experience.

Unlike Gunn questioning the link between LSD and autobiography, Ginsburg connects LSD experiences with his autobiographical construct. Mescaline gives a powerful portrayal of him being an old man under the influence of drugs:

Rotting Ginsberg, I stared in the mirror naked today
I noticed the old skull, I'm getting balder
my pate gleams in the kitchen light under thin hair
like the skull of some monk in old catacombs lighted by
a guard with flashlight
followed by a mob of tourists
so there is death⁸⁶

The horrifying image of Ginsberg seeing himself rotting in front of the mirror naked is totally unlike Gunn's impulse to rewrite childhood. The lyrical poem relentlessly depicts the decaying physicality of old age and the accelerating rhythm is pushed to the last note 'death'. Ginsberg's autobiographical voice seems to possess the power of hollowing himself out. Unlike Gunn's continual 'invading breath' in 'Being Born', Ginsberg's stanza dissipates, as well as our breath too, when we read it out. Ginsberg dramatizes death while Gunn withholds it. In 'Being Born', in which the absence of childhood memory goes against the grain of 'Must I rewrite my childhood?' the poem does not travel beyond that horizon. Answering the question 'Are they the past or yet to come or both?' at the end of 'Being Born' features another kind of potency in the air in which the floating tanker re-emerges and the external reality is used to depict inner emotions:

Both. Between moving air and moving ocean
The tanker pushes, squat and purposeful,
But elsewhere. And the smoke. Though now air's pull
Begins to suck it into its own motion.

There is a furnace that connects them there.
The metal, guided, cuts through fall and lift,
While the coils from it widen, spread, and drift
To feed the open currents of the air.

(219)

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 218.

⁸⁶ Ginsberg, p. 228

After 'memory loosed', after 'midwife and doctor', after 'mergings of authority and pain', the poem returns to its beginning and concentrates on the tanker, which despite its elsewhere-ness and purposelessness earlier in the poem seems to embody a sense of movement. It is 'squat and purposeful', being pushed between the kinetics of air and ocean, just like the 'blue jay scuffling in the bushes [that] follows / Some hidden purpose' (39) in 'On the Move'. The connection between the tanker and the smoke is put into focus by 'air's pull' and more so by the furnace that 'connects them there.'

The relations of different objects are joined together to tell a story of visual composition. The tanker becomes a part in the whole; its detached presence in the first line ('The tanker slips behind a distant ridge') is conjoined with the metallic system of the furnace. This part-whole relationship not only makes the tanker 'purposeful', putting its previous function in place, but also transforms (or justifies) its existence in the way its movement, like the coils, widens, spreads, and drifts between air and ocean. What is being born in the poem is not only Gunn himself, but also his manifestation of the tanker, which is given purpose and meaning in 'the open currents of the air' at the end of the poem. Its movement shows the virtue of the snail in 'Considering the snail' in which 'the slow passion [and] deliberate progress' gives a potent illusion of freedom. 'The tanker pushes' as 'the snail pushes' (117). They are both passing through and living out the fantasy of being at the margin of society, where magical dreaminess is an everyday business. The poem leaves the reader with an ambiguous scene of its own trajectory. Is the ship just a literal ship, and the furnace its engine-room? Or is that furnace that produces the spreading smoke, an emblem of the new dynamic origin of the memory? an image of childhood? of poetic inspiration? Certainly the final lines suggest the creative burst of imagination as much as the traces of a boat on horizon. Whether we take it as literal-objective, or autobiographical-subjective, it is a poem whose trimmed stanzaic mapping process suggests the presence of source beyond visibility, over the horizon. We are left finally with the widening coils of the smoke, which metaphorically 'feed' the air.

Gunn's Sun

Wrapped up in the yellow sun-drenched cover of the original Faber hardback, *Moly* captures the 'sun-breathing' new earth that Gunn discovered in California. The book records protean forms of light, in particular sunlight. For example, in 'For Signs' (189-9), the light effects are explicit in phrases like 'moonlight floods the pillow', 'statued in the shine' and 'light fills blinded socket'. In 'The Sand Man' (193) a striking union-organizer in San Francisco who suffered a brain injury is 'Bare to the trunks', with his 'body on the ground', 'sun-stained, ribbed, and lean'. In 'The Rooftop' (203) we find a sense of absorbed idleness that comes close to self-discovery: 'With sunlight, washing tree, / Bush, and the year's last flowers, / And to sit here for hours, / Becoming what I see.'⁸⁷

'Sunlight' (223-4), the hymn-like poem ending *Moly*, embodies a formal celebration of the sun that unifies objects and lives through its embracing light. The poem steps in to a world of mysteriousness where objects of different forms and textures—'water, glass, metal'—are connected in a wave of sunlight:

Some things, by their affinity light's token,
Are more than shown: steel glitters from a track;
Small glinting scoops, after a wave has broken,
Dimple the water in its draining back;

Water, glass, metal, match light in their raptures,
Flashing their many answers to the one.
What captures light belongs to what it captures:
The whole side of a world facing the sun

Sunlight becomes the agent of unification, an unchangeable presence that brings different forms of matter ('water', 'glass' and 'steel') into focus. 'Flashing their many answers to the one' in 'Sunlight' echoes the transcendental ending of Shelley's *Adonais*, in which Earthly life colours 'stains' the pure white light of 'the One',⁸⁸ which is the source of all light. The azure sky and flowers exemplify earthly colours that, however beautiful, fall far short of the 'glory'

⁸⁷ There are more examples: in 'Justin' (190), 'The lamplight's little world clasped round/ By sweet rot and the autumn dark', setting an atmospheric waiting scene against despairing Justin. Also in 'Tom-Dobbin' (200-2), on the other hand, is an otherworldly observation of gay sex in which 'light is in the pupil/ luminous seed/ and light is in the mind/ crossing'. Also the allusion to the mythical plant moly in 'The Garden of the Gods' (213): 'They follow path to path in wonder/ Through the intense undazzling light./ Nowhere does blossom flare so white!/ Nowhere so black is earthmound under!'

⁸⁸ P. B. Shelley, 'Adonis' in *The Complete Poems of Shelley* (USA: Random House, 1997).

of the pure Light that they transmit but also refract. Gunn's poem, however, sets its foot more on scientific grounds as in 'The whole side of a world facing the sun', implying the rotation of the earth that leaves the other side in shade. The poem then explores the illusion that 'It is as if the sun were infinite.' Instead of creating the boundless energy of the sun, Gunn's critical slant tells us that the sun's 'concentrated fires / Are slowly dying—the image of persistence / is an image, only, of our own desires'.⁸⁹ The first pair of rhymes, 'distance' and 'persistence', is semantically dissimilar whereas the second set 'fires' and 'desires', comes from an established metaphorical association. The two sets of rhymes, contrast in a way that plays out the conflict between the illusion of the infinite sun and the reality of its dying fires. Gunn then extends this metaphysical conceit to a rather high-toned philosophical musing on desire and knowledge:

Desires and knowledge touch without relating.
The system of which sun and we are part
Is both imperfect and deteriorating.
And yet the sun outlasts us at the heart.

Behind this lies Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, based on the story of Prometheus' challenges to the divine system of Zeus and seizing of fire that gives rise to human knowledge and desire. Likewise in the Age of Enlightenment, knowledge, desire and the sun were intertwined with the idea of truth and reason. To the Romantics, however, the sun goes inward to the mind and is related to moments of inner reflection. Wordsworth wrote in *The Prelude* that 'the darkness and the light / Were all like workings of one mind'.⁹⁰ Gunn modifies this tradition and these images, in his secular reworking of the Romantic metaphysics of light.

Unlike the way water and sunlight feature in the opening of 'Flooded Meadows', in 'Sunlight' energy is generated at the end of the poem in the final unexpected Blakean association between the sun and a sunflower:

Great seedbed, yellow centre of the flower,
Flower on its own, without a root or stem,
Giving all colour and all shape their power,
Still recreating in defining them,

Enable us, altering like you, to enter
Your passionless love, impartial but intense,
And kindle in acceptance round your centre,
Petals of light lost in your innocence.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ William Wordsworth, ed. Stephen Gill, *The Prelude* (UK: OUP, 1975), p. 100, L. 567-8.

The poem's high celebratory tone is reminiscent of Keats' 'Ode to Apollo' and 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream' in which Apollo is transfigured—like the one who should 'with fierce convulse / Die into life'—not only into the god of sun, but also into the god of highest poetry. Unlike weariness that contests against 'the steps of the sun'⁹¹ in Blake's 'Ah, sunflower', Gunn's sunflower is charged with the power of recreation and definition in the way it takes all colours from the sun and forms a shape like the sun. The word 'centre' is reiterated twice reminding us of the influence of drugs in 'At the Centre'. Huxley's mescaline experience prefigures the transcendental moments in the poem: 'I was looking at the flowers—back in a world where everything shone with the Inner Light, and was infinite in its significance.'⁹² The 'passionless love', 'acceptance' and most saliently, 'innocence' at the end of the poem returns us to the Romantic pastoral theme. Entering the centre of a sunflower is like Beatrice turning her eyes to stare straight into the sun in Canto I of Dante's *The Paradiso*.⁹³ By staring at the sun Beatrice metaphorically becomes a 'second' sun. Entering the sunflower in Gunn's lyric has the same effect, as we are surrounded by 'petals of light', a phrase that bears a strong resemblance to Dante's mystic rose.⁹⁴ 'Lost in your innocence' captures a sense of total abandonment but also of what Blake called 'Innocence Regained'. Normally we speak of 'lost innocence' in the fallen world, but here Gunn imagines being lost in innocence.

Even though Gunn calls himself an atheist and as Clive Wilmer observed, 'one of the constants in his poetry is the absence of any sustaining otherworldly belief or consolation', the language of religion and divinity that he uses to paint the sunflower in 'Sunlight' evokes a passion of secular belief rooted in the ancient Greek culture that is evident throughout the book, embracing Homer's moly, Phaedra and the Apollonian sun. Sunlight is a new sense of energy in Gunn's poetry, functioning as the antithesis of the moonlight, which pervades early poems such as in 'The Silver Age' and 'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy'. Gunn renounces the obsessive introspection of the past in the *Moly* poem 'For Signs' when he addresses the moon as 'Dream mentor, I have been inside that skull, / I too have used those cindered passages.' (131) With Yeats' astrological force, the speaker in 'For Signs' says: 'I dream: the real is shattered and combined / Until the moon comes back into that sign/ It stood in at my birth-hour' (188). Resonating with the image of midwife and doctor in the LSD poem 'Being Born' and the theme of lost pastoral innocence in the book, Gunn shatters the real and combines it

⁹¹ Blake, p. 221.

⁹² Huxley, p. 11.

⁹³ 'when I saw Beatrice has turned left to raise / her eyes up to the sun...//so through my eye/ her action, like a ray into my mind, / gave rise to mine: I stared into the sun / so hard that here it would have left me blind.' (John Ciardi, trans. *The Divine Comedy* (USA: W. W. Norton, 1977), p.396, l. 46-54.)

⁹⁴ Ibid, 'flew ceaselessly to the many-petaled rose/ and ceaselessly returned into that light/ in which their ceaseless love has its repose.' p. 584, l. 10-12.

with the other reality opened up by LSD. Though the moon is a 'dream mentor' in this poem, *Moly* as a whole gravitates towards 'Sunlight', its final poem.

Gunn explores the inter-crossing of sunlight and shadows in 'Words' (197), a rare occasion in Gunn's *oeuvre* that deals explicitly with the process of writing:

The shadow of a pine-branch quivered
On a sunlit bank of a pale unflowering weed.
I watched, more solid by the pine,
The dark exactitude that light delivered,
And, from obsession, or from greed,
Labourled to make it mine.

Like 'Flooded Meadows', 'Words' captures the subtle kinetics of light with full concentration on verbs such as 'quivered' and 'delivered'. But unlike 'Flooded Meadows', where the drift of landscape and thoughts are at stake, 'Words' depends on a more static view of the external world where an intricate landscape is delivered directly in the first two lines. It is countered, however, by the more passive watching ('I watched') to active working ('laboured to make it mine'). The poem's fine texture resides in the interchange of 'shadow' and 'sunlit bank', 'dark exactitude' and 'light', form which luminosity and shades incorporate each other to form a balanced view of thoughts as in 'I watch, more solid by the pine'.

The poem, indeed, tells a story of looking and how the poet, driven by obsession or greed, labours to turn the experience of looking into words:

In looking for the words, I found
Bright tendrils, round which that sharp outline faltered:
Limber detail, no bloom disclosed.
I was still separate on the shadow's ground
But, charged with growth, was being altered,
Composing uncomposed.

It is 'the words' not 'words' that the speaker is looking for, an analogue of the specific and private possession entailed in 'Labourled to make it mine.' If creativity is a form of self-possession, Gunn possesses 'the words' in this poem, and the title of the poem 'Words' exposes the same question of authorship. But 'looking for the words' is far away from verbal possession and what the speaker finds are details of the unsurprising landscape: 'Bright tendrils, round which that sharp outline faltered: / Limber detail, no bloom disclosed.' Is it a depiction of landscape or what we call poetry? How and when do words become poetry? Gunn's 'Words' investigates the margin between objects and words, questioning the way the mind gestates poetic thoughts. Its psychological concentration shares the psychedelic

introspection offered by LSD. At the end of the poem Gunn does not take us from the world of dreaminess. Instead of embracing the sunlit bank, the speaker is 'still separate on the shadow's ground', free from any attachment but at the centre of transformation, charged with 'growth' and 'being altered'.

The breathtaking final idea of 'Composing uncomposed' combines the worlds of dream and risk, a notion of composition beyond conscious control. It not only captures the constantly creating-erasing state of the mind in the process of writing, but touches on the linguistic ambiguity of the way a continuous tense clashes with a perfect tense, as if the continuum of composition is punctuated constantly by what is uncomposed and therefore, what is composed is never finished. In this sense, composition is composing the uncomposed. The poet takes risks and ventures into the dreams of what is yet to come, into worlds of telling that hinge on untelling. On the other hand, Gunn began as a poet under the tutelage of Yvor Winters, and even this dream of 'composing uncomposed' is composed in a tight stanzaic form, with a web of *abcabc* rhymes, demonstrating an intricate metrical control over the experience of lost control, which is characteristic of *Moly* on the whole. This is a book which begins with a poem called 'Rites of Passage' about physical and poetic transformation and ends with poems about 'The Discovery of the Pacific' and 'Sunlight'. Much of its force, though, paradoxically hinges on its fidelity to the poetic past, the labour to make the new experience of light 'mine'.

CHAPTER THREE

'THE SNIFF OF THE REAL': NIGHTMARE AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN JACK STRAW'S CASTLE (1976)

1

Before Visiting Jack Straw's castle

Gunn in *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) passes through nightmares before coming out as a 'gay poet' and writing for the first time as an autobiographical self. For Gunn, nightmares precede autobiography, and in this chapter I follow this order. Jack Straw, Gunn's character in the title poem, is obsessed with entering nightmarish spaces and returning to haunting figures such as Charles Manson and Medusa. Manson says in the poem: 'dreams don't come from nowhere: it's your dream...you dreamt it. So there's no escape.' (276) The poem, however, ends with Jack Straw's escape: 'With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world.' (279) Dreaming, in the Freudian sense, sponsors an encoded or decoded autobiography, just as the way Jack's nightmares 'don't come from nowhere.' Langdon Hammer observes that Gunn's castle in the nightmare sequence is 'a figure for solipsism, for the confinement of the self in the self.'¹ The poem is haunted by the self's confinement as much as its desperate release. From cover to cover Gunn in *Jack Straw's Castle* insists on being elsewhere, and the journey into and out the castle's real and imaginary nightmarish interstices is an indispensable experience that enables him to write what he calls 'the sniff of the real' in 'Autobiography'.

Immediately following the title poem, 'Autobiography' from the concluding section of *Jack Straw's Castle* evokes the primacy of the sensuous world and the obstinately paradoxical nature of 'the real'. The poem also establishes a new voice in Gunn's poetry in which the search for autobiographical moments becomes a crucial poetic resource.² 'Sniff' suggests a

¹ Langdon Hammer, 'Thom Gunn and the cool queer tales of Cupid', *Raritan* 2:2 (2000), p. 76.

² 'Not just the abstract concept of a perceivable reality, but an actual whiff of it. It is the combination of this adherence to the senses with the apparently cerebral aspect of his formal dexterity and his

momentary physical thing, both a smell and the process of smelling it. 'Autobiography' is an unusual title for Gunn indeed, whose early poetry is intimately allied to anonymity, as we can see from its investment in the icons (or what he calls the 'poses') of the soldier, the motorcyclist, the wave-surfer and Odysseus, among many others, figures who epitomise Gunn's sense of masculine heroism.

Gunn was compiling a selection of Ben Jonson's poems when he was writing *Jack Straw's Castle*. In the introduction to his 1974 selection of poems by Jonson, Gunn wrote that 'artifice is not necessarily the antithesis of sincerity—the truest poetry can be the most feigning.'³ 'The sniff of the real' is such an occasion for poetry. For Gunn here, the tension between the 'real' and 'feigning' ('posing') is dialectical rather than dichotomous. Borrowing from Auden's title 'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning' (which is itself a quotation from a love scene in *As You Like It*), Gunn not only shows his investment in literary allusion, but highlights one of the key problems of poetic voice: for what poet ever does use his/her 'own' voice? And how would we recognise it, if they did? This question reflects on the fact that all speech (poetic or not) is conveyed from borrowed tones, indistinct and multiple discourses, set against the background noises of race, class, gender, sexuality and so on. It also raises the paradoxical connection (or chasm) between poetic voice and identity which goes to the heart of Gunn's poetics. Earlier poems such as 'The Wound', 'On the Move' and 'Moly' explore personal experience through the lens of mythical figures and cultural prototypes, creating a complex polemical interplay between the real and the feigning, the personal and the anonymous, and generating that paradoxical sense of diversity we find throughout Gunn's poetic career. Gunn favours poetic diversity and derivation, and likes to position himself between poetic and cultural models that seem on the face of it to antithetical or opposed. Among contemporaries, he presents himself as a mediator between Yvor Winters and Robert

intellectual detachment that gives his poems their unique signature.' (Gregory Woods, 'The Sniff of the Real' in *AGENDA*, p. 97).

³ Introduction to *Ben Jonson*, selected by Gunn, p. 15.

Duncan,⁴ while historically he figures as both a contemporary of Jonson and the Elizabethan⁵ and a modern 'Anglo-American poet'.⁶

There are many Gunns in *Jack Straw's Castle* as the poet himself consciously divides the book into three distinctive sections. The first section begins with taut stanzaic poems, which include portrayals (mostly in couplets) of construction workers, the Statue of Liberty, another icon soldier (in 'The Corporal'), and works towards an account of the open Californian bathhouse in 'The Geysers'. The second section is in more exploratory 'American-style' free verse, typified by the jagged, episodic record of archaeological discovery in 'Bringing to Light', and climaxing in the elongated nightmare of 'Jack Straw's Castle'. The last section, heralded by 'Autobiography', introduces a more overtly autobiographical self entangled in the process of self-definition, with flickering memories of Hampstead, London (Gunn's childhood places) and his recent North Californian snapshots. The book concludes with 'Breaking Ground' and 'The Release', poems that remember 'the sense of mild but constant risk' (301). They also, as their titles intimate, signal the poet's venturing into a new poetic voice, which is more released (and relaxed) in terms of his sexual identity, intermixing metre and free verse, and embodying a distinctly autobiographical self. In terms of poetic forms, *Jack Straw's Castle* makes use of heroic couplets, rhymed stanzas, free verse and Elizabethan songs both in expansive Whitmanesque lines and condensed, enjambed lines, reminiscent of Williams and Creeley. Wallace Stevens said, 'All poetry is experimental poetry',⁷ and *Jack Straw's Castle* is formally a highly experimental book. The sense of experiment is not, however, only limited to the medium, but carries over into the risky territory explored in the poems themselves, from the politics of the Nixon era in 'Iron Landscapes' to the Gay bath-house culture of 70s California captured in the dreamy but disturbing long poem 'The Geysers'. As Clive Wilmer says 'Gunn has always liked the word "risk"⁸ and these poems are unmistakably risky.

⁴ See PR, p. 171. Gunn said, 'I am the only person in the world ever to have dedicated poems to both Winters and Duncan. They hated each other. They hated each other. They didn't meet but they hated each other. When they referred to each other it was with contempt.'

⁵ 'People do have difficulties with my poetry, difficulties in locating the central voice or central personality. But I'm not aiming for central voice and I'm not aiming for central personality. I'm not really interested in personality. I want to be an Elizabethan poet. I want to write with the same kind of anonymity that you get in the Elizabethans and I want to move between forms in the same way somebody like Ben Jonson did. At the same time I want to write in my own century.' August Kleinzahler and John Tranter, 'Interview with Thom Gunn' in *Scripta*, 5:3 (April 1989), pp.175-6.

⁶ 'I call myself an Anglo-American poet. If it's a question of the poets I admire, there's a tremendous number of both British and American poets whom I admire greatly. I'm a weird product of both.' PR, p. 188.

⁷ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry & Prose* (USA: The Library of America, 1997).

⁸ Clive Wilmer, 'Definition and Flow: A Personal Reading of Thom Gunn' in *PNR* 5:3 (1978), p. 51.

Later in this chapter, I look at the way Gunn's autobiographical project is different from the confessional selves of Lowell, Berryman and Plath. The autobiographical self in *Jack Straw's Castle* is caught up in self-resistance as much as self-expression, as he struggles to come out of the closet and directly deal with his homosexuality and the gay culture of West Coast America (in 'The Geysers') and London ('Jack Straw's Castle' being named after a pub at the heart of the cruising area in Hampstead Heath). 'Autobiography' sets itself against the heroic icons and anonymity embodied in the earlier Gunn. It suggests Gunn's suspicion of his own early poetic strategies, an attempt to break down or through the formally armoured self of his previous work, and be truer to the occasion of writing than a poem like 'On the Move' could be. There he wrote, 'seeking their instinct, or their poise, or both / One moves with an uncertain violence', erasing the first person 'I' in that anonymous 'one' as completely as the leather-jacketed motorcyclists with their 'donned impersonality'.

Comparing *Moly* with *Jack Straw's Castle*, Gunn said, 'Much of *Moly* was about dreams; this was about nightmares.'⁹ The heady liberationist pastoral of *Moly* gives way to a darker vision of the sexual liberation of the time, and indeed, *Jack Straw's Castle* can be seen as a metaphor for disorder and panic, an equivocal site of psychological conflict. The book can be viewed as a direct criticism of *Moly* in the sense that Gunn records the downside of the drug experience, articulating a nightmarish reality absent in the Edenic world of *Moly*. In the near contemporary essay 'Autobiography: My Life up to Now' (1979), Gunn said of the title poem, 'I was dealing with just that confinement and with the terrors of self destructiveness you may face when you are aware of being trapped in your own skull.'¹⁰ This sounds positively (or rather negatively) Beckettian but is appropriate to the eponymous hero of the book. After all, the OED defines Jack Straw as 'a "straw man"; a man of no substance, worth, or consideration.'¹¹

Unlike the critical damnation suffered by *Moly* five years earlier, *Jack Straw's Castle* received mixed reviews. Circumventing the homosexual elements in 'Jack Straw's Castle', Derwent May in *The Listener* said that 'The reader is quite a long way through the book before he comes to its more unhappy, meditative poems, which acknowledge the difficulty of achieving the harmony and physical ease that the previous poems have been describing.'¹² Taking Gunn's homosexuality on board reluctantly, Terry Eagleton in *Stand* wrote the book off as 'homosexual gossip', saying that it has 'little to recount beyond causal encounters and

⁹ PR, p. 176.

¹⁰ OP, p. 185.

¹¹ Gunn's reference of the OED in the notes of CP.

¹² Derwent May, 'Burdens' in *The Listener* (25 Nov 1976), p. 686.

homosexual gossip', and 'is depressingly thin and banal for a poet who at one time promised to be the most intellectually resourceful of the younger English writers.'¹³ Under the title 'Bad Trip', the poet Craig Raine in *The London Magazine* dismissed the whole volume but was particularly dismissive of the title poem:

Gunn returns to the outside world with relief—'Jack's ready for the world.' What precedes this is not worth quoting. Its eleven sections ramble on imprecisely and wordily, reminding one of Conrad at his most adjectival—'an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention'. 'Jack Straw's Castle' is a bad trip—for writer and reader—and Gunn would have done better to emulate the more cryptic Conrad who limits Kurtz in four words: The horror, the horror.'¹⁴

Alan Brownjohn in *New Statesman* also acknowledged the new Gunn with doubt but recognised the changed persona: 'This newly vulnerable Gunn, at times almost inarticulate with self-doubt ('nothing outside the bone / nothing accessible / the bush and taking of / meaning were nothing'), is a very different proposition from the brutally confident *persona* of the earlier books.'¹⁵ This was also the first time Gunn was reviewed in *Gay News*, where Julian Mitchell gave a fair account of the book: 'Letting go, escaping from self and self-consciousness, experiencing life directly, as one experiences sex, not at an intellectual distance—these are again Gunn's subjects in this excellent new collection.'¹⁶ As Gregory Woods pointed out later, many of the negative reviews 'were outspokenly both anti-American (Gunn was now following Williams and Winters rather than the Metaphysicals) and, of course, anti-homosexual. The same had happened to Isherwood before him.'¹⁷ Clearly outing himself autobiographically in *Jack Straw's Castle* was a high-risk strategy as far as the English critics were concerned.

Gunn actually officially 'came out' as a gay poet when Ian Young included him in his pioneering gay anthology *The Male Muse*¹⁸ a couple of years earlier (1973). Eve K. Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1992) argues that 'even the phrase "the closet" as a publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues is made available, obviously, only by the difference made by post-Stonewall gay politics oriented around coming out of the

¹³ Terry Eagleton, 'New Poetry' in *Stand* 24:3 (1976), p. 79.

¹⁴ Craig Raine, 'Bad Trip' in *London Magazine* (April-May 1977), p. 101.

¹⁵ Alan Brownjohn, 'Carnal Knowledge' in *New Statesman* (24 Sept 1976), p. 417.

¹⁶ Julian Mitchell, 'Beneath the Poses' in *Gay News* 105:21 (October-November), p. 23.

¹⁷ Gregory Woods, 'The Sniff of the Real', in *AGENDA*, p. 95.

¹⁸ Gunn's poems are included in Ian Young, ed., *Male Muse: A Gay Anthology*. (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1973).

closet.¹⁹ This thesis does not focus on the theoretical discussion about 'the closet' and its complex. The closet, however, is a populated site for nightmarish experience. Edmund White in *States of Desire* recalls David Goodstein, the publisher of *The Advocate* in San Francisco, saying that 'coming out—well, it's not a closet but a tunnel.'²⁰ It is reductive, I think, to equate Gunn's Jack Straw's castle with the closet, yet its image of the 'Little Ease', a cell you could not stand, sit, or lie in, does convey the nightmarishness of repulsive enclosure and dramatize the urgency of 'coming out'.

Gunn subsequently said in an interview with Tony Saver, 'I wouldn't have expected that [coming-out] to make so much difference as it did.'²¹ Looking back on the Pre-Stonewall period in the *Paris Review* interview, Gunn explained the rationale for writing in the closet:

I was in the closet because I would not only have lost my job, I'd have been kicked out of America and consequently would not have been able to live with my lover. That was a very practical reason for my behaviour, dishonest though it may have been. I suppose there was even a danger of going to prison at certain times, because the act of having sex with men was illegal in many states.²²

For the poet who wrote 'Even in bed I pose',²³ the play of posing and hiding, the equivocation of the Audensque *you* and the use of masculine icons in Gunn's early poetry were ways to covertly channel homoerotic passions, or, to borrow Gregory Woods's title, to 'articulate flesh'. The 'practical reason' Gunn mentioned above is charged with irony. It reminds us how high the stakes were in coming out as a gay man during that time of legalized sexual oppression. That pragmatic 'practical reason' generated as its counterpart, a psychic habitat of passivity, secrecy and hidden-ness which no doubt played its part in Gunn's nightmare portrayal of Jack Straw confined in his castle. Gunn's use of the word 'dishonest' to describe living in 'the closet' suggests a sense of guilt. It aligns him with Leo Bersani who in *Homos* (1995) argues that 'by erasing our identity we do little more than reconfirm its inferior position within a homophobic system of differences.'²⁴ Given this, it is surprising the way Gunn's early poetry is largely free from this punitive sense of guilt. It is paradoxically not until walking through the dark interstices of 'Jack Straw's Castle' that he reveals the nightmare of self-rejection (and abjection) implicit to the closet, where the speaker says he's 'petrified at my centre' (275).

¹⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 14.

²⁰ Edmund White, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (NY: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 34.

²¹ Tony Saver, 'Thom Gunn', *Gay News* 134 (Jan 1978), p. 16.

²² PR, p. 171.

²³ Gunn, 'Carnal Knowledge', CP, p. 15.

²⁴ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (USA: Harvard UP, 1995), p. 42.

This paradox plays out in the way that even though Gunn's entire *oeuvre* embraces 'the sense of mild but constant risk',²⁵ unlike Robert Duncan's open attitude towards homosexuality, early Gunn seems to be closer to early Auden with his hesitancy and sexual equivocation. Eavan Boland compares Auden and Gunn in terms of their attitudes towards risk, and within the same context of sexual politics, suggesting that they

started their poetic career at risk as poets. They were at risk because they wrote political poetry without politicising their sexuality—and yet for each of them the sexual perspective was a source of vision and disaffection. Both were imprisoned by inscriptions and conventions within the British poem itself.²⁶

Gunn is probably one of the least directly political poets in the last century²⁷ (despite the exceptional appearance of 'Iron Landscapes' in *Jack Straw's Castle*). Boland suggests that writing in the closet created a debilitating sense of estrangement which 'imprisoned' the imaginations of these two gay poets and put their poetic careers at risk. But it is important to remember that some poets like Ashbery are openly gay but do not want to be read as 'gay poets'. Also, there are poets like Gunn whose poetry seems to thrive on exploring risk. No doubt, his high-risk subjects ran the risk of alienating his readership on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed this was confirmed by the critical reception of *Moly* and *Jack Straw's Castle*.

However, the danger within Boland's categorical approach to sexuality and poetry is that it overrides the different ways poets—including gay poets—handle private relationships and personal identity in public, that is, the danger of not taking risks. Whereas some, like Ginsberg, howl their sexuality in public, others, like Gunn, require a more intimate register and more oblique way of addressing their material. Miraculously released from the restrictions of prose, poetry fosters paradox and equivocation. Paradoxically, we trust poetry the more because 'poems do not necessarily ask to be trusted', as James Longenbach argues in his recent study *The Resistance to Poetry* (2004):

Their [poems'] language revels in duplicity and disjunction, making it difficult for us to assume that any particular poetic gesture is inevitably responsible or irresponsible to the culture that gives language meaning: a poem's obfuscation of the established terms of accountability might be that poem's accountable act—or it might not. Distrust of poetry (its potential for inconsequence, its pretension to consequence) is the stuff

²⁵ 'The Release', p. 301.

²⁶ Eavan Boland, 'A Mirror for Poets' in *PNR* 94, 20:2 (November-December 1993), p. 52.

²⁷ 'I'm really a very apolitical person. Oh, I write letters when I see anti-faggot slurs in the press and so on. I join parades, like the 1974 Christopher Street parade in New York, when I march forty blocks freaked on acid—but nothing spectacular.' Scobie's interview, p. 14.

of poetry. And the problem with many defences of poetry is the refusal to recognize that the enemy lies within.²⁸

To embrace possibility, inconsistency and contradiction, or in Gunn's words, 'the occasions of poetry', goes deep into the grain of his poetic experience.²⁹ In his chapter 'Poetry and Paradox' Gregory Woods wrote:

Given that our lives as gay men are thought to be anomalous, contradictory, obsessive and obscene, we have taken up paradoxical ways of speaking, both to reflect the way we are seen and to stamp our own more accurate logic on the world. We strive to make sense of the conflict between negative versions of our lives and our own more positive versions: to forge some kind of unity out of our contrary needs to be different and to fit in.³⁰

Woods' view epitomizes the psychological struggle between the total confinement at the beginning of 'Jack Straw's Castle'—'Jack Straw sits / sits in his castle' (270)—and the sense of release at the end of the poem—'With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world.' (279) If Jack Straw's castle is Gunn's big imaginary closet, then the scenery after coming out of the nightmarish castle is neither the steamy San Francisco bathhouses of 'The Geysers' nor the post-orgasmic moment of 'The Bed'. It is his childhood Hampstead, reading Lamartine, and riding between horse chestnut trees with his brother, a world of sweet memories free from nightmare. If there is no nightmare in Gunn's directly autobiographical poems, there is little of his autobiographical self in Jack Straw's castle.

2

Inside 'Jack Straw's Castle'

Gunn introduces his persona 'Jack Straw' sitting in the nightmare Gothic of his own castle: 'Jack Straw sits / sits in his castle / Jack Straw watches the rain' (270). 'Jack Straw's Castle' is Gunn's second narrative sequence after 'Misanthropos' and its opening strikes a

²⁸ James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p 1-2.

²⁹ In 'To Donald Davie in Heaven' from *Boss Cupid*, Gunn celebrates something comparable to Longenbach's sense of resistance, as he pays tribute to Davie's poetic (and critical) inconsistency: 'your love of poetry/ greater/ than your love of consistency.' (BC, p. 57).

³⁰ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1998), p. 376.

comparable note of monotonous singleness as the beginning of the earlier poem. This tedious rhythmic repetition creates an uncanny, almost Gothic sense of suspense, which leads us to question the given reality. But who is Jack Straw? Gunn in the first section of the poem calls him 'a man of no account / visited only by visions', a description bearing out the definition in the OED which define him as a "man of straw"; a man of no substance, worth, or consideration'. He is a re-incarnated version of Eliot's hollow man, 'headpiece filled with straw.'³¹ Yet, Jack Straw was a historical figure, one of the three leaders (together with John Ball and Wat Tyler) of the Peasants' Revolt or 'Great Rising' of 1381. According to information in the church of St. Mary in Great Baddow, Essex, Jack Straw led an ill-fated crowd from the churchyard and marched to London, arriving at Stepney.

The name 'Jack Straw', therefore, with its play between dictionary definition and historical allusion, confronts the conflict of anonymity and biography, illusion and reality, that is Gunn's pre-occupation in the book. The same applies to Jack Straw's Castle, as it is Jack Straw the hollow man's haunted home, a castle that generates and shelters panic and anxiety, a metaphorical space of self-consciousness, the Freudian 'castle' of the ego populated with ghosts—or rather, in the Freudian imagoes, figments of highly invested figures from the past. Also, the name Jack Straw's Castle operates as a pun that contradicts Jack Straw's (and Gunn's) mental imprisonment. It is the name of a roundabout and well-known pub and public house on the edge of Hampstead Heath in London [PLATE 3], a popular gay cruising area near where Gunn was brought up and where many of his autobiographical pieces are set. The pub is believed to be on the site of the highest sea level in London and where Jack Straw the rioter built an encampment from which he took refuge and intended to march on London but his plan came to nothing when he was captured and hanged by the King's men. The pub has stood on the site for many years and in the 19th century Wilkie Collins, William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens are all known to have drunk at Jack Straw's Castle. Being the site of political riots, literary drunkenness, gay cruising and Gunn's childhood, the actuality of Jack Straw's Castle counters the nightmarish Jack Straw's Castle of the hollow Jack in the poem, signifying an identity crisis caught up in the fissure between dream and reality. The allusive poetic (and narrative) voice of the sequence operates on different textual levels in a way reminiscent of Joyce's Stephen Daedalus and Walcott's *Omeros*.

³¹ The beginning of Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' (1925) reads: 'We are the hollow men/ We are the stuffed men/ Leaning together/ Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!/ Our dried voices, when/ We whisper together/ Are quiet and meaningless/ As wind in dry grass/ Or rats' feet over broken glass/ In our dry cellar' in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1963), p. 89.

Diverse, interlocking literary allusions provide the key to the architecture of 'Jack Straw's Castle', as the poem takes us through different sections, metres and rhymes, rooms and voices. Like Hamlet in the 'rotten' state of Denmark, Gunn's Jack Straw is trapped in a dead-end of internalised ghostly ratiocination. Despite his abiding critical investment in Pound,³² Gunn's *oeuvre* is only marginally committed to the modernist trajectory. Trusting 'the occasions of poetry', his lucid critical writing tends to subvert and extend literary canons. His allegiances are to Williams, Snyder, Duncan, Bunting, Creeley, Bishop, Moore, Mina Loy and Kleinzahler, poets writing outside or at the margin of the modernist canons. However, 'Jack Straw's Castle' shares some prototypical modernist features in the way it thrives on literary allusions ranging from the apocalyptic imagery of Dante's *Inferno* to the kittens changing into the Furies from Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, from King Lear's outrage on the heath to Samuel Pepys's diary. The poem, as Douglas Chambers points out, 'enacts what Gunn admired a few years earlier in his essay "Hardy and the Ballads".³³ The diction of ballads, Gunn wrote, 'tends to be plain and colloquial, the grotesque and the supernatural are present as a matter of course, and above all the structure of the narrative is economical, with incident and explanation implied wherever possible.'³⁴

'Jack Straw's Castle' is definitely not a ballad but its iconography shares macabre balladic qualities with the recurrent references to the murderous Charles Manson, the supernatural Medusa head, its narrative abruptness, and the grotesque savagery of its language. An example is section 2 which abruptly introduces a ravaged voice charged with a sense of violence and abuse:

Pig pig she cries
 I can hear her from next door
 He fucked me in the mouth
 and now he won't give me car fare
 she rages and cries (271)

This conversational anecdote documents a reality alien to the confinement of the castle but the sexual explicitness and profanity generate a nightmare sense of sexual violence. In an interview with John Haffenden, Gunn mentions that this is 'actually a transcription of something I heard through my bathroom window—which is about as opposed as two bodies could be, and the end of the poem is at least an elementary answer to that, a return to touch.'³⁵ Like Gunn, the accidental witness to a real violent episode, Jack Straw in the poem

³² Gunn, 'What the Slowworm Said: Eliot, Pound, and Bunting' in *SF* and Gunn's selection of *Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 2000).

³³ Douglas Chambers, 'Thom Gunn: The Poetic Implications of the Sensory Life' in *AGENDA*, p. 31.

³⁴ Gunn, 'Hardy and the Ballad', in *OP*, p. 83.

³⁵ Haffenden, p. 52.

is locked into passivity, 'a man of no account/ visited only by visions.' Part 2 ends abruptly in this manner, and rightly so, as Jack Straw is apparently incapable of making the violence outside the castle cohere with his dread inside it. His neurotic sense of detachment provides a compass to hold on to amid the disturbing undercurrents of irrationality that flood the poem.

Jack Straw is caught in an internal equivalent of one of Piranesi's imaginary prisons in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, full of multiplying, ambiguously demarcated chambers that mirror his vertiginous anxiety. This is the beginning of section 3:

But night makes me uneasy: floor by floor
Rooms never guessed at open from the gloom
First as thin smoky lines, ghost of a door
Or lintel that develops like a print
Darkening into full embodiment
— Boudoir and oubliette, room on room on room. (271)

Despite the vertigo of spatial panic, the stanza (from the Italian *stanza* meaning a 'room') is tightly and formally constructed within an enclosing *abaccb* rhyme scheme where the last line repeating the second rhyme creates an enveloping effect as in Gunn's early poems such as 'On the Move' and 'Round and Round'. The stanza also remembers 'The Nature of an Action' in *Fighting Terms* in which architectural space becomes strangely undefined and indefinable due to the disturbed perception of the speaker: 'In corridors the rooms are undefined: / I groped to feel a handle in the mind.' (41) Gunn mentions this sense of spatial disturbance in the interview with W. I. Scobie, saying that during the process of writing *Jack Straw's Castle* he moved:

from a house I'd lived in for ten years into this place, and I had a series of anxiety dreams. I had moved into the wrong house. I had moved in with the wrong people. Once to my horror I found I was sharing an apartment with Nixon. Very often I would keep discovering new rooms in the house that I'd known nothing about. All this became very much the scheme for the nightmare world of 'Jack Straw's Castle'.³⁶

Surely the quote offers us a metaphorical key to unlock the shadowy psychodrama of the iconography in 'Jack Straw's Castle', and particularly in this stanza Gunn builds it up with a series of enjambment to create a tone that is exploring but not explanative. The result is an architectural labyrinth, haunted by 'room on room on room', a Gothic sense of enclosure drawn from the castles of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, pushing the poetic voice towards the risk of breakdown and self-destruction.

³⁶ Scobie, p. 11.

This sense of risk latent in many of Gunn's psychic spaces is most pronounced in 'Jack Straw's Castle', even though we find quotidian versions of it in early poems.³⁷ Asked of his recurrent reference to rooms, dungeons, cellars, cells and confining spaces in Scobie's interview, Gunn is aware of them as 'a classic image of psychoanalysis—that you're living in the room of daylight consciousness, but behind this there's another that you sense and wish to enter—the unconscious—and beyond that still another, the subconscious.'³⁸ Interweaving the Freudian imagery of room and mind together, Jack Straw asks, 'Do these rooms / Spring up at night-time suddenly, like mushrooms, / Or have they all been hiding here all day?'(272) This question signals the disturbed boundaries between real rooms and imaginary rooms, evolving a liminal overlapping space that allows Jack Straw to walk in and out of the different levels of reality, just as Gunn did in *Moly*. The mentioning of 'mushrooms' of course implies the drug aspect of the whole dream experience, and yet we should notice that 'Jack Straw's Castle' does not invite this reading as most of the poems in *Moly* do.

The poem is prefaced by a revealing epigraph from Dickens's middle period novel *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4). It features the moment when Jonas Chuzzlewit haunted by the memory of the 'ugly chamber' where he poisoned his own father. Gunn's epigraph comes from Chapter 47, which tells of Jonas haunted by the memory of the murder in the context of the poem:

when he pictured in his mind the ugly chamber, false and quiet, false and quiet through the dark hours of two nights, and the tumbled bed, and he not in it, though believed to be, he became in a manner his own ghost and phantom, and was at once the haunting spirit and the haunted man.³⁹

Gunn juxtaposes Jonas's 'ugly chamber' (and his murderous mind) with Jack Straw's Castle (and his dreams of Charles Manson). The way Dickens raises the dialectical question of actual reality and imagined reality ('he not in it, though believed to be') epitomizes Jack Straw's dream/reality complex ('That dreams don't come from nowhere: it's your dream / He says, you dreamt it. So there's no escape.' (276)) In fact, Gunn's quotation starts in the middle of a paragraph, as fragment (as most quotations are) and fragmented voice. The unquoted beginning of Dickens's paragraph curiously anticipates the poem:

³⁷ Such as 'La Prisonnière' (14) ('Now I will shut you in a box'), the dark 'room with heavy chairs' in 'The Nature of an Action' (41), 'the darkened stairs/ Leading deprived ones to the mossy tomb' in 'During an Absence' (73), the dark 'empty hotel corridor' in 'The Corridor' (85), 'the dim interior' in 'In Santa Maria del Popolo' (94), and the 'dreamed pogrom' in 'Touch' (169).

³⁸ Scobie, p. 11.

³⁹ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (Penguin Classics) (UK: Penguin, 1999), p. 804.

Dread and fear were upon him, to an extent he had never counted on, and could not manage in the least degree. He was so horribly afraid of that infernal room at home. This made him, in a gloomy, murderous, mad way, not only fearful *for* himself, but *of* himself; for being, as it were, a part of the room: a something supposed to be there, yet missing from it: he invested himself with its mysterious terrors⁴⁰

The prose is nerved with the diction of anxiety: 'infernal room', 'gloomy', 'murderous' and 'mad', but at the same time explores the wonderfully abstract psychology of the murderer. 'Not only fearful *for* himself, but *of* himself': the lucid (almost blunt) prepositional movement chillingly shifts the notion of fear inwards, internalizing it as part of the murderer's being but also externally connecting his being to 'a part of the room'. Fear internalized is possession rather than perception, and the person in fear is the possessed one, as in the way Jonas 'invested himself with its mysterious terrors'. Jonas's murder room, like many of Dickens's prisons, haunts the novel. Like many of the Dickensian outcasts who break the law, Jonas and Jack Straw exist as an isolated, demented consciousness removed from the sociability of any community.

Writing on the idea of contemporary American Gothic, Mark Edmundson defines Gothic as 'the art of haunting, the art of possession [that] fills its audience with fear, with an uncanny sense of impending harm.'⁴¹ Gunn's epigraph is an emblematic example of Dickensian Gothic. The infernal room, the murderous and the mad are all common features of Jack Straw's 'dream sponsors', Charles Manson and the Furies who are introduced in section 4:

Dream sponsors:
Charles Manson, tongue
playing over dry lips,
thinking a long thought;
and the Furies, mad
puppet heads appearing
in the open transom above
a forming door, like heads
of kittens staring angrily
over the edge of their box (272)

The verse opens up a surrealistic dimension with the appearance of Carroll's kittens. Even though confinement is stressed by the imagery of the box, the nightmarish space, crowded with 'mad / puppet heads', seems in the process of formation, as we see from 'the open

⁴⁰ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (Penguin Classics) (UK: Penguin, 1999), p. 804.

⁴¹ Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and The Culture of Gothic* (Massachusetts & London: Harvard UP, 1997), p. xi-xii.

transom above / a forming door'. Jumping from tight meter and rhyme in section 3, here Gunn's scattered free verse introduces the controversial 60s religious guru Charles Manson. The paradoxical term 'dream sponsors' in this context seems to highlight the eclecticism of the charismatic and persuasive leader, despite the sinister portrayal of his 'tongue / playing over dry lips'. Manson was a fringe cult leader, obsessed with apocalyptic fantasies. Believing in himself as Jesus Christ, or the 'fifth angel' (the other four being the members of the Beatles), Manson persuaded his followers to 'embark on the murder spree in order to spark a racial war, after which only he and his family would be left, along with black slaves.'⁴² Manson not only sponsors Jack Straw's nightmares but inspired a murderous cult group that killed 11 people, including Sharon Tate, wife of Roman Polanski. He is a recurring motif in 'Jack Straw's Castle', at times substituting Jack Straw's voice and becoming his double.

Mark Edmundson observes that 'one of the major sources of terror in Gothic mode is the double. The idea of a second self—a horrible other unrecognised within us, or loosed somehow into the world beyond.'⁴³ Setting up a bridge between Freud and Gothic, Mark Edmundson points out that 'for Freud, the psyche, however else he may describe it, is centrally the haunted house of terror Gothic. Freud's remarkable achievement, Edmundson observes, 'is to have taken the props and passions of terror Gothic—hero-villain, heroine, terrible place, haunting—and to have relocated them inside the self.'⁴⁴ The anti-heroic voice of Manson undercuts Gunn's early hero-worship not only because of his extreme psychological disturbance and cultural marginality (compared to Gunn's Elvis or the motorcyclist), but also the complexity of embodying such a catastrophic voice within the psyche of Jack Straw to create double (and multiple) layers of human consciousness. Despite Manson's pressing recurrence in the poem, we should remember that everything happens strictly in Jack Straw's mind (and his castle). His nightmares are exclusively personal regardless of the cultural investment in their formation and interpretation. Like a rotting disease or mental parasite, Manson invades Jack's mind. Indeed, the relationship between

⁴² 'In the Manson serial murder happened on Beverley Hills on 9th August 1969, Susan Atkins with the Manson Family killed 11 innocent people, including Sharon Tate, the wife of film director Roman Polanski, and her friends. The scale of horror untold in Gunn's poem is chilling. 'According to Atkins, several celebrity targets were next on the list. She had planned to carve the words 'helter skelter' [Manson's title of his racist Armageddon philosophy after a Beatles song] on Elizabeth Taylor's face with a red-hot knife and then gouge her eyes out. She would castrate Richard Burton and put his penis along with Elizabeth Taylor's eyes in a bottle and mail it to Eddie Fisher. Frank Sinatra was to be skinned alive, while he listened to his own music. The Family would then make purses out of his skin and sell them in hippie shops. Tom Jones would have his throat slit, after being forced to have sex with Atkins.'

BBC Crime Online. May 2004. <www.bbc.co.uk/print/crime/caseclosed/charlesmanson.shtml>

⁴³ Edmundson, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Edmundson, p. 32.

the dreamer and his dreams become paradoxically disturbed in section 9, where Manson's physical presence is in the spotlight:

A bearded face, it's Charlie, close as close,
His breath that stinks of jail—of pain and fungus,
So close that I breathe nothing else.
Then I recall as if it were my own
Life on the hot ranch, and the other smells.
Of laurel in the sun, fierce, sweet; of people
—Death-sweat or lust-sweat they smelt much the same.
He reigned in sultry power over his dream. (276)

Gunn's stanzas in this section seem to struggle for a uniform meter (some long lines are almost in iambic pentameter). The rhymes too, seem to wrestle against each other for harmony ('close', 'else' and 'smells'; 'own', 'same' and 'dreams')—triplings that are a disguise to echo each other despite subtle discord. The primary sensory experience of breathing and smelling are foregrounded here. Manson's 'breath that stinks of jail' set against the other smells 'of laurel in the sun, fierce, sweet', as 'I', Jack Straw, is ambiguously mixed with that of Manson, when he says: 'Death-sweat or lust-sweat they smelt much the same.' In contrast with the 'sniff of the real' in 'Autobiography', it is the sniff of the unreal, as we sense the intruding nightmare of Manson's threat. Unlike *Moly* in which dreams and drugs provide the escapist, pastoral ideal of 'trusting Eden in the human'⁴⁵ against the apocalyptic future of nuclear explosion and political turmoil in the 60s, in 'Jack Straw's Castle' dreams become the Mansonian gates to a mental prison rather than the Huxleyian doors to paradisaal perception.

We are surely in the territory of the Freudian uncanny when we are confronted with the problematic poetic voice in which the *he* (Manson) speaks within and through the *I* (Jack Straw). 'Jack Straw's Castle' can be read as an uncanny poem because it involves both Jack's substitution of Manson's self for his own and more importantly, in Freud's terms, the unconscious '*compulsion to repeat*' leading 'a demonic character to repeat certain aspects of mental life.'⁴⁶ This unresolved recurrent motif becomes more salient with the appearance of the Medusa head, another Freudian motif, in section 4:

'Quick, fetch Medusa,
their shrewish voices,
'Show him Medusa.'

Maybe I won't turn away,
maybe I'm so cool
I could outstare her. (272)

⁴⁵ 'To Natty Bumppo', CP, p. 212.

⁴⁶ Freud, 'The Uncanny' in ed. Hugh Haughton, trans. David McLintock *The New Penguin Freud: The Uncanny*, (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 145.

Building on the anxiety of Manson as *Doppelgänger*⁴⁷ (or double), Gunn's reference to Medusa's head extends the uncanny effect, giving it a mythical edge in which sexual fear is highlighted by the Freudian equation of decapitation with castration. In his essay on 'Medusa's Head' (1940), Freud takes the gorgon's snake-hair as a symbol of the penis and suggests that Medusa's head summarizes 'the castration complex'. However frightening the head may be, it serves 'actually as a mitigation of the horror, for the snakes replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror.'⁴⁸ Freud continues to explore this paradox of sexual anxiety, saying that 'the sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. [...] For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact.'⁴⁹ Gunn may also have in mind Caravaggio's *Head of Medusa* (1595-1600) [PLATE 4]. Taking off from the mythical continuation in which Medusa's head ultimately is set upon the aegis of Athena,⁵⁰ Caravaggio did not paint a standard picture but a convex ceremonial shield. The striking masculine portrayal of Medusa with her head severed from the body and blood pouring out of the neck not only magnifies the horror of continued life after decapitation, but captures the reality of her horror expressed on her disturbed, frowning face: the widened eyes look downward at the world for a last time, while a scream of death is wrenched from the gaping mouth which seems charged with a possible sexual reference to fellatio. Gunn's Perseus-like narrator is the epitome of 'cool': 'Maybe I won't turn away, / maybe I'm so cool / I could outstare her.' Risking the Medusan curse of being turned into stone, Gunn touches on the Freudian paradox of sexual anxiety without drilling into it (possibly reflecting his reluctance to assert an overtly homosexual identity).

Section 7 of the poem turns onto a different kind of repetition. Gunn injects homicidal horror ('I am the man on the rack') into a domestic nursery rhyme, 'This is the

⁴⁷Freud in 'The Uncanny' develops the idea of the double ('the *Doppelgänger*'), moving from the fact of identical physical and facial features to internal identifications. He points out that 'A person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own. The self thus can be duplicated, divided and interchanged. Finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies, the same misdeeds, even the same names, through successive generations.' ('The Uncanny', p. 142.)

⁴⁸Freud, 'Medusa's Head' (1940) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud* Vol. XVIII (London: Hogarth, 1955), p. 273.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰'The betassled, terrible aegis...and thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgo, a thriving horror' from *The Iliad*, 5.741.

House that Jack Built'.⁵¹ The speaker's identity crisis is articulated starkly as with each line the subject—the agent—shifts:

I am the man on the rack.
I am the man who puts the man on the rack.
I am the man who watches the man who puts the man on the rack. (274)

The benign suburban setting of 'This is the House that Jack Built' is transformed into a sadistic rhyme sung by Jack Straw. Shifting from victim to torturer and finally to watcher, Gunn not only explores, as in his early poem 'Tamer and Hawk', the problematic reciprocity of master and slave, oppressor and oppressed, but captures the hierarchical horror involved, externalizing the focalization from the immediate sufferer to the unengaged watcher, like Kafka's anonymous narrator watching the death sentence being inscribed on the victim body in 'The Penal Colony'. Bringing together a child's nursery rhyme and the adult S/M scenario, Manson's murder of Sharon Tate and the Medusa story, Gunn scrambles the narrative codes here, offering no stable site of identification. As Freud argues that the uncanny offers us an external version of the most familiar, it may be that the nightmare life-in-death vision of the petrifying female projects a memory of Gunn's childhood—his mother's suicide. It certainly touches on the most intimate masculine anxieties.

Jack Straw is at home in his castle but estranged there; he is simultaneously out of his mind and out of his castle. He says, 'I sink into / darkness into / my foundations', acknowledging the notions of sinking, darkness and foundations, which are crucial symbols as the poem goes on revealing the dark interstices, cellars, hidden chambers and staircase of the castle (and the self). The uncanny or Freud's versions of Gothic, entails the return of the repressed. To Freud, the uncanny is *das Unheimliche*, the unhomely, but at the same time it is entirely homelike, the most familiar domestic place. Allying familiarity with homeliness, Freud in 'The Uncanny' says that:

German usage allows the familiar (*das Heimliche*, the "homely") to switch to its opposite, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, the "unhomely"), for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed. The link with repression now illuminates Schelling's definition of the uncanny as "something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open".⁵²

⁵¹ The nursery rhyme goes: 'This is the house that Jack built! / This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built. / This is the rat that ate the malt / That lay in the house that Jack built. / This is the cat that killed the rat / That ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built...'

⁵² Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 148.

Gunn refers to being 'back where I'd never left' and sinking into his 'foundations'. The architecture of Jack Straw's Castle has its homely elements as Gunn helps us visualize the space with corridors, rooms, tables, cellars, stones, staircase and kitchen. It is also, however, entirely *Unheimliche* as the description resists recognizable architectural references.⁵³ Troubled by the castle and its referentiality, Gunn's Jack takes us to the cellars, a site which mirrors his state of mind, and where there is an eerie scene of invisible premises and insecure boundaries:

Down in the cellars, nothing is visible
no one
 Though there's a sound about me of many breathing
 Light slap of foot on stone and rustle of body
 Against body and stone. (274)

The invisibility of the cellars echoes the irrationality of Jack Straw, as the bizarre line ('there's a sound about me of many breathing') negotiates the concentrated singular of 'a sound about *me*' with the paradoxical plural of '*me* of *many* breathing' (and later 'Oh, the breathing all around me'). The lexical repetition of 'body' and 'stone' in successive lines (in fact the two words appear a total of five times in the section) not only reveals an uncanny syntax but reproduces the anxiety of Medusa curse which turns flesh into stone.

In *The Poetics of Space* (1994) Gaston Bachelard says that 'the rationality of the roof' can be compared to 'the irrationality of the cellar.' He continues, 'a roof tells its *raison d'être* right away: it gives mankind shelter from the rain and sun he fears. As for the cellar, [...] it is first and foremost dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths.'⁵⁴ This vertical dialectics of attics and cellars becomes more pronounced when Jack Straw associates Manson's taunt with a staircase:

He's gone too far, Charlie you've overdone it.
 Something inside my head turns over.
 I think I see how his taunt can be my staircase,
 For if I brought all of this stuff inside
 There must be an outside to bring it from. (276)

Curiously Gunn's imaginary topography looks familiar, as if it is constructed by a cliché of poetic language. From this moment in section of the poem changes its tone from being

⁵³ James Longenbach argues that 'all poems are troubled about their own locations because their language is troubled by its referentiality; they recognize that the effort to include a clear sense of a location in the poem may become indistinguishable from the effort to omit it.' (Longenbach, p. 92.)

⁵⁴ Gaston Bachelard, trans. Maria Jolas, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 18.

totally entrapped to regaining a sense of actual reality. The imaginary staircase becomes an agency of transporting Manson's taunt from outside to inside the castle, inside Jack's head. The staircase is literalized later in the section: 'Easing itself in place even as I see it, / A staircase leading upward.'⁵⁵ C. G. Jung suggests that 'the conscious acts like a man who, hearing a suspicious noise in the cellar, hurries to the attic and, finding no burglars there decides, consequently, that the noise was pure imagination.'⁵⁶ If the cellars provide a shelter to the unconscious and the hosts of nightmare, it also creates a space for pure imagination.

Bachelard believes that 'In the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls'⁵⁷ which, out of fear, we could take as shades from Hades. If climbing the staircase from the cellar to the attic symbolically entails the passages from irrationality to rationality, from anxiety to equanimity, Gunn here also introduces the crucial dialectics of inside and outside signalling Jack's different level of consciousness and the extreme of a reality beyond the confinement of his castle: 'Outside the castle, somewhere, there must be / A real Charles Manson, a real woman crying, / And laws I had no hand in, like gravity.' (276) Bringing Jack Straw's attention to a possible world outside the castle, Gunn risks the credibility of the poem integral to the foundation of his poetic castle. Charles Manson becomes 'real', in other words, actualised, as Jack's mind extends towards the realm of risk and uncertainty in the outside world ('the laws I had no hand in, like gravity'). The poem resolves itself by reaching the outside, a symbol of release and freedom which confirms Bachelard's suggestion that the dialectics of 'outside and inside has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything.'⁵⁸ The sudden disappearance of Manson ('He is, for now at any rate, clean gone' (277)) disturbs 'the boundary between fantasy and reality', as for the first time Jack enters 'real rooms' and thinks that the place must 'at one time have been castle.'

Facing the complete effacement of the castle as anxiety abruptly dissipates, section II reinstates the concreteness of the castle ('Down panic, down. The castle is still here') and the stable mapping system of couplets, used earlier to define the confined bodily openness of 'The Geysers'. With Jack 'in the kitchen with a beer / Hearing the hurricane thin out to rain', the couplets channel a sense of normality into the castle (as we remember the proverb, 'an Englishman's home is his castle', which makes the Gothic castle the most *Heimliche* place):

The castle is still here, but not snug any more,
I'm loose, I rattle in its hollow core.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (NY: Harvest, 1955), p. 124.

⁵⁷ Bachelard, p. 19.

⁵⁸ Bachelard, p. 211.

And as for that parade of rooms—shed, jail,
 Cellar, each snapping at the next one's tail—
 That raced inside my skull for half the night,
 I hope I'm through with that. I flick the light. (278)

Rhythm and rhyme offer comfort not only because they remember an existing poetic form that resounds in our mind, but because they give a sense of musical reassurance anticipating what is to come, as each line embraces the next in rhyme. It is as if the knowledge of metre facilitates the act of Jack's escape, as the interlocking reciprocal rhyme of 'learn' and 'return': 'escape by learning what to learn; / And hold it that held me. Till I return.' (278) The lines can also serve as criticism towards the psychedelic escape portrayed in *Moly*, suggesting another sense of escape obtained through the introspective process of self-learning rather than the external assistance of drugs.

The site of imprisonment (a cellar) evolves into a site of growth (alluding to a jail cell and biological cell) that generates and shelters autobiography, memory and fantasy, a theme that I will explore in the last section of this chapter. In 'Bringing to Light', uncovering 'the foundations' means discovering autobiographical memory, but in 'Jack Straw's Castle', sinking into 'darkness into/ foundations' means exactly the opposite—the suppression of an autobiographical self. But for Gunn in 'Jack Straw's Castle', one high compositional risk that he has to avoid is Jack's consciousness surfacing back into the light his 'foundations'. Jack, therefore, is trapped in a Dantesque limbo. He is like both the man-pig hostage and the detained Odysseus under Circe's charm in 'Moly'.

Even though the notions like fear, horror, terror and panic seem to have rather loose and interchangeable meanings in Gunn's poem (and in this chapter as well), I suggest that underneath all these loosely defined notions there is a meeting point in which the fear (or horror) is profoundly internal and dislodged. It seems to come from nowhere, as at the end of section 8:

I sit
 trapped in bone
 I am back again
 where I never left, I sit
 in my first instance, where
 I never left
 petrified at my centre (275)

'Trapped in bone', Jack's estranged Beckettian condition is very different from the existentialist voice of 'The Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death' where fear of death is

translated into a source of self-knowledge, or the confident commitment to self-definition articulated in 'Vox Humana', or less remotely, in 'At the Centre' from *Moly*. Being 'petrified' is the antithesis of the paradisaal lexicon of drugs in *Moly*. What is so petrifying at Jack's centre? The ghosts of Manson, Medusa, Jack or Thom? Jack is not possessed with fear, but the anticipation of fear, that is, anxiety. According to Kierkegaard, fear 'refers to something definite';⁵⁹ it has a specific focus in which we have a clear understanding of the object of fear. By contrast, according to Freud, anxiety has 'a quality of indefiniteness and lack of object.'⁶⁰ In another words, the object of anxiety is absent, or it can be recognized as the paradox that is the negation of every possible object. The theologian Paul Tillich poetically combines Kierkegaard's version of fear with Freud's version of anxiety, pointing out that 'the sting of fear is anxiety'.⁶¹ After the publication of Auden's *The Age of Anxiety* (1948), which recorded the existential crisis of a generation living in the midst of world war, there has been no shortage of literary commentators who have taken this title as a fitting label for the prevailing consciousness of modern times. Instead of resisting anxiety, 'Jack Straw's Castle' thrives on it. Gunn offers an escape from the physical confinement (of the castle) and moving towards the revelation of a new identity at the end of the poem: 'Maybe I won't turn away, / maybe I'm so cool / I could outstare her.' The way Jack risks the curse of Medusa's eyes sounds uncannily logical in the poem once we understand Jack's embrace of anxiety. Reviewing *Jack Straw Castle in America*, James Finn Cotter uses the term 'Poetry of Apocalypse' to describe Gunn's book, saying that 'In the midst of apocalypse, poets take bolder risks, speak with urgency and cry to be heard.'⁶²

It is hard to imagine modern poetry without imaginary apocalypses when we recall *The Waste Land*, *Pisan Cantos*, *Howl*, *For the Union Dead*, etc.—seminal works that counter-define their inherited cultures and as a result, redefine a culture that itself will have to be countered. Poetry is fundamentally at risk because it embodies this sense of imaginary apocalypse, because it is entirely of its home culture but also feels entirely unhomey, peripherally foreign to the mainstream. As Longenbach observes: 'a literary culture that celebrates poetry's availability at the expense of its inwardness would ultimately become a place in which poetry finds no place to hide, no home.'⁶³ The home of poetry, therefore, is a hiding place where the dialectics of everywhere and nowhere do not matter as the notion of hidden-ness

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* R. Thomte and A. Anderson, trans. (NJ: Princeton UP, 1980), p. 42.

⁶⁰ Freud, 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety' in *On Psychopathology: Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety and Other Works* trans. J. Strachey (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 325.

⁶¹ Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (Glasgow, William Collins, 1952), p. 46.

⁶² James Finn Cotter, 'Poetry of Apocalypse' in *America* 136:13 (1977), p. 295.

⁶³ Longenbach, p. 9.

subverts the need of comprehension, creating a home that is not necessarily at home in its culture. This uncanny situation of poetry is articulated in 'Jack Straw's Castle' in the way Jack's apocalypse is inward and hidden, located within the castle itself that hinges on the paradox of being *Heimliche/Unheimliche* (homely/unhomely).

The poem ends in the bedroom, an intimate site in the castle that calls for homeliness, and yet it evokes an anonymous, rather unhomely third person 'we', implying that there is another 'he', whom Jack shares his bed with. The other man is 'from outside the castle', a 'real' man not 'a dream of that same man' (notice the 'man' in 'Manson'). This is from the last section:

So humid, we lie sheetless—bare and close,
Facing apart, but leaning ass to ass.
And that mere contact is sufficient touch,
A hinge, it separates but not too much.
An air moves over us, as calm and cool
As the green water of a swimming pool. (278)

There is a sense of reassurance coming from the couplets. 'Close' and 'ass', 'touch' and 'much', suggest a sense of individual separateness crucial to durable intimacy ('it separates but not too much'), an art of detached sociability that figures prominently in *The Passages of Joy*. 'Ass' rhymes with 'close'. Lying in bed 'ass to ass' reformulates the Manson complex of being 'close as close'. In 'close as close', the middle term 'as' becomes the outside term. The word that effects a metaphorical substitution—'as'—becomes 'ass', a physical and sexual thing in itself in 'ass to ass'. The mirroring of 'ass to ass' also suggests not only two people of the same gender, but also Freudian homoerotic narcissistic double, in which the man 'from outside the castle' can be interpreted as Jack's alter ego. Jack moves on from the enclosure of cocoon and castle, and his metaphorical language is 'moved' outward and transformed into 'ass to ass', a 'physical' hinge signaling intimacy and pleasure. This crucial moment in Gunn's poetic career brings us back to intimate sensuality of 'The Bed' (229), the opening of *Jack Straw's Castle* where two lovers 'lie soft-caught' after sex but 'it still goes on / Inside my head.' The 'sufficient touch' also takes us back to 'Touch' (169) in which every single human touch is 'in/continuous creation, dark / enclosing cocoon round / ourselves alone'. Moving on from the enclosure of cocoon and castle, Gunn gives us a surprisingly communal image of a hinge, signaling a conjoining intimacy based on the satisfaction (and reassurance) of pure physicality. It recalls the 'touched arm feels of dust' from 'Misanthropos', another chronicle of apocalypse.

This 'hinge' image paradoxically aligns Gunn's poetry with the literary tradition of the *homosexual poet*, a conflicting label that he tries hard to resist, but at the same time it offers him a sense of release towards the poetic voice from which some of his finest poems in *Jack Straw's Castle* such as 'Autobiography' emerge. 'Ten years ago,' Gunn told Scobie in 1977, 'it wouldn't have occurred to me to end the title poem as *Jack Straw's Castle* as I do.'⁶⁴ Perhaps this was partly because he could not, but it was also because he need not. Neil Powell points out that 'it is the gestures of repression, like the Christopher Street raid and the closure of the Sonoma County Geysers (or in England the *Gay News* blasphemy trial and then more recent Section 28 of the Local Government Act) which urge the gay poet towards the dangerous but necessary stridencies of sexual propaganda.'⁶⁵ Gunn is aware of both the danger and necessity to identify himself with homosexuality.

But at this midpoint of Gunn's journey of the bed, Jack turns on bed and thinks: 'even if he were a dream / —Think sweating flesh against which I lie curled— / With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world.' (279) While the rest of the poem is written in the first person, this uncanny twist of the tail takes us back to the territory of the third person where 'Jack Straw sits / sits in his castle.' Gunn points out that Jack's identity struggle is embedded in the use of pronouns:

Jack is speaking about himself in the third person, and when do people do that?—when they're not very sure of themselves. Richard III says 'Richard's himself again'. There's a certain bravado in that last section, since he's uttering conditional clauses: there's no certainty that he won't have to make the nightmare journey again.⁶⁶

This sense of conditionality challenges the illusive (allusive) status of the dreamer, the castle and the poem, suggesting an emergence of a poetic voice parallel to the release for Jack's nightmare imprisonment. Jack is speaking of himself as the third person. And in a sense a lot of the third persons in Gunn's poetry—the soldier, the motorcyclist, Achilles, Odysseus, and Jack Straw—speak as first persons for Gunn. Jack Straw is a metaphor for Gunn's nightmarish sexual crisis but nightmare facilitates the construction of 'Jack Straw's Castle', or is itself the castle. Nightmare enables Gunn to write a biographical piece about Jack Straw, yet such biography at the same time operates as a metaphorically autobiographical poem. 'With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world.' Gunn's final line destabilizes the intimate reality of 'leaning ass to ass', but surely 'dream' here, whether it is actually 'dream' or

⁶⁴ Scobie, p. 11.

⁶⁵ Neil Powell, 'Loud Music, Bars and Boisterous Men' in *PN Review* 30, 9:4 (1989) pp. 68-9.

⁶⁶ Haffenden, p. 52.

'experience', fosters Jack's homoerotic desire. At once the castle subsides, as 'Jack's ready for the world' in all senses.

3

Outside Jack Straw's Castle

Once we step out of 'Jack Straw's Castle', Gunn gives us the scene of the Parliament Hill near London when he was seventeen:

The sniff of the real, that's
what I'd want to get
 how it felt
to sit on Parliament
Hill on a May evening
studying for exams skinny
seventeen dissatisfied
 yet sniffing such
a potent air, smell of
grass in heat from
the day's sun (285)

'The sniff of the real, that's / what I'd want to get'. No doubt influenced by Williams's free-wheeling dedication to the doctrine of 'no ideas but in things', the poem asks us to smell memory, situate the self in time and space and dwell on the pungent presence of the concrete. It begins with a thin, wavering column of short lines, made-up of short physical words with minimal punctuation. Unexpected indented spaces re-enact a reflective and broken tone, packing the lines with vivid glimpses of particular locale (Parliament Hill), month (May), purpose (study for exams), body shape (skinny), age (seventeen) and mood (dissatisfied). The speaker's memory unpacks itself; narrative takes its shape as mere nouns and adjectives fall into a slow, stream-like rhythm that allows the story to brew. The verse smells of memory as it spreads out on the page; its casualness recalls Williams's *Paterson*. 'In heat' refers to the warm grassland as well as presence of sexual desire. In his essay 'Autobiography: Writing a Poem' (1973), Gunn says 'the act of writing is an exploration, a reaching out, an act of trusting search for the correct incantation'⁶⁷. One thing left consistently unexplored in Gunn's poetry published before the final section of *Jack Straw's Castle* is the status of memory, despite its powerfully collaborative role in the act of writing.

⁶⁷ 'Writing a Poem' in 'Autobiography' (1973) in *OP*, p. 152.

The early Gunn is a poseur and he adopts a lot of mythical, heroic, literary and pop-cult poses: Achilles, Lazarus, Shelley, Shakespeare, Elvis and the motorcyclist. Gunn identifies himself with his poses but never *Thom Gunn* himself. He is a biographer of his own literary and pop-cultural poses, rather than an autobiographer of his own self. Gunn attributes 'A selfless self' to Thomas Bewick and in Gunn's poetry, self equals anonymity, like the speaker in 'The Geysers' who is 'part of all' (246), 'torn from the self' and 'unnamed, unborn' (244). Gregory Woods argues that Gunn is a rare candidate whose works embody 'the changes which have occurred in the lives of gay men in the last seventy years.'⁶⁸ Much has been written about Gunn's thematic consistency and technical control, but somewhat less about his own psychological journey in relation to the history of homosexual culture. His constant effort of effacing his self in his early poetry gives way to an emerging autobiographical investigation that progressively figures in poems exploring the work of memory, such as 'Bringing to Light' in Part 2 and 'Autobiography', 'Hampstead: the Horse Chestnut Trees' and 'The Road Map' in the culminating last section of book. This change not only subliminally parallels the progress of sexual liberation from the 50s to 80s in the U.S., but also draws on the developing debate about the poetics of autobiography started in the 70s. In this final part of this chapter, I will look at Gunn the 'autobiographer' in *Jack Straw's Castle* as opposed to Gunn, the 'biographer' of Jack Straw, Odysseus and Elvis.

Written before his essay 'Autobiography', the poem 'Autobiography' opens the last section of *Jack Straw's Castle* and its title boldly signals Gunn's intentions. Titling the poem 'Autobiography', Gunn proposes a secret 'autobiographical pact' or 'contact' between himself as poet-autobiographer and the reader. Philippe Lejeune suggests autobiography is a mode of reading as much as a type of writing, highlighting the 'contractual effect' of the genre in his chapter 'The Autobiographical Pact':

'Social contract' of the proper name and the publication, autobiographical 'pact', fictional 'pact', referential 'pact', phantasmatic 'pact'—all the expressions used refer back to the idea that the autobiographical genre is a contractual genre.⁶⁹

On the one hand this secret 'pact' gives Gunn licence to explore his paradoxical relationship between the autobiographical self and memory, yet on the other hand, it calls into question the notions of sincerity, truth and trust in the author that go to the heart of autobiography. Memory and autobiography are inseparable from the question of what it means to put a life

⁶⁸ Gregory Woods, 'The Sniff of the Real', in *Agenda: Thom Gunn at Seventy*, 37:2-3, London (Autumn-Winter 1999), p. 92

⁶⁹ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (USA: U of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 29.

in narrative, to make a story or stories out of a life. Taking off from the memorable phrase, 'the sniff of the real', the poem signals a commitment to the smell of poetic realism without being caught up in a theoretical web. It evokes the real through direct references to details of memory charged with an elusive solidity comparable to the detail celebrated in the earlier poem about the great English naturalist engraver Thomas Berwick.

In 'Autobiography', it is a particular vibrant smell of early English summer, adolescence and indolence, laying 'on the upper/ grass with Lamartine's poems' that Gunn imagines as the starting point of his 'Autobiography', rather than Wordsworthian infancy or the bright Californian sun figured in *Moly*. Gunn frequently acknowledges his inheritance from Elizabethan poets such as Shakespeare, Donne and Jonson. But in 'Autobiography', he summons Romantic French poet Alphonse de Lamartine (a less obvious choice). Lamartine's regular, rhymed end-stopped lines in *Méditations Poétiques* (1820) create a personal poetic voice absorbed in meditation on loss. In 'Le Vallon', Lamartine writes, 'Beaux lieux, soyez pour moi ces bords où l'on oublie: / L'oubli seul désormais est ma félicité'⁷⁰, evoking the ambivalent sense of memory and forgetfulness that prefigures the process of autobiographical writing.⁷¹ Gunn's mellowing landscape of Hampstead ('distant babble of children/ and beyond, distinct at/ the end of the glow') recalls Lamartine's landscape in the sense that the painted place is felt and lingering at the edge of emotional outbursts, like the tensions accumulated at 'distant' yet 'distinct'. His tone, though, is drier, a more matter-of-fact, as the move from the Romantic lake to Hampstead's 'ponds' modifies the French poet's declamatory elegy. In 'Autobiography' the speaker walks 'through the damp / rich ways by the ponds', reflecting and reflective, as it were, meditating on loss: 'life seemed all / loss, and what was more / I'd lost whatever it was / before I'd ever had it' (285). The lines are written with syntactic and emotional condensation, even a touch of the low-key coziness of Bishop's 'lose something everyday' in 'One Art'. In his essay 'Out of the Box: Elizabeth Bishop', Gunn notes in her 'a longing for coziness, though a coziness often tinged with melancholy.'⁷² Gunn's melancholic indeterminacy towards life and loss in the poem echoes Lamartine's metaphor: 'D'ici je vois la vie, à travers un nuage, / S'évanouir pour moi dans l'ombre du passé', as if life is going towards a vanishing point. The tone and stance is, however, more robust and implicitly ironic towards his adolescent Romantic self.

⁷⁰ 'May these fair banks be where my memories cease: / My sole remaining joy is to forget' E. H. & A. M. Blackmore, ed. *Six French Poets of Nineteenth Century* (US: OUP, 2000), p. 6.

⁷¹ Lamartine's poem continues: 'D'ici je vois la vie, à travers un nuage, / S'évanouir pour moi dans l'ombre du passé: / L'amour seul est resté: comme une grande image / Survit seule au réveil dans un songe effacé.' 'From here I see life, through a misty steam, / Vanishing in the shadow of the past; / Love alone remains: as, alone, one vast / Image stays, when we waken from a dream.' *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁷² SL, p. 78.

The autobiographical Gunn in the poem is problematically incomplete, as life is caught up in this ongoing swing of loss against the grip (and sniff) of memory. In the following related poem 'Hampstead: the Horse Chestnut Tree', the poet remembers pedalling with his brother on Hampstead Heath when they were young; but the poem veers between past and present and different seasons, undermining the currency of memory even as it reproduces it:

It's all
getting lost, I started
forgetting it even as I wrote.

Forms remain, not the life
of detail or hue
then the forms are lost and
only a few dates stay with you. (287)

'Nine-tenths of our lives are well forgotten in the living. Of the part that is remembered, the most had better not be told',⁷³ Williams writes in the Foreword of his autobiography, setting the self who remembers but refuses to tell against the self who confesses but forgets. Self-contradictory at the core, Gunn like Williams is caught up in the tug of war of an autobiographical definition. Memory sponsors insufficient, broken autobiographical materials, crying out for coherence but the self hesitates (and resists) in the face of sincerity as well as dramatic disclosure. There is a fine line between this provisional, fragmentary autobiographical verse and the 'confessional' manner. In 'Against Sincerity', Louise Glück writes 'honest speech is a relief and not a discovery',⁷⁴ and what provides relief for Gunn's self are glimpses of incoherent autobiographical moments completely unlike the rhetorical, persistent confessional 'I' of Lowell, Berryman and Plath whose rebellious selves weave together personal and historical traumas in search of possible self-liberation: a way of realising their fundamental estrangement. Gunn's autobiographical self, however, is quieter, more reserved and playful than that dramatised in the high-pitched confessionalism of Plath and Lowell. 'At the edge / of the understanding: / it's the secret', he writes in 'The Outdoor Concert' (263), 'You recognize not / the content of it but / the fact that it is / there to be recognized.'

This status of secrecy and obliqueness as opposed to confessional urgency goes to the heart of Gunn's autobiographical voice. Gunn's autobiographical self is akin to Bishop's girl in 'In the Waiting Room' who 'scarcely dared to look / to see what it was I was.'⁷⁵ Gunn and

⁷³ William Carlos Williams, *The Autography of William Carlos Williams* (NY: New Directions, 1967), p. i.

⁷⁴ Louise Glück, 'Against Sincerity' in *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry* (USA: Ecco, 1994), p. 35.

⁷⁵ Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), p. 160.

surfaces within the book's psychedelic fantasia. Poems such as 'Rites of Passage', 'Moly' and 'The Fair in the Woods' negotiate the transformative drug experience within pastoral and mythical settings, and without risking the first-hand immediacy of Ginsberg. Published before Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975) and Bishop's *Geography III* (1979), 'Autobiography' in *Jack Straw's Castle* precedes the emergence of autobiography as a fashionable genre for critical study in the Eighties and before the genre was theorized by critics such as James Olney and Paul John Eakin.⁷⁷ Gunn's poetry is, however, consciously anti-confessional.⁷⁸ He is as suspicious of the romantic egocentricity of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), though one assumes that he would be sceptical of the convoluted self-dramatization of Ashbery.

Setting against the decentering, anti-foundationalist approach of the subject and self in poststructuralist theories, such as the works of Foucault, Lacan, Barthes and Derrida, autobiography in some sense reinstates the human subject and resuscitates the idea of a coherent self to tell a life-story. One problem of Gunn's autobiographical voice, however, is the derivativeness of his poetic forms and his reticence (and scepticism) towards the idea of the singular, unifying self. 'Behind the Mirror' (293), as the critic Paul Giles suggests, can be read as a 'self-parodic poem'.⁷⁹ It plays out the elusive dialectics of self and other implicit in autobiography. It mocks Gunn's own reticence about exhibiting the self. The poem is divided into two parts and they counterpoint each other like a mirror and its image. It happens in the social setting of 'a dark restaurant', where the 'I' (possibly Gunn) 'caught the eyes of another' and finds out that 'it was my own eyes from a recessed mirror.' Gunn then negotiates the doubleness of the self, saying 'I and the reflected self seemed identical twins, / alike yet separate, two flowers from the same plant.' As Paul Giles suggests, this moment recalls Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. Taking off from Freud's concepts of the early stages of psychosexual development, Lacan draws the distinction between a pre-linguistic stage of an infant as the imaginary stage and his post-linguistic acquisition as the symbolic stage. The mirror stage is an intermediate moment between the two stages 'when the infant learns to identify with his or her own image in a mirror, and so begins to develop a sense of a separate self that is later enhanced what is reflected back to it from encounters

⁷⁷ See James Olney, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) and Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: PUP, 1992).

⁷⁸ 'Like Sylvia Plath, Bly has had an influence that has been the origin of an awful lot of bad poetry. [...] I'm slightly bored with poets' personalities. Berryman is an exception in that he has an interesting personality.' Haffenden, p. 37.

⁷⁹ Paul Giles, 'Landscapes of repetition: the self-parodic nature of Thom Gunn's later poetry', *Critical Quarterly*, 29:2 (1987), p. 87.

with other people.’⁸⁰ To borrow Lacan’s idea of mirror stage, Gunn’s ‘reflected self’ is literalised as one of the ‘identical twins’ and ‘two flowers from the same plant’, in which of state of doubleness (‘alike yet separate’) implies the speaker’s uncanny return to (or nostalgia for) the mirror stage prior to the access to language. This linguistic impasse is uncoincidentally similar to Gunn’s own reticence towards the self.

In the second part the poem abruptly moves from modern restaurant to classical myth, confronting the moment when ‘Narcissus glares into the pool: someone glares back.’ This abrupt thematic jump asks the reader to connect the speaker with Narcissus, to see them as ‘identical twins’ facing the same paradox of reflection. Gunn’s Narcissus, like most Narcissuses in male homo-erotic literature, is heavily idealised and eroticised with ‘the rounded arms, / a hunk of auburn hair tumbled forward, / lips parted / in awe, in craving’. We might see him as the positive version of the uncanny Manson figure of the double in ‘Jack Straw’s Castle’. Gregory Woods in *Articulate Flesh* points out ‘Narcissus was a teenager without a lover, absorbed in the languor of his own unchannelled desire. At the same time, he was a boy who fell in love with another boy, who happened to be himself.’⁸¹ Narcissus’s passion, therefore, can be read as a metaphor of the love of one male for another. The identity crisis of Narcissus, like that of Gunn’s speakers in ‘Behind the Mirror’ and ‘Jack Straw Castle’, is the doubleness of being ‘the same’ and ‘the other’:

He escapes, he does not escape, he is the same, he is the other.
 If he drowned himself he would be one with himself.
 If he drowned himself he would wash free into the world
 placid and circular, from which he has been withdrawn. (294)

‘He’ here refers to the reflected image of both the speaker of the poem and Narcissus, both ‘the same’ and ‘the other’. Narcissus as ‘he’ mirrors the poetic I’s Narcissism. The sense of *doubled doubleness*, escape and inseparable existence restages the nightmarish entrapment of Jack Straw/Manson in ‘Jack Straw Castle’, a poem that can be rendered (auto)biographical as so much of the ‘biography’ of Jack Straw reveals the psychological struggle of Gunn’s own sexual identity.

‘The other’ in ‘Behind the Mirror’, uncoincidentally is Narcissus, an icon of homoerotic love, who is absorbed in his ‘other’, the reflection of himself. Gunn/Narcissus assumes his identity as the unified image in the mirror is reflected back to him from outside (remembering the outsider in Jack Straw’s bed at the end of ‘Jack Straw’s Castle’), from the

⁸⁰ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (7th Ed.) (USA: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), p. 252.

⁸¹ Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, p. 19.

place of the other. This Lacanian idea of the mirror as an analogy for self-reflection and self-identification underlines the act of autobiographical writing. Reading in the light of Lacan's mirror stage, autobiography, according to Shari Benstock in *The Private Self* (1988) 'reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins in the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction.'⁸² Gunn's poem offers Narcissus the same impossible dream of drowning as being 'one with himself' and 'free into the world', echoing the mythological density of Narcissus. 'He would at last be of it,' Gunn writes, 'deep behind the mirror,':

white limbs braided with a current
where both water and earth are part of it,
and would come to rest on a soft dark wave of soil
to root there and stand again
 one flower,
one waxy star, giving perfume, unreflecting.

Gunn's long sentence quietly captures Narcissus's physical transformation as he pines away and is charged into a single flower that bears his name. Narcissus's metamorphosis is appropriated by Gunn's anticipation in conditional form, as the repetitive use of 'would' in 'would at last be' and 'would come to rest' postpones the resolution of the identity crisis to the future. The poem ends with an uncanny sense of oneness and unity in the 'one flower, one waxy star', which refuses doubleness and is 'unreflecting'. Paul Giles notes that

there is a pun here on *unreflecting*: Narcissus wants to avoid seeing his own image 'reflected' in the pool; but he also hopes to be 'unreflecting' in a mental sense, endowed with the same preference for instinct over reflection that characterised Gunn's heroes in his poems of the 1950s.⁸³

The knowledge of reflection (both in its optical and mental senses) has nothing to do with the narcissus flower anymore as its mere vegetable existence continues despite the nourishment of human metaphors. In short, Narcissus ceases to reflect since he is transformed into a flower.

Other autobiographical poems also appropriate plants as mirrors of human development. In 'The Cherry Tree' the poet elaborates the metaphor of the tree-as-mother, makes it an image of biological growth and reproduction—and then the wintry self-sufficiency of the close 'She knows nothing about babies.' (296) In the interview with James

⁸² Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 11.

⁸³ Giles, p. 87.

Campbell (2000), Gunn imagines himself 'a suburban muse, a bit like Keats's.'⁸⁴ He associates Keats as a 'Cockney poet' on Hampstead Heath rather than a Lake poet. He also gives a vivid autobiographical account behind the genesis of the poem:

I was staying with one of my many aunts, in a village near Sittingbourne in Kent. The cherry tree was in the next garden, and I would see it all loaded with blossom from my bedroom window. The poem follows the cherry tree through twelve months, so it ends at its beginning, in a sense.⁸⁵

In another 'suburban' poem 'Hampstead: the Horse Chestnut Trees' (288-9) Gunn returns upon Yeats's image in 'Among School Children' of the chestnut-tree as a 'great-rooted blossom', but contrasts the elusively up-rooted nature of human memory ('my brother and I rode between them') with the otherness of the vegetable wall: 'But trees have no sentiments/ their hearts are wood'. This recalls the end of 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', where the tubers merely 'multiply in ignorance.' (55) Gunn's relentless insistence on the inanimate status of plants independent of human metaphor recalls Wallace Stevens's 'dry, plain sense of things', as well as Gray Snyder and Robert Creeley's un-accidental straightforwardness in which facts help us, as Gunn writes, 'feel the cleanness of the senses'.⁸⁶ The Wordsworthian organic imagery of human 'growth' has yielded to a tougher, post-Darwinian sense of difference.

'Behind the Mirror', like many of Gunn's autobiographical poem, is engaged in what the critic Susanna Egan calls 'mirror talk', as the narrative action 'begins as the two lives in which the biographer is also an autobiographer.'⁸⁷ Rewriting crucial 'biographical' moments of Narcissus (as he did for Odysseus in 'Moly' and Achilles in 'The Wound' and again in 'Bringing to Light'), Gunn slips in glimpses of his own autobiographical story, which is why a lot of Gunn's speakers are defined through their identifications rather than their identities. They thrive on the ground of contesting voices (such as Achilles/the invalid in 'The Wound', pig/Odysseus in 'Moly' and Gunn/Narcissus in 'Behind the Mirror') in which identity crisis is at stake. This double act of imagination, this paradox of mirror talk (talking to the mirror and the mirror talking to us), as Egan writes,

conveys some sense of Lacan's illusion of wholeness received from reflection, but it tends to emphasize mere glimpses or indications of experience and meaning, of relationship and of the processes of

⁸⁴ Campbell, p. 43.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 44.

⁸⁶ Gunn, 'The Early Snyder' in *OP*, p. 37.

⁸⁷ Susanna Egan, *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 7.

narration, rather than revealing some core identity. By virtue of being multifaceted, mirror talk reflects the very indeterminacy of life in crisis.⁸⁸

Gunn's double and multiple autobiographical voicing is more in line with the exploratory process of mirror talk than the autobiographical, seminal sequence of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Pound's *The Cantos*, Lowell's *Life Studies* and Charles Wright's *Negative Blue*: they too insist on openness, elusiveness and indeterminacy. His (auto)biographical poems are scattered through *Jack Straw's Castle* and later collections; they never congeal into a coherent narrative. Here 'Last Days at Teddington' (238) records 'the warm wakeful August night' with a garden full of guests, children and friends, a lived-in sense of sociability rather than a separate autobiographical epiphany. 'All Night, Legs Pointed East' (239) takes off from a night of insomnia to recalling 'my teens in spring' when Gunn imagined 'a plant's unrest / Or bird's expectancy, that enters full / On its conditions, quick eye claw and wing / Submitting to its pulse, alert in the nest', subtly bridging the bird's unrest to pre-adolescent anxiety to post-orgasmic restlessness.

The last poem 'Breaking Ground' (303-5) is another vegetable poem. It records the life of an unnamed old woman (possibly Gunn's grandmother?) in Kent, growing potatoes, cabbage, raspberry and bergamot when Gunn 'can't accept / her kind hand, her / grey eyes, her voice / intonations I've known / all my life—to be lost, forgotten'. The second part of the poem takes us to Monterey in California with Joan Baez's 'Let it Be' in the background as he remembers the woman in Kent:

Let it be. It
comes to me at last that
when she dies she
loses indeed
that sweet character, loses
all self, and
is dispersed—but dispersal
means
 spreading abroad

The pop song blends melancholy with the memory of a specific loss, and yet Gunn's song, like 'Let it be' in the concert, picks up a different tune as it flows: 'some have her touch, some / her eyes, some her / voice, never to be forgotten: renewed again...one great garden which / is always here.' The natural cycle of growth and decomposition appropriates the decayed human body, representing it as an agent of renewal in the harmonious image of a garden. The poem ends with an unexpected change of register from the pop song to Elizabethan lyric: 'Shee / is gonn, Shee is lost, / Shee is found, shee / is ever faire.' The words are from Sir Walter

⁸⁸ Egan, p. 226.

Raleigh's elegiac poem of imprisonment, *Ocean's Love & Cynthia*. Gunn in 'Breaking Ground' ties in two continents, two cities, two songs, two lives, a few centuries and one garden together, breaking bounds of time, space and lives to record a biographical sketch of an anonymous life. And in doing so, it reflects on Gunn's own memory-work and long-term trans-Atlantic division, effectively striking an (auto)biographical tune without formally writing a symphonic autobiography of his own. Gunn is a sketchy biographer of city lives, but at the same time a reticent autobiographer of his own, as he records it through others in *Positives*, *The Passages of Joy*, *The Man with Night Sweats* and *Boss Cupid*.

PLATE 3

Some images of Jack Straw's Castle in Hampstead Heath, London. It used to be a pub and now turned into penthouse apartments. Taken by the author.





CHAPTER FOUR

'PASS THROUGH THE CITY': STREET LIVES IN *THE PASSAGES OF JOY* (1982)

1

'Chaste' Passages

*Enlarge my life with multitude of days,
In health, in sickness, thus the suppliant prays;
Hides from himself his state, and shuns to know,
That life protracted is protracted woe.
Time hovers o'er, impatient to destroy,
And shuts up all the passages of joy*

Samuel Johnson, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'¹

Gunn's title *The Passages of Joy* (1982) playfully transposes Johnson's take on Juvenal's sense of transient fleshly pleasure to San Franciscan gay life in the 80s'. Moving from the imaginary confinement of 'Jack Straw's Castle', Gunn in *The Passages of Joy* explores the geographical specificity of San Francisco and London, evoking the erotic sniff of the real people on the streets. 'The Streets are no longer mere connections. They are things',² Gunn wrote in one of his notebooks. Streets, for Gunn, are erotic sites of intersection where the homosocial meets the homosexual experience, and where the excitement of erotic inconsequentiality may or may not develop into a sustained friendship. He associates streets with energy, something he wants to 'possess' in his poetry:

One of the things I want to record is the street, because the streets that I move through are part of my life that I enjoy and want to possess. I don't any longer think of a poem as "loot", but I do think of it as in some sense possessing something.³

¹ Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings* ed. Patrick Cruttwell, (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 143-4, l. 255-260.

² Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Thom Gunn Notebook 6, Feb 28 to May 1970

³ PR, p. 183.

In an early 70s notebook he wrote: 'carry S.F. in the head'.⁴ For Gunn, 'Possess' includes different sensual experiences, associated with the nine holes or passages of our body that offer the pleasure of sight, smell, sound, taste and sex. The web of streets fosters diverse human interactions as well as develops a unique cityscape.

'Passages' in *The Passages of Joy* alludes to 'the action of passing'⁵ in Gunn's own experience of gay history—his transit from the-summer-of-love bathhouse drugs and orgies in *Moly* to the tormented self confined in *Jack Straw's Castle*, and to the reports of the AIDS epidemic in *The Man with Night Sweats*. 'Passages' also suggest 'passageways', the narrow, seedy and bumpy streets of San Francisco, the exciting playground for cruising and meeting with old and new friends. The word, according to the OED, also includes 'the passing of people' and 'something that passes between two persons mutually or amorous relations', that is, the crowded flow of San Francisco street lives that Gunn feels pleasurable at home. Finally 'passages' also means a 'small or moderate portion of writing, a part of speech' and 'a passing utterance of a phrase or expression.' 'One of the several senses of the word passages is channels,' Gunn writes, 'after all, the nine channels with their nine holes through which we get most of our physical joys.'⁶ I suggest that many poems in *The Passages of Joy* operate like small episodic 'passages' taken out of a large backdrop of San Franciscan life.

Gunn's love affair with San Francisco's streets is played out in 'Night Taxi' (386-8), the concluding poem of *The Passages of Joy* about a taxi driver called 'Rod Taylor' who thinks that his 'fares are like affairs'. The city in the poem has a 'chaste' sense of clarity at night: 'Open city / uncluttered as a map.' The taxi driver takes shortcuts and picks up speed, and switches on 'the dispatcher's / litany of addresses, / China Basin to Twin Peaks, / Harrison Street to the Ocean.' Gunn told Clive Wilmer that this 'litany of names' locates the 'four extreme points in the city'. He went on, 'It's pure litany, it's not meaningful. But it gave me a feeling of possession or achievement—to have found a place for those names.'⁷ The poem, like a map, evokes the topographical specifics of San Francisco, but unlike a map it translates place names into a 'a feeling of possession', finding 'a place for those names.' Towards the end of the poem the taxi driver explores the dialectical relationship between his life and the city:

Do I pass through the city
or does it pass through me?

⁴ University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Thom Gunn Notebook 5, Sept 5, 1969 to Feb 25, 1970.

⁵ Quotations about the various meanings of 'passages' here and onwards are cited from OED.

⁶ *Poetry Books Society Bulletin*, 113, London (Summer 1982), p. [1].

⁷ PR, p. 184.

I know I have to be loose,
like my light embrace of the wheel,
loose but in control (387)

'The streets that I move through are part of my life', Gunn said. Unlike the countryside through which Gunn's early bikers move 'with uncertain violence', the palpable city in 'Night Taxi' becomes a living organism that passes through the driver's life. 'Loose but in control' is far cry from the biker's motto in 'Black Jackets': 'Born to Lose'. The phrase not only captures the erotic drive around the city, but epitomizes Gunn's paradoxical play on risk: his fascination with high-risk activities and subjects countered by his sense of 'loose' control.

Many poems in *The Passages of Joy*, written about street lives of 'real' people, are 're-performed' through the anonymous voice of the third person, as if Gunn has to write off his presence or participation to write such poetic 'records'.⁸ The book is populated with the pleasure and the risk of urban street lives. 'Another All Night Party' and 'At the Barrier' record Gunn's sociable gay life, his intimate friendship and carnivalesque pleasure without explicit portrayal of sex. Other poems such as 'Sweet Things', 'The Miracle', 'Song of a Camera' and 'San Francisco Streets', however, record another version based on anonymous sex, cottaging (tearoom), S/M and promiscuity that critics like Donald Davie considered dangerously homosexual.⁹ The book also describes the dark passages of urban life: an unexplained suicide in 'Elegy', a familial deceit and breakdown in 'Adultery', Elvis's overdose in 'Painkillers', and as the title captures, the early cases of AIDS (called 'gay cancer' when *The Passages of Joy* was published¹⁰) in 'Transients and Residents'.

⁸ In an interview, Gunn said, 'I like to bring in people on the street [in my poems]. I was thinking that, if the romantics had "effusions" and certain of the modernists had "observations"—*Prufrock and Other Observations*, Marianne Moore's book *Observations*—what I'm trying to do is record.' (PR, p. 183)

⁹ Donald Davie condemned *Jack Straw's Castle*. His tone became more mellow in 1989, despite the keen emphasis on 'practicing homosexual': 'He was a practicing homosexual, and in poem after poem in *The Passages of Joy* he proves on his pulses, from experience, that is so far as he is concerned, homosexual practices (even, in some circumstances, of a notably promiscuous and mercenary kind) constitute 'what is right.' He continues, with a mild touch of irony: 'The appeal to experience, and alleged vindication by experience, are what Gay Liberation, when it is respectable, is all about. Gunn's fearlessness about it, together with his ardent belief that the liberation is momentous and overdue and enlightened, was impressive, all the more so because it was clear that he was naturally a reticent man who disliked self-exposure.' (Donald Davie, 'Thom Gunn' in *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain 1960-1988* (GB: Carcanet, 1989), p. 178)

¹⁰ *The Passages of Joy*, published in 1982, shows barely any sign of AIDS or epidemic, except in 'Transients and Residents' in the section titled 'Crossroads': 'You lie propped up here like an invalid./ Pursuing your recuperation, slow./ Relentless, from the world you used to need.' (CP, p. 376) This may be an early sign of AIDS?

Here are some quotes and facts about the ambiguous time before and after AIDS was diagnosed: 'In the spring of 1981 rumours about a mysterious 'gay cancer' began circulating on Castro Street and throughout the gay community. [...] By 1984 Castro Street was virtually a ghost town. Businesses boarded up, fear gripped the community as at first hundreds and then thousands of gay men died.' (Les

The city offers both the erotic and risky streets, and the two contrasting worlds converge comfortably in *The Passages of Joy*. The notion of poetry as an exploration, as occasional adventure is at the heart of Gunn's street lives. In the interview with Clive Wilmer, he connects the genesis of *The Passages of Joy* with his poetic pursuit of experience:

I liked the idea of a populated book. I've always liked the idea of a book of poems as a kind of...if not a world, a country in a world. One of my impulses in writing is the desire to possess my experience and to possess all my experiences—my funny and trivial experiences too. [...] What I'm trying to do is *record*. I'm recording the past, I'm also recording the present and I'm recording the world around me and the things that go through my mind.¹¹

Belle Randall points out that 'exploration for Gunn means in part making poetry out of areas of experience without literary antecedent and therefore not previously objectified in terms of any particular style or set of decorums.'¹² She concludes 'Gunn is one of the few poets around who is *both* taking risks and keeping alive the traditions of poet as responsible man of letters, as well as those of rhyme and meter.'¹³ For Gunn, the definition of a poem is Yvor Winters's 'a statement in words about a human experience.'¹⁴ He also favours Duncan's: 'It is a reach into the unknown, an adventuring into places you cannot have predicted.'¹⁵ Gunn in *The Passages of Joy* compounds Winters's word-choice-as-moral-choice principle with Duncan's open and never-completed creative process.

In terms of poetic form, *The Passages of Joy* is predominantly written in free verse; it is more Duncan than Winters. This caused some consternation among his readers especially the British ones. For some critics like Donald Davie¹⁶ and Terry Eagleton,¹⁷ Gunn's

Wright, 'San Francisco' in David Higgs, ed. *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories since 1600*. (London & NY: Routledge, 1999), p. 186.

'July 2, 1981: "Rare Cancer Seen in Homosexuals" is the first story in *The New York Times* about the mysterious disease that will later be named AIDS.' (Steve Hogan & Lee Hudson, *Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopaedia* (NY: Owl Book, 1998), p. 655.)

'July 27, 1982: Representative of various gay, government, and health organizations decide on the term "acquired immune deficiency syndrome", or AIDS, at a Centers of Disease Control meeting convened in Washington, D.C. The mysterious syndrome is now reaching epidemic proportions among gay men in the U.S.' (ibid, p. 656.)

¹¹ PR, p. 183.

¹² PNR33, p. 27

¹³ ibid.

¹⁴ PR, p. 160.

¹⁵ Jack R. Cohn & Thomas J. O'Donnell, 'An Interview with Robert Duncan' in *Contemporary Literature* 21:4 (1980), p. 527.

¹⁶ For Davie, *The Passages of Joy* 'isn't in the least a joyous book'. (Donald Davie, *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1988*, p. 178). Gregory Woods in 'The Sniff of the Real' highlights Davie homophobic undertone: 'In a typically sinuous essay on Gunn, Donald Davie tentatively endorses the modest aims of "Gay Liberation (when it is respectable)" at the same time as he deplores the "pathetic

combination of free verse and sexuality are perceived as over-daring and risky. John Lucas disapproved of Gunn's 'laid-back, free-form, West Coast style', marking it as 'slack' and harmfully ' clichéd'.¹⁸ Likewise, Neil Powell refuses Gunn's 'casualness', saying 'To write on both Jonson and Snyder is one thing, to write *like* both of them in a single volume quite another.'¹⁹ It is true that some poems such as 'Slow Walker', 'The Girls Next Door', 'Donahue's Sister' and 'At an Intersection' hinge on flat, almost clichéd third-person portrayals. Instead of selectively exploring key experiences, some of Gunn's free verse in the book loosens narrative momentum and results in a series of casually anecdotal passing moments. The aesthetic risk he runs in such poems is banality—one that like Williams he was content to run.

Michael Schmidt wrote that for Gunn 'each poem is a new risk, not in the teeth of form, but with form itself.'²⁰ This question of 'risky form' becomes especially salient in *The Passages of Joy* because so many poems are written in 'the plain style' Donald Davie championed in *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952), which Gunn would have read in Cambridge. Borrowing from Goldsmith's idea against 'frigidity',²¹ Davie develops his idea of 'chastity of poetic diction' as a form of 'restraint and economy in the use of metaphor.' Chaste diction therefore is 'pure', unpolluted by 'sentiments and habits', and the poet with such poetic 'chastity' or 'purity' is able to 'purify the language of the tribe' (Davie borrowed Eliot's phrase), correcting and re strengthening the spoken languages of his time.²² Gunn was described by Frank Kermode as a 'chaste and powerful poet'²³ in the vein of Davie's treatise, highlighting the insistence of clarity in Gunn's poetry. In response to Kermode's claim, Gunn swerved to the idea of Isherwood's 'transparent' style:

incongruity" of the word "gay". He speaks of gay liberation as one of several "causes which agitated poets and their readers in the 1970s", implying that poetry should not in such trivial way be "agitated" by current events—stirred, perhaps, but not shaken.' (AGENDA, p. 96)

¹⁷ Reviewing *The Passages of Joy* and *The Occasions of Poetry*, Eagleton writes: 'Gunn's recent collection...has little to recount beyond causal encounters and homosexual gossip.' He continues to claim that it is 'depressingly thin and banal for a poet who at one time promised to be the most intelligently resourceful of the younger English writers...Gunn is now a considerably better critic than he is a poet, which is not in the least, one imagines, what he is try for.' (*Stand* 24:3 (1983), pp. 77-80)

¹⁸ John Lucas, 'Pleading for the Authenticity of the Spirit', *New Statesman* 104 (13 August 1982), p. 21.

¹⁹ Neil Powell, *PN Review* 30, 9:4, pp. 68-9

²⁰ Michael Schmidt, 'Gunn, For Example', *PN Review* 70, 16:2 (1989), p. 37.

²¹ According to Goldsmith', Davie continues, 'chastity in writing is the best safeguard against frigidity; and frigidity is "a deviation from propriety owing to the erroneous judgment of the writer, who, endeavouring to captivate the admiration with novelty, very often shocks the understanding with extravagance"' Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 18.

²² Davie, p. 16, 31.

²³ *PR*, p. 182

I admire the qualities of somebody like Isherwood—of what I would call a ‘transparent’ style. Now the word *transparent*, as you know, is much frowned on by most critics nowadays. They don’t like that at all. I love it! I think that’s what it’s all about. [...] I want more clarity. [...] I don’t want to be an obscure poet. I do not want even to be as obscure a poet as Lowell, though I may often be so.²⁴

For Gunn, ‘transparent’ means ‘clarity’, a version of Davie’s chastity of poetic diction rather than a transparent, sincere or authentic self. He thinks of himself as an apprentice of being ‘a literalist’, seeking to achieve ‘a simple faithfulness to experienced truth’ arisen from occasions.²⁵ In *The Passages of Joy* Gunn the literalist is interested in re-enacting the dilemma of the sexual ambivalence and crisp playfulness, bringing together the classical and Elizabethan world of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson and Rochester, with his contemporary taste for Bunting, Duncan and Isherwood. Sean O’Brien says that Gunn’s *oeuvre* captures ‘the unusual clarity some of the debates poetry in English has pursued in this century—form versus improvisation, diction versus talk, the American way versus the English tradition.’²⁶ This exciting tension between Gunn’s unchaste subject matters and exceptionally chaste, lean, unadorned poetic form becomes starker in *The Passages of Joy* than ever before, due to the preponderance of free verse. August Kleinzahler defines Gunn’s ‘chaste’ and low-key idiom as ‘The Plain Style’ found in ‘diction and movement of the way people speak.’²⁷ Gunn’s plain style, Kleinzahler believes, does not ‘call attention to itself but serves the material of the poem’; it is not colloquial but conversational—‘clear, trim and direct’.

‘Expression’ (321) neatly exemplifies Gunn’s ‘chaste’ poetics in *The Passages of Joy*. The poem records Gunn’s experience of ‘reading / the poetry of my juniors’ when Gunn taught modern poetry and creative writing in UC Berkeley from 1958 to 1999.²⁸ He describes his students’ poems are about ‘black irony / of breakdown, mental institution, / and suicide attempt, of which the experience / does not always seem first-hand.’ Gunn points out his students’ inclination to write like Plath, Berryman and Lowell—confessional poets whose autobiographical poems invited ‘his juniors’ to imitate them. He concludes: ‘It is very poetic poetry’. Instead of dramatizing his ironic stance by italicizing *poetic*, he disengages himself from the dominant American line of confessional poetry in the 1970s and early 80s.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ August Kleinzahler, ‘Thom Gunn: The Plain Style and The City’ in *AGENDA*, p. 44.

²⁶ *TLS*, 1993, to be found out

²⁷ Kleinzahler, *AGENDA*, p. 44.

²⁸ Having taught creative writing and poetry at UC Berkeley for 25 years (from 1958 to 1966 and again from 1973 to 1990), Gunn retired in May 1999.

The second stanza of 'Expression' moves to 'the Art Museum' as Gunn withdraws from the role of teacher (and writer). Now wandering like other visitors, he finds himself 'looking for something, / though I'm not sure what it is.' Artistic intention here is infused with a sense of uncertainty, and that 'something' means a painting but also symbolizes the poet's own poetic materials. He then experiences the uncanny moment of arriving at 'something' that he has not seen before that is charged with some familiar recognition: 'I reach it, I recognize it, / seeing it for the first time.' The tone of the poem changes as we are introduced to an untitled painting simply called 'An "early Italian altarpiece."' Gunn titled the poem 'Expression' but he depicts the expression of the Virgin and the Child without either being expressive or expressionistic. Gunn brings out the cool, mathematical and painterly beauty of 'the outlined Virgin' and 'doll-sized Child':

He has the knowing face of an adult,
and a precocious forelock curling
over the smooth baby forehead. She
is massive and almost symmetrical.
He does not wriggle, nor is he solemn. (321)

For Gunn, there is 'something' beautiful about the non-human qualities of Mary and Jesus, whose portrayal during the early Renaissance is usually homely and intimate. He juxtaposes the divine and the mundane: 'The sight quenches, like water / after too much birthday cake.' But what 'quenches' is not the painting's expression but the reverse: 'Solidly there, mother and child / stare outward, two pairs of matching eyes / void of expression.' The poem closes here, leaving an open and puzzling ending which is very unlike many Gunn's poems obsessed with argument(ation) and (re)definition. 'Void of expression' counter-balances the title 'Expression' and counters the 'very poetic poetry' of both his students and the confessional poets. 'I distrust myself with rhetoric,' he told James Campbell in an interview, 'because it would be a form of falsification. Though I adore writers like Milton and Yeats, and even Lowell at times, they are writers of rhetoric, and not my kind of writer.'²⁹ By examining his experience of reading the poetry of his juniors, in 'Expression' Gunn offers us a way to read his own. He explores the tension between a piece of art 'void of expression'. It draws fluently from 'first-hand' experience and distils it in a way that preserves its rawness. Whatever else it is, this is not an over-processed poem—in Kleinzahler's words it is 'plain', in Kermode's 'chaste', and Gunn's 'transparent'.

²⁹ Campbell, p. 46.

Street Lives: San Francisco

watch the busy scenes of crowded life

Johnson, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'

In 'San Francisco Streets', the speaker (Gunn himself) is a gazer, watching 'the busy scenes of crowded life' in his adopted city. 'I've had my eye on you / For some time now' (355): the poem opens with the focus on 'you' from the casserole of 'crowded life'. This is not the Audensque you that Gunn experimented with in 'The Carnal Knowledge', but a known, nameless adolescent, a boy from the (erotically charged) 'Peach country' trying to reinvent his life in San Francisco. Unlike the reciprocal gaze that generates a sexual encounter Gunn's gaze operates as a surveillance system, checking up that 'you're getting by it seems, / Not quite sure how.' Independent and alert, the gazer is not interested in being seen but only in seeing. Voyeuristic and fetishistic, its pleasure is realized as a paternal friend in the background of the new boy's life.

The 'peach boy' in the poem is a new immigrant in the city. He had an agricultural background at home as he 'went picking' peaches everyday and ended up 'with peach fuzz sticking / All over face and arms'. The poem explores San Francisco's status of bohemian haven, identified by *Life* magazine in 1964 as the 'Gay Capital' of the US.³⁰ Writing about San Francisco's gay history, Les Wright points out 'the city's uncanny ability to reinvent itself.'³¹ For Gunn too, San Francisco was a city for reinvention, and after following his lover Mike Kitay from Cambridge University to Stanford, finally settled in there in 1960.³² Like the

³⁰ 'Life magazine's identification of San Francisco as the 'Gay Capital' of the United States in its 26 June 1964 issue was both an observation of the facts of San Francisco as well as fuel to the flames of official resentment of the visible gay presence in the city...The 26 June issue of *Life* in 1964 was a watershed for the leather community of San Francisco. The lead photo, an interior shot of Tool Box and the mural of Chuck Arnett, served as a beacon to show the world that in San Francisco "there was an alternative homomasculine style.'" (Les Wright, 'San Francisco' in David Higgs, ed. *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories since 1600*. (London & NY: Routledge, 1999), p. 176.)

³¹ Wright, p. 164.

³² 'So we met in 1952, during our second year. I was doing quite well as a student so I tried for fellowships to this country, and I got one in Stanford. Which was not very close to him because he was in an Air Force base in San Antonio. I didn't want to go to Harvard because the west coast is so exotic and nothing like Europe, while the east coast is like Europe. After my first year I went to get some half-assed teaching job in San Antonio so I could like with Mike. After he was released I said the place to move is San Francisco. We came up separately and enrolled in Stanford doing graduate work.' ('Smokin' Gunn', <<http://www.sonic.net/goblin/8gunn.html>> (24 February 2005))

peach boy, Gunn reinvented himself, in his case as an overtly homosexual poet in San Francisco. He recalled 'the ultimate happiness' of settling in the city:

It was quite an open city. Flourishing whore-houses, a lot of gay bars. I was taken to my first gay bar, and you might say I haven't looked back since. The freedom this city offers to homosexuals was a big attraction. One day I was walking down Columbus avenue in the fog—I remember this with peculiar clarity, even to the exact street corner—and I suddenly thought that the ultimate happiness would be for me and Mike to settle in San Francisco. And here we are, still.³³

For Gunn, this rough-and-tumble, morally wide-open frontier town harboured real opportunities for self-redefinition. Les Wright points out that San Francisco was 'true to the gold diggers, utopians, philosophers of Manifest Destiny, opportunists of every stripe and many a young man escaping dubious or intolerable personal situations, each arrived in San Francisco with distinctly preconceived notions of the place which rarely had the slightest correspondence with reality.'³⁴ Oscar Wilde, who visited the city in 1882, remarked that 'everyone who disappears is said to be seen at San Francisco. It must be a delightful city and possess all the attractions of the next world.'³⁵ In a sense Gunn too disappeared in San Francisco, or re-appeared there, as a poet of its passages of joy.

Transformed from a sleepy backwater by the economy of the Gold Rush era, San Francisco became an international port and cultural capital of the American West as well as what Carl Whittman calls 'a refugee camp for homosexuals.'³⁶ During the 60s, Gunn and Kitay shared a flat on Filbert Street in North Beach. The area, with its bars, jazz clubs and comedy clubs, attracted 'a range of anti-establishment, nomadic individuals, including notables from the Beat generation.'³⁷ Several key Beat figures, such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs (who figures in Gunn's 'A Drive to Los Alamos'), Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassidy³⁸, were homosexual or bisexual. Although they did not stay long in San Francisco, their anarchic and iconoclastic presence took root. Ginsberg came to San Francisco to 'find the Whitman self-reliance to indulge a celebration of self'. Here he came to terms with his

It is worth noting that Gunn consciously prefers the West coast to the East as it is 'like Europe'.

³³ Scobie, p. 6.

³⁴ Wright, p. 164.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Carl Whittman in 'Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto' in *SF Free Press*, (22 December 1969 – 7 January 1970).

³⁷ Wright, p. 174.

³⁸ 'Jack Kerouac came to the city in 1947, at the end of the cross-country trip that was to make him famous a decade later with the publication of *On the Road*. Because Neal Cassidy was in San Francisco, the city became the western terminus of Kerouac's restless cross-country swing. He turned the original teletype-roll manuscript of *On the Road* into paragraphs in Cassidy's flat on Russian Hill in 1952.' (Wright, p. 176.)

homosexuality, met Peter Orlovesky, moved to the Hotel Wentley and read *Howl* for the first time at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1955.

Even though Gunn's street poems in *The Passages of Joy* do not offer flashbacks of the city's gay history, his precise naming of gay streets and landmarks provides a living record of the homoerotic topography of pre-AIDS San Francisco. The title 'San Francisco Streets' suggests a generalized view of public lives, whereas the poem spotlights the story of one particular person in the crowd, unpicking his transition from farmer in 'Peach country' to middle-class sales clerk in Castro Street. The boy's social transformation involves an unsentimental education in Gay Culture. We are told he first 'hung out on Market Street' in a 'Tough little group of boys / Outside Flagg's Shoes' but soon noses in the world:

You learned to keep your cash.
You got tattoos.

Then by degrees you rose
Like country cream—
Hustler to towel boy,
Bath House and steam;
Tried being kept a while—
But felt confined,
One brass bed driving you
Out of your mind.

(355-6)

From victim to hustler, from 'towel boy' to 'kept' boy, the anonymous protagonist rises up the pole, playing a series of assigned roles in the all-male hierarchy of the city's Gay Culture. Mimicking an Elizabethan ballad metre, the loosely rhymed stanza (*abcbedfe*) explores the sensitive modern subjects of tattoos, hustlers and bathhouses, turning them into a stereotypical but playful narrative. The poem has trim stanzaic swagger, and the gaze is like that defined by Henning Bech, involving 'delicacy, self-control and practices, i.e. good manners—a qualification in itself.'³⁹ The street poems in *The Passages of Joy* show 'self-control' and 'good manners' even when the speaker's eyes are gazing at bodies on the street.

Central to the erotics of the street is the play of the gaze. In 'Song of the Open Road' Whitman has conjured it in an earlier era when he asked: 'Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers? / Do you know the talk of those turning eyeballs?'⁴⁰ In Gunn's 'San Francisco Streets' the one being gazed at is also a gazer, as the poet addresses another 'you':

³⁹ Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*, trans. Teresa Mesquit & Tim Davies (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997), p. 105.

⁴⁰ Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy, (UK: Penguin, 2001).

You gaze out from the store
 Watching you watch
 All the men strolling by
 I think I catch
 Half-veiled uncertainty
 In your expression.
 Good looks and great physiques
 Pass in procession. (356)

‘Watching you watch’ spells out the playful dynamics of looking. ‘Watch’ strikingly rhymes with ‘catch’, the boy’s ‘half-veiled uncertainty’ of finding the gaze in return in this visual manhunt. ‘Pass in procession’ suggests the sexual politics of ‘passing’, which defines the street as a site of erotic mobility. In ‘Fragments for a Queer City’ David Bell argues that ‘the subtleties of the gaze and the codings of homosexual identities in public space can offer the transgressive, transient pleasure of passing.’⁴¹ Gunn’s poem also features Castro Street in the 70s and early 80s when it emerged as ‘a gay city-within-a-city.’⁴² The pre-AIDS Castro Street in the poem was a thriving gay quarter, as *The Rough Guide to San Francisco* (2003) describes it as ‘filled with stores, restaurants and bars all flying the rainbow flag, and...usually packed with people whatever the time of day. It’s especially throbbing on a Sunday afternoon, crammed with men strolling, cruising, and sipping coffee on the sidewalk.’⁴³

Looking out on Castro Street as a sales clerk, the boy saw ‘good looks and great physiques’, perhaps suggesting the clone culture started in the gay ghettos of San Francisco and New York about 1974 and spread quickly all around the world. A post-hippie look, the stereotypical components of clone are ‘a mustache, a flannel shirt, and tight button-fly jeans, all ideally accentuated by well-developed muscles and a masculine carriage.’⁴⁴ The clone also came to symbolize a sense of belonging. In ‘Why I Always Wanted to be a Clone’ David B. Feinberg confesses ‘Invisibility is what I sought. I’ve always wanted to be exactly like everyone else. I wanted to blend into a crowd of clones and disappear.’⁴⁵ Feinberg’s experience coincides with a stem of Leo Bersani’s argument about gay identity and sameness in ‘The Gay Absence’ in *Homos*.⁴⁶ The ‘clone’ also led to a culture of ‘trade’, ‘sexually available

⁴¹ David Bell, ‘Fragments for a Queer City’ in *Pleasure Zones: Bodies Cities Spaces* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 91.

⁴² Wright, p. 180, 182.

⁴³ It is interesting to note the way popular travel guide tries to capture the lost atmosphere in the area. Nick Edwards & Mark Ellwood, *The Rough Guide to San Francisco* (Rough Guides, 2003), p. 108.

⁴⁴ Hogan & Hudson, p. 139.

⁴⁵ David B. Feinberg, *Eighty-Sixed* (NY: Grove, 2002), p. 82.

⁴⁶ Bersani argues: ‘My argument is that by not accepting and radically reworking the different identity of sameness—by rejecting the whole concept of identity—we risk participating in the homophobic project that wants to annihilate us. Only an emphasis on the specifics of sameness can help us to avoid collaborating in the disciplinary tactics that would makes us invisible. In other words, there is a “we”. But in our anxiety to convince straight society that we are only some malevolent invention and that we

but straight-identified men, usually young and working-class', and as Hogan and Hudson observe, 'by the end of the clone era, gay male sexuality had been so transformed that even the word "trade" had largely disappeared from gay male slang.'⁴⁷ Being a sales clerk, that the peach boy is literally in trade, 'selling chic jewelry', but also in the 'trade' of gazing at the clones on Castro Street.

Gunn ends 'San Francisco Streets' with the question of roots, returning to the initial image of the boy's association with peaches. Earlier he had described the peach fuzz as 'Intimate, gross, / Itching like family, / But far too close' (355), and in the final stanza Gunn takes this up as he offers some gently admonitory advice:

You've risen up this high—
How, you're not sure.
Better remember what
Makes you secure.
Fuzz is still on the peach,
Peach on the stem.

The delicate organic image of 'Peach on the stem' suggests both a return to his rural roots and the fragility of his youthful urban charm. It is worth noting that the word 'street', announced in the title, appears three times in the poem unrhymed, as if the street life that the 'peach boy' is at odds with that fruity resonance. Gunn dwells on the gap between the boy's present and past, while that 'still' suggests his precarious future. The poem ends with a provocative statement about the politics of the gaze: 'Your looks looked after you. / Look after them.' The lines summarize the social and sexual dynamics in the city where eyes and the gaze are everywhere. Others look at 'your looks', but 'you' will only be looked at, as the speaker looks at him, if you work to preserve the looks on which your status depends. If 'San Francisco Streets' is a story of migrant survival and reinvention, it also explores the politics of the metropolitan gaze. In *When Men Meet* Henning Bech claims that 'The gaze belongs to the city':

Only when there is mutual strangeness does it exist; and the city supplies strangers galore. In the country, there is no gaze, but instead an all-embracing visibility...[In the city] every one walks down the street, and everyone is free to look at everyone...The homosexual, then develops the gaze. Conversely, it may be that the gaze develops the homosexual: another man's

can be, like you, good soldiers, good parents, and good citizens, we seem bent on suicide. By erasing our identity we do little more than reconfirm its inferior position within a homophobic system of differences.' (*Homos*, p. 42)

Being a clone in a way confirms Bersani's last sentence in my quote. I tap into Bersani here to relate Gunn's observation of 'good looks and great physiques' to a larger picture of gay theoretical debate. However, many Gunn's poems mark distinct distance from any theoretical trends. I allude Bersani here it would be impertinent for me to apply theoretical approaches directly to the explication of Gunn's poetry.

⁴⁷ Hogan & Hudson, p. 140.

surface captivating one's glance, another's man's gaze meeting one's own and arousing interest. Whatever the case, it is impossible to be homosexual without having a gaze.⁴⁸

The gaze, of course, plays an equal role in heterosexual and bisexual urban life. Bech's emphasis on the gaze in the constitution of homosexuality marks the street as what David Bell called, 'potentially *the* most erotic urban erogenous zone.'⁴⁹

'San Francisco Streets' plays at Bech's dialectical account of the gaze that maps out the erotic city and the erotic city that maps out the gaze. Gunn himself is sceptical about the politics of the 'gay community', and we can see that from his diction he prefers 'city' and 'street' to 'community', 'friendship' to 'sociability', and 'desire' to 'sexuality'. His poetry and poetics are deliberately against the grain of intellectual fashion. He told Clive Wilmer,

I've always been interested in the life of the street. I suppose it's always seemed to be like a kind of recklessness, a freedom after the confinement of the home or the family. [...] There is the promiscuity of the streets, which can hold promise of a sexual promiscuity as well, which is exciting. [...] As soon as Reagan pushed the nutcases out on the street in California, turning them back to the "community," which means turning them out on the streets in fact, the composition of the people on the streets began to change a good deal.⁵⁰

Gunn 'the street observer' lingers in Fifth Street, Market Street, Polk Street, Castro Street, Haight-Ashbury Street, and Cole Street, and those San Francisco streets become the structural coordinates in his street poems. Gunn's streets feature bumping into friends, doing errands like buying 'toothpaste, / vitamin pills and a book of stamps' (327), hooking up with ex-lovers in 'Sweet Things', cottaging in McDonald's toilet in 'The Miracle', violent rape in 'The Victim', and a taxi-driver's night shift in 'Night Taxi'.

Gunn's streets are haunted not only by strangers, but friends and lovers. Gunn said that 'the value of friendship' was 'a subject that has preoccupied me in recent years', and 'this shows especially in *The Passages of Joy*, though nobody noticed it.'⁵¹ He argued that it was 'the greatest value in my life' because

This is not a literary influence, though I admire Ben Jonson very much and he likes to write about friendship. I write about love, I write about friendship. Unlike Proust, I think love and friendship are part of the same spectrum.

⁴⁸ Bech, p. 108.

⁴⁹ Bell, p. 91.

⁵⁰ PR, p. 187.

⁵¹ SL, p. 229.

Proust says that they are absolutely incompatible. I find that they are absolutely intertwined.⁵²

Gunn lived with lovers and friends under the same roof in San Francisco, leading Edmund White to call him 'the last of the commune dwellers.'⁵³ In 1971, when property values in Haight-Ashbury hit rock bottom, Gunn bought a two-flat Victorian house on upper Cole Street and combined the two units [PLATE 5]. For the next 33 years he shared the house with Kitay, Schuessler (Kitay's lover) and an assortment of friends and companions. Gunn refused to play landlord or exploit the property for profit and rented only to friends. In 1966, as Wright records, 'the world's first psychedelic shop opened on Haight Street, new drugs became prevalent and the hippies moved in.'⁵⁴ In early 1967 'tens of thousands attended for the first human Be-in Golden Gate Park (adjacent to the Haight), presided over by Ginsberg and others.'⁵⁵ Strangely both *Moly* and *Jack Straw's Castle*, written when Gunn lived in Haight-Ashbury, feature imaginary territories rather than Gunn's familiar localities of San Francisco. *The Passages of Joy* extends his poetic territory into 'San Francisco's Streets'.

In 'Another All-Night party' Gunn records a sequence of post-party events that brings 'the life of the street' and 'the value of friendship' together. After 'another night of passages' in 'that wet purgatorial hall' (353) of a basement party in SOMA (South of Market Street), Gunn walks on Fifth Street with this friend at daybreak:

The drugs wear off, my friend and I
Head for the sidewalks of the day.
Fifth Street at 7 a.m. in May.
So this is where the night-stream led:
Pavements as empty as my head,
Stone city under pale blue sky. (353)

This cool aubade registers an anecdotal everyday lifewhich is unlike the sprawling psychedelic visions of the LSD poems in *Moly*. In an uncollected poem called 'Bow Down' (published in 1985 is a pamphlet titled *Sidewalk*⁵⁶), Gunn describes 'the line of men / unevenly disposed along the footway / waiting to get into the sex club'.⁵⁷ Stating that 'the drugs wear off' establishes a casual, down-beat, morning-after idiom. Like 'San Francisco Streets', the

⁵² PR, p. 185.

⁵³ Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part One', SFGate.com, April 2005, <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/25/DDGUFCD4SPI.DTL>>

⁵⁴ Wright, p. 178.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Poems in *Sidewalk* include 'Outside the Diner', 'Skateboard', 'Well Dennis O'Grady', 'The Best Secret', 'Bow Down', 'The City' and 'These Minute Designs'. The first three of which are collected in the third section of *The Man with Night Sweats*. There is a drawing by Bill Schuessler on a view of San Francisco in the book.

⁵⁷ *Sidewalk*, p. 14.

neat stanzaic form and rhyme (*abbcca*) organize the informal night-out into a unifying, aesthetic experience with the initial 'I' eventually chirring with the 'pale blue sky' but also half-shaped with 'day' and 'May' on the way. The language is easy and vernacular, but both the 'sidewalks of the day' and 'night-stream' open metaphorical doors out of the pedestrian scene. The poem's sense of robust pleasure depends on a sense of genial sociability. Indeed it gives homosexuality a good name:

We laugh, and once more we've run through
Historic night to simpler dawn.
Though even the street we walk upon
Might sparkle with a difference.

Rendering the ordinary epic, Gunn's 'historic night' sounds self-undermining, almost mock heroic. The street 'we walk upon / Might sparkle with a difference' because 'we' are enriched by last night experience. This re-maps the city and Wordsworth's 'the difference to me' in the light of a new kind of gay history. The poem ends with a contented sense of lassitude reverberating with a post-orgasmic relief:

I stretch, almost too tired to think,
Cool as a hand freed from a glove
That it began to feel part of,
It had been on so long. We greet
Two other guests on Market Street
And hit the Balcony for a drink. (354)

Charged with sexual implication, 'a hand freed from a glove' suggests protected sex, but it may also literally mean a hand and a glove, though, in Gunn's case, we are inclined to think of a leather glove. The word 'freed' signals liberation and release from the sexual and psychedelic roles they had been playing. While the first line withdraws to a lethargic self, the following image regains the realization of bodily contact, as the hands 'began to feel part of' the glove. It is as if the body has forgotten the senses, or has given itself up to other hallucinatory senses.

The poem ends with a gesture towards an extensive network of friendship as 'the 'two other guests' appear on Market Street and join them for a drink. Gunn's subtle distinction between 'two other guests' and 'my friend' shows different levels of familiarity, closeness and friendship. But all are equally welcomed in the group. Bech outlines three aspects of homosexual friendship that resonate with Gunn's account of selective friendship within an all-embracing culture of friendliness. Firstly, Bech suggests friendship 'is not a unity, rather a "plurality": there are more people one can be together with, either tête-à-tête

or in changing combinations.’⁵⁸ In Gunn’s ‘Another All-Night Party’ ‘people’ are not perceived as fixed and the scene shifts easily from the party crowd to two sober friends walking on Fifth Street meeting two more for a drink. Clearly this involves a change kind of company and companiability. According to Bech, ‘those in a network of friends are not prepositioned, without the question of desire or duty even arising. They have been chosen; further, you are with those you feel like being with and when you feel like it.’⁵⁹ Despite its sense of spontaneity the poem carefully registers choice, routine, habit and preferences—mapped against the city’s geography: Fifth Street, Market Street and the Balcony. And lastly, each individual moves freely ‘both inside and outside the network of friends’,⁶⁰ with the speaker ‘too tired to think’, detaching himself from his friend for a moment joining up with ‘two more guests’ almost simultaneously. While moving from the self to the body then to the network of friendship, the last stanza of ‘Another All-Night Party’ is held together in rhymes. The two pairs of rhymes, ‘Greet’ and ‘street’, and ‘think’ and ‘drink’, denote an intermix of sociability and geography which encapsulates the presiding ethos of *The Passages of Joy*.

The street as a poetic subject crops up early in Gunn’s career but mainly in the form of unnamed, imaginary streets.⁶¹ What makes Gunn’s streetscape in *The Passages of Joy* different from all his previous streets is not only the specific geography of San Francisco, but also his compulsion to record his range of sexual experiences. In ‘The Miracle,’⁶² Gunn

⁵⁸ Bech, p. 117.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ The speaker of ‘Wind in the Street’ in *Fighting Terms* ‘regain[s] the street’ (6) after being confronted in ‘the talking shop’. Standing ‘at a street corner’ (58), the soldier-like figure in ‘Market at Turk’ in *The Sense of Movement* is ‘hunched up’ and ‘prepared/ for some unique combat in/ boots, jeans’. In ‘A Map of the City’ in *My Sad Captain* The speaker (possibly Gunn himself) stands ‘upon a hill and see[s]/ A luminous country under’ him. ‘Taylor Street’ in *Touch* captures a lonesome, depressed man who ‘sits on his kitchen chair facing/ the street’, watching ‘what/ he is not living’ and living ‘here morning by morning.’ (165) ‘Street Song’ in *Moly* records a young boy selling ‘Keys lids acid and speed.’ (208) In *Jack Straw’s Castle* the speaker of ‘The Corporal’ ‘watched the soldiers’ marching, ‘piratical along my street’. (233) In ‘The Release’ the speaker walks in the street and feels ‘the sense of mild but constant risk.’ (301)

⁶² “‘The Miracle’ came about in a funny way. It was based on an anecdote: I knew this very attractive guy who was leaving San Francisco. I went up to a friend of his at a bar and said, I guess so-and-so has left, and his friend replied that on the way to the airport, he was so hot that they stopped off some place at the public toilet and had sex for the last time. The poem itself is similar in tone to a late poem by Thomas Hardy called ‘Her Second Husband Hears Her Story’, which is contained in his last collection, called *Winter’s Words*. It is quite wonderfully grotesque. A woman in bed with her second husband tells him a story about her first husband who had a way of coming home drunk and raping her. She didn’t like this so she decided to take measures. She’s very good seamstress, so when her first husband came home and passed out on the bed, she sewed him into the bed. In the process, she inadvertently stifled him, and he died of asphyxiation. She does most of the talking in this poem, but I think there’s just one phrase from the second husband that goes, ‘Well, it’s a cool queer tale!’ which I used as the epigraph of my last book as a kind of joke. I used ‘queer’ in quite a different sense.’ Christopher Hennessy, ‘An Interview with Thom Gunn’ in *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005), pp. 16-17.

features a conversation about a friend's experience of cottaging (a 'tearoom trade' in the US). The poem is stitched together around dialogue between two anonymous friends, and is about the thrill of anonymous sex in public. Laud Humphreys published his controversial sociological study *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* in 1970, dwelling on the sheer impersonality of public sex in this particular theatre:

Tearoom sex is distinctly less personal than any other form of sexual activity, with the single exception of solitary masturbation. What I mean by "less personal" is simply that there is less emotional and physical involvement in restroom fellatio—less, even, than in furtive action that takes place in autos and behind bushes.⁶³

'The Miracle' opens up another level of impersonality as the two speakers impersonate what happened in the public toilet in their conversation. The sexual encounter occurs in a site of transit:

'Right to the end, that man, he was so hot
That driving to the airport we stopped off
At some McDonald's and do you know what,
We did it there. He couldn't get enough.'
—'There at the counter?'—'No, that's public stuff. (357)

Neil Powell argues that this poem lacks the ability 'to perceive, or to distance through irony, the potential absurdity'⁶⁴ of its subject. Powell overlooked the particular social context and linguistic register which Gunn adopts from the outset. Gunn's dialogue is jam-packed with implication and fantasy: Is 'that man' the taxi driver or the passenger? Why didn't they do it in the car? Who are they? 'McDonald's' seems to be a random choice but the fast-food chain store offers a quick flow of transient people—and is another site of transit, alongside 'the airport' and the car. The implication is that the tearoom trade is junk sex, the equivalent of

⁶³ Humphreys, reprinted in Leap, p. 33. Humphreys conducted a qualitative research 'on the activity that takes place in the restrooms of public parks' (reprinted in William L. Leap, ed. *Public Sex / Gay Sex* (NY: Colobumia UP, 1998) p. 30). The book includes interviews of the participants describing their personal experiences as well as graphic depiction, such as 'One summer afternoon, for instance, I witnessed 20 acts of fellatio in the course of an hour while waiting out a thunderstorm in a tearoom. For one who wishes to participate in (or study) such activity, the primary consideration is finding where the action is.' (Leap, p. 30)

Peter M. Nardi in 'Reclaiming the Importance of Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*' writes that 'when the study appeared as the lead article in *Trans-Action*, a monthly sociology magazine (now called *Society*) edited by Irving Louis Horowitz, it was denounced in a January 1970 *Washington Post* column by Nicholas von Hoffman as immoral and a violation of the participants' basic human rights to informed consent: "No information is valuable enough to obtain by nipping away at personal liberty" (reprinted in Humphreys 1975: 181). Sociologists Irving Louis Horowitz and Lee Rainwater jumped to the defense of Humphreys' work and methods in a May 1970 editorial in *Trans-Action* (reprinted in Humphreys 1975). They strongly stated their belief in the research and "in its principled humanness, in its courage to learn the truth and in the constructive contribution that it makes toward our understanding of all the issues, including the moral, raised by deviant behavior in our society" (Humphreys 1975: 185).' (Leap, pp. 23-24)

⁶⁴ Neil Powell, 'Loud Music, Bars and Boisterous Men', *PNR* 16:2 (1989), p. 41.

fast food. The dialogue is saucy, playful and gossipy, as if its purpose were to publicize the speaker's private taste for public sex. 'There at the counter?' half-ridicules and half-challenges the limit of 'the public'. 'No, that's public stuff' directly throws the ball back to the listener, subverting the general consensus about cottaging or tearoom sex being a 'public' business, as they did it 'there in the rest room.' In a way this answer reinstates the irony and privacy of having sex in a cubicle that resembles the closet.⁶⁵

If the poem plays on the codes of sexual behaviour in public spaces, it also explores the pornographic language to articulate intimate sexual behaviour in public, the sharable public aspects of sex talk. The second and the third stanzas capture the explicit one-on-one sexual action 'in the rest room', which makes the human melting pot of 'The Geysers' seem tame:

'There in the rest room. He pulled down my fly,
And through his shirt I felt him warm and trim.
I squeezed his nipples and began to cry
At losing this, my miracle, so slim
That I could grip my wrist in back of him.

Confined in the cubicle with no time to 'properly' undress each other, they flirt with the idea of sadomasochism, with nipples squeezing and screaming. 'My miracle' refers to the man's extraordinary slim body but also the speaker's luck in meeting such an attractive lover. 'He pulled down my fly' moves on to 'he dropped down on one knee' and 'let it fly' in the third stanza. Even though power struggle and role-play (as to who takes the initiative to suck or to be sucked) are in play, it is hard to decide who is more controlling or subservient. The stanza, in fact the whole poem, is braced in a tight system of rhymes (*ababb*) conscious of the traditional balladic rhymes *abab* that are used to narrate or ridicule physically violent and moralistic stories, but also the tight stanzaic forms of 17th Century metaphysical poetry. The speaker 'can still see him shoot', and a slimy sperm trail that looks like 'snail-track on the toe of my boot.' The snail's 'slow passion' in 'Considering the Snail' is rendered into a scandalous image of a miraculously renewed 'snail-track' on the leather boot:

—'Snail-track?'—'Yes, there.'—'That was six months ago.
How can it still be there?'—'My friend, at night
I make it shine again, I love him so,
Like they renew a saint's blood out of sight.

⁶⁵ 'Even though it is hard to evaluate the relevance of Humphreys's findings in the 70s to our current scene, his by-then groundbreaking research did draw a useful categorization for tearoom sex and suggests that a majority of participants are living 'in the closet'. He writes: 'As occupational autonomy and marital status remain the most important dimensions along which participants may be ranked, we shall consider four general types of tearoom customers: 1) married men with dependent occupations, 2) married men with independent occupations, 3) unmarried men with independent occupations, and 4) unmarried men with dependent occupations.' (Leap, p. 39)

But we're not Catholic, see, so it's all right.'

We laugh at the speaker's transparent vanity—his funny, consolatory fetishism, his nostalgia for passing pleasure, and his unreserved self-mockery. 'We play without deceit, / compressing symbol into fetish', Gunn writes in 'The Menace', and 'The Miracle' is a playful celebration of a sexual devotionism modelled on a George Herbert poem. Gunn compresses symbol into fetish, as underneath the Camp comedy lie the fetishes of cum, leather and boots, downplayed but implied in the poem. 'I make it shine again' suggests masturbation, the kind of on-going masturbation that gives the boy in 'Courage, a Tale' anxiety. The speaker compares the 'snail-track' with 'a saint's blood', turning a dirty joke into a religious miracle, while gently ridiculing the theatricality of Catholicism. Gunn's mundane street language dramatizes the thrill of public sex as well as gossip between friends. As in sex, gossip requires trust and understanding, play and panache; otherwise no anecdote will even 'shine.' 'The Miracle' uses devotional poetry to capture the mysteries of San Francisco gay culture—and its devotional cults.

Before moving from San Francisco to London, I will quickly glance at a dark side of Gunn's San Francisco streets where crimes, sexual prejudices, insanity and poverty lurk in alleys and corners in *The Passages of Joy* and continue to haunt us in *The Man with Night Sweats*. Apart from the glamour of the Golden Gate Bridge, the cable cars, the 'Painted Ladies' in Alamo Square, and the enthralling Transamerica Pyramid in the Financial District, San Francisco is a city with a staggering crime rate and homeless population. Ironically centred on Downtown and the Financial District around Powell and Market Streets and in the plaza in front of the City Hall—sad-looking, bedraggled, drug-addicted and often mentally ill men and women lie on dirty sleeping bags, push shopping trolleys filled with possessions and sit cross-legged on the pavement begging for spare change, as conservatively there are estimates of 6,000 to 10,000 homeless people in the city alone, with thousands more in surrounding Bay Area counties. In representing the Gay Metropolis in *The Passages of Joy*, Gunn also registers the city's social derelicts.

In 'At an Intersection' the speaker 'couldn't take my eyes off/ the old woman raging around, / cursing at random...like a mobbed witch.' (369) The old woman, lingering 'at the intersection/ where worldly Market Street / meets the slum of Sixth', is one example of the homeless and mentally ill population in San Francisco. In the ballad 'Waitress', Gunn explores the way the female body is consumed like the lunch special by men 'loosed from the office job'. The speaker, the waitress, is conscious that 'My little breasts, my face, my hips, / My legs' are not found on the menu they read 'while wiping gravy off their lips.' (349) Their

foul language, the 'talk of Pussy, Ass and Tits' objectifies and commodifies the female body, crossing the fine line between flirtation and sexual harassment. The poem ends with her imaginary revenge as she serves them their 'Special Lunch: / Bone Hash, Grease Pie, and Leather Soup', in which vulgarism counters vulgarism. 'The Victim' records the 'poor girl' Nancy Spingarn being raped on the street. The poem gathers around sexual symbols in which the rapist 'played' with 'sharp things'—'needles and you'. (358) The penis and the murder weapon becomes indistinguishable when 'He pushed it through your shirt / Deep in your belly, where it hurt.' Depicting horrific violence through an intimate second person persona, Gunn turns himself into a witness: 'You turned, and ate the carpet's dirt.' The poem becomes disturbingly dark as we find out that the rapist-murderer, too, witnesses his deed as 'he watched out with a heavy eye / The several hours you took to die.' These darker occasional poems are not incidental; they impinge on the city of hedonistic sex Gunn portrayed in the book.

3

Revisiting London

*A transient Calm the happy Scenes bestow,
And for a Moment lull the Sense of Woe.*

Johnson, 'London'

Imitating Juvenal's Third Satire, Johnson published 'London' anonymously in 1738 before 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' (1749)—and in *The Passages of Joy* Gunn revisits not only his own London backgrounds, but London's poetry which is far from the hedonism of Gay San Francisco in the 70s and 80s. I will conclude this chapter with Gunn's two London poems, 'Keats at Highgate' and 'Talbot Road' in the *Passages of Joy*. The two poems evoke two specific London neighbourhoods, Highgate and Talbot Road, as sites of loss and memory. They both record two memorable literary meetings, bound up in the sprawling city of London in different centuries. 'Keats at Highgate' takes the form of a well-trimmed sonnet to record the famous chance meeting between Keats and Coleridge in April 1819, before Keats became terminally ill in Rome. 'Talbot Road', however, takes the form of sectioned free verse and locates us back during Gunn's stay in London from mid-1964 to 1965, when he lived

opposite Tony White. The elegiac poem stretches through different decades before and after White's death in 1970s, shaping and reshaping Gunn's close and eclectic friendship with White. Though both poems are set in different places and centuries, under the same shadow of foreseeable death, they explore the way the city sponsors literary friendship and personal discovery.

Having lived in cities of such different scale as London, Cambridge, Rome and San Francisco throughout his life, Gunn curiously identifies his muse as a 'suburban muse, a bit like Keats's'. He said that Keats is called 'a Cockney poet because he wasn't a Lake poet, was only interested in Hampstead Heath.' Gunn spent much of his childhood in Hampstead, as he recalls: "I divided my time—or my time was divided—between continuing to go to the school in Hampstead while living with a family who'd been friends of my mother's, and spending the weekends and vacations down in Snodland in Kent with two of my aunts."⁶⁶

'Keats at Highgate' features dialogues and itself is a result of literary dialogues. The poem recycles bits and pieces of Keats's and Coleridge's accounts of their meeting, and imagines Keats's perturbed mental terrain in Hampstead. Gunn plays on Coleridge's remarks about Keats's clothes and image—being 'loose, slack, not well-dressed'—and explores the notion of looseness in psychological and rhythmical terms. After the meeting, Keats wrote a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, between 15th and 21st April 1819, where he said: '[Charles] Brown is gone to bed—and I am tired of rhyming'.⁶⁷ Though it is not mentioned in the poem, Gunn must have picked up Keats's idea of being 'tired of rhyming' and compared it with Coleridge's idea of his 'loose' clothes. Bruce Woodcock argues that in 'Keats at Highgate' 'Gunn acknowledges Keats's ability to utilize all the trivia of everyday life, "Everything put to use. / Perhaps not well-dressed but oh not loose" had a double edge to it, speaking both of the verse form and defensively about sexual identity.⁶⁸ Woodcock over-emblematises the poem, taking it out of its specific literary context and transplanting it into his reading of Gunn's sexual identity. Being 'loose' does imply promiscuity in the modern sense, and Gunn is interested in a 'loose' poetics that shall also be taut, trim, disciplined.

Gunn portrays Keats as a 'passive, not slack' listener, 'listening respectfully to the talk talk talk / Of First and Second Consciousness' (350). To make sense of this it is worth quoting Keats's letter which captures the richness of their stream-of-consciousness-like conversation:

⁶⁶ Campbell, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Robert Gittings, ed. *Letter of John Keats* Oxford: OUP, 1992, p. 237

⁶⁸ Bruce Woodcock, 'But oh not loose': Form and Sexuality in Thom Gunn's Poetry' in *Critical Quarterly* 35:1 (1993), p. 62.

Last Sunday I took a Walk towards highgate and in the lane lead that winds by the side of Lord Mansfield's park I met Mr Green our Demonstrator at Guy's in conversation with Coleridge—I joined them, after enquiring by look whether it would be agreeable—I walked with him a[t] his alderman-after dinner pace for near two miles I suppose In those two Miles he broached a thousand things—let me see if I can give you a list—Nightingales, Poetry—on Poetical sensation—Metaphysics—Different genera and species of Dreams—Nightmare—a dream accompanied with by a sense of touch—single and double touch—a dream related—First and second consciousness—the difference explained between will and Volition—so m[an]y metaphysicians from a want of smoking the second consciousness—Monsters—the Kraken—Mermaids—southey believes in them—southeys belief too much diluted—A Ghost story—Good morning—I heard his voice as he came towards me—I heard it as he moved away—I had heard it all the interval—if it may be called so. He was civil enough to ask me to call on him at Highgate Good Night!⁶⁹

Obviously it was a memorable meeting for Keats, as his letter tries to capture every scrap of the conversation. Despite the inexorable flow of the prose devoted to recording Coleridge's swift flow of talks, he chose not to mention his famous handshake. Gunn's poem, too, tends to downplay Keats's disease and fragility, as Gunn describes Keats 'pressed / The famous hand with warmth'. Coleridge's later account of the meeting (14th August 1832), however, associates Keats's hand with death:

It was Keats. He was introduced to me, and staid a minute or so. After he had left us a little way, he came back and said: "Let me carry away the memory, Coleridge, of having pressed your hand!" "There is death in that hand," I said to Mr. Green, when Keats was gone; yet this was, I believe, before the consumption showed itself distinctly.⁷⁰

Coleridge's economical retrospect of the meeting poses a stark contrast to Keats's. While Keats is interested in Coleridge's intellectual performance, Coleridge dwells on the physical and biographical aspects of the meeting with the short-lived younger poet. It is curious that Gunn intentionally uses 'warmth', partly to show Keats's ardent respect for Coleridge, and partly to conceal Keats's worsening health. Mr. Green in his own account said that 'the hand of Keats felt to Coleridge clammy and cold, like the hand of a dead man.'⁷¹

Both Coleridge and Keats were sonneteers and wrote sonnets about other writers. Gunn's poem not only restages the meeting, but operates as a meeting point where the two pieces of contrasted literary prose come together in the established form of sonnet, written by the 20th century poet who also wrote about other chance meetings in 'Sweet Things' and

⁶⁹ Gittings, p. 237.

⁷⁰ Carl Wooding, ed. *The Collected Works of S.T. Coleridge—Table Talk II* (Routledge: Princeton UP, 1990), p. 186-7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

'The Miracle'. Gunn condenses the meeting in five lines and leaves the subsequent nine lines for Keats's quiet, reflective response to it. He is not interested here in the opposition of nudity and embroideries but in the 'Cockney Poet' being neither 'well-dressed' nor 'loose'. Keats 'sauntered back, / Homeward in his own state of less dispersed / More passive consciousness'—excited, absorbed, anything but 'loose':

He made his way toward Hampstead so alert
 He hardly passed the small grey ponds below
 Or watched a sparrow pecking in the dirt
 Without some insight swelling the mind's flow
 That banks made swift. Everything put to use.
 Perhaps not well-dressed but oh no not loose. (350)

For Gunn, Hampstead is internalised in Keats's swelling 'mind's flow'. Capturing Keats's eclectic state of mind in which 'Everything put to use', Gunn uses the poet's clothes to dress up the sonnet. In 'A Coat', Yeats made his song 'a coat / Covered with embroideries/ Out of old mythologies', yet he said 'there's more enterprise / In walking naked.' Gunn's Keats is not embroidery and nudity, but 'not well-dressed'. 'But oh no not loose' ambivalently opens up a rather casual, 'loose' tone, at the same time as insisting on iambic pentameter, and correct rhymes such as 'loose' and 'use' which counter the elusive sense of 'loose' woven into the sonnet.

Thoreau said 'it is a great art to saunter',⁷² and Gunn's account of Keats as he 'sauntered back / Homeward', celebrates the Romantic poet's casual pleasure in his journey through the suburb. He insists on both his 'passive consciousness' and 'alert' stance, his promiscuous openness to the 'mind's flow' in the letter and his commitment to aesthetic form. Keats wrote a sonnet on the sonnet, where he talked of the aesthetic of form and rhyme in dazzlingly erotic ways, and Gunn presents him as an attractive paradigm of poetic intelligence, combining casual receptiveness with formal discipline of the most exacting kind. If Gunn's title recalls the Great Charm of Augustan London, this treatment to the Cockney Romantic from his native Hampstead, establishes a very different kind of city poet.

'Talbot Road'⁷³ is one of Gunn's best long sequences in free verse. It is a signature 'turning-point poem', like 'The Wound', 'The Sense of Movement', 'My Sad Captain', 'Moly' and 'Jack Straw's Castle'. The poem evokes a sense of 'complete access— / to air, to street, to friendship'. Its voice is slow-paced, reflective, undisguised, Isherwood-like, and it reads like a

⁷² Henry David Thoreau's *Journal*, Monday, April 26, 1841, in *Walden*, (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 186.

⁷³ 'None of the AIDS poems, strong as they are, celebrated as they have been, compares with his elegy "Talbot Road" in *The Passages of Joy*, a book unjustifiably maligned on publication and largely ignored ever since.' (Gregory Woods, 'The Sniff of the Real', *AGENDA*, pp. 92-97.)

tiny episode in Wordsworth's expansively autobiographical *The Prelude*. Comparing himself with Wordsworth, and aligning himself with Lamb's letter to Wordsworth, Gunn says, 'I love streets. I could stand on the street and look at people all day, in the same way Wordsworth could walk around the lakes and look at those things all day.'⁷⁴ San Francisco and Cumbria are worlds apart, but it is interesting that Gunn has Wordsworth in mind when constructing his urban streetscape.

'Talbot Road' fosters a multi-cultural sense of London, which is a completely different territory from the cruisy world of 'San Francisco Streets' and the rural setting of 'Keats at Highgate'. It begins with precise geographical coordinates, setting Talbot Road 'between the pastel boutiques / of Notting Hill and the less defined/ windier reaches of the Harrow Road'. (380) Since the 1950s and 60s, Notting Hill had been a vibrant centre for immigrants from the Caribbean. Located in the fringe of Notting Hill, Talbot Road, where Gunn lived in London 1964-5, had witnessed political, economical, racial and cultural transformations, being, as Gunn says, 'built for burghers, another Belgravia / but eventually fallen / to labourers'. Racist advertisements for jobs like 'No Coloured or Irish / Need Apply' were in Gunn's sight. The street was later transformed again:

like the veins
of the true-born Englishman
filling with a promiscuous mix:
Pole, Italian, Irish, Jamaican,
rich jostling flow. A Yugoslav restaurant
framed photographs of exiled princes,
but the children chattered with a London accent. (380)

Reading the poem in the wake of 7th July London Bombings, Gunn's portrayal of a diverse community goes to the centre of the heated debate about the tension between multiculturalism, immigration and Englishness. The opening of 'Talbot Road' creates a 'loose', mobile, constantly re-definable sense of 'Englishness', as 'the veins / of the true born Englishman' are filled with 'a promiscuous mix' of people of international descent. 'Promiscuous' captures the 'rich jostling flow' of people that Gunn feels at home with, but it carries a sexual meaning, as well as 'indiscriminate, casual', consisting a wide range of different things. The Yugoslav 'children chattered with a London accent' affirms the way the demographical change broadens and enriches the use of the English language.

Gunn refocuses this uncharacteristic socio-political setting into 'the excellent room' where he 'slept, ate, read and wrote'. The 'heavy balcony' redefines the private and public

⁷⁴ PR, p. 187.

space as Gunn 'could step through the window' and 'sup there [on the balcony] on hot evenings.' Looking down to the 'promiscuous mix' of the London crowd, Gunn exclaims:

That's what I call complete access—
to air, to street, to friendship:
for, from it, I could see, blocks away,
the window where Tony, my old friend,
toiled at translation. I too tried
to render obscure passages into clear English,
as I try now. (380-1)

'To render obscure passages into clear English' spells out Gunn's motive in 'Talbot Road' as well as *The Passages of Joy* more generally. The 'complete access' is more than the balcony; it is a sense of openness, sponsoring a web of human connectedness that enables the private self to get access to a larger social picture. The poem is attentive to ways of looking and the way direction establishes subtle human relationships. Gunn looks out from his window to Tony's where he 'toiled at translation.' Tony 'was translating from French into English at that time,' Gunn wrote in 'My Life Up to Now', 'we would work all morning in our respective rooms and then at midday emerge on our balconies where we would signal to each other (through binoculars) if we wanted to go for a beer and lunch together.'⁷⁵ As happens in many poems in *The Passages of Joy*, the social meeting cohabits with the well-defined personal spaces, as the private self coexists with the public self, like the way Gunn and Tony conjoin whenever they want to, despite the fact that they live in separate buildings. Clive Wilmer in 'A Poet's Life' points out 'Thom had a study as well as a bedroom—so that he had that privacy which is essential to a writer, but was able to step out of that privacy into communal life.' This precarious balance between privacy and sociability was central to Gunn's poetics of friendship.

Written 'in memory of Tony White', 'Talbot Road' describes Tony as a 'glamorous and difficult friend, / helper and ally.' Tony was not only 'a very close friend',⁷⁶ but, in Gunn's words, his 'best reader and most helpful critic, knowing what I was trying to get at in poems often so bad that it's difficult to see how he divined my intentions.'⁷⁷ Tony died of 'a football accident in his mid-forties', but his absence looms large in the book as poems like 'A Waking Dream' and 'Talbot Road' reveal. In 'Talbot Road' Tony is portrayed as a dandy-like figure who manages more than 'two romances', one 'in London, one in Northampton, one in Ireland, / probably others.' Like a 'fantastical duke of dark corners' (381), his behaviour constantly inspires multiple interpretations, as 'friends and lovers / all had their own versions of him.'

⁷⁵ OP, p. 180.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ OP, pp. 174-5

That image of the 'fantastical duke' reflects his early acting career and Gunn records that 'innocent poet [Gunn] and actor...posed' and 'played out parts to each other', 'like studs in a whorehouse.' They form a 'promiscuous mix' but are also 'posed' playing double to each other.

'A London returned to after twelve years' returns to 1964, when Gunn returned temporarily to England as a gay poet, settled American, and transient immigrant. Section 3 of the poem explores Gunn's self-reconciliation with his 'past self' lingering 'on a long passage between two streets' (382). Here the self is also the other, 'a youth of about nineteen glaring at me / from a turn of desire.' The London streets look like the San Francisco streets where 'our eyes parleyed, then we touched / in the conversation of bodies.' Equivocally identifying himself with the other, Gunn embraces 'the prickly heat of adolescent emotion' that had been suppressed in the cool argumentation of his early poetry. The chance-meeting streets then dissolve into Gunn's childhood suburban scenery, where he 'knew every sudden path from childhood, / the crooks of every climbable tree.' (383) The passage from 'a long passage between streets' to 'every sudden path from childhood' is unnerving. His mind then goes back to 'where I had played hide and seek / with neighbour children', scenes and scenery that recall 'Hampstead: the Horse Chestnut Tree' and 'Hide and Seek'. The tree and hide-and-seek is later turned into a site of sexual orgy, where he 'played as an adult / with troops of men...at the Orgy Tree or in the wood / of birch trunks gleaming like mute watchers'. Playing 'as an adult' is at the centre of *The Passages of Joy*, but here is mapped against the primary geography of children play.

Though much of the poem is about moving through different time and places, Gunn is trapped in a time-complex. As the speaker 'returned to Troy' in 'The Wound', Gunn goes back to Talbot Road where the wound of Tony's death needs healing. Section 4 begins with a bus journey of pass through 'Hampstead, Wimbledon, the pubs' and arrives at his memory of 'the balcony filled up with wet snow', where 'Tony and I / would lunch there in the sunshine'. Partly indoor and partly outdoors, the balcony, operating as an open zone at the boundary between the private and the public, fosters a dialectic between the self and the other, the authentic and the forged:

He wondered aloud if he would be happier
if he were queer like me.
How could he want, I wondered,
to be anything but himself? (384)

One moment Tony imagines forging his sexual identity, another moment he 'would have to be off, / off with his jaunty walk'. Gunn then juxtaposes this passing question of sexuality with

his farewell party 'on a canal boat' travelling 'through the watery network of London'. Gunn was surprised by this hidden water-map of the city, 'that had always been glimpsed / out of the corner of the eye / behind fences or from the tops of buses.' Passing through a displaced cityscape of 'what we had suspected all along', Gunn finds himself gliding 'through the open secret' of something which was always there but had gone unnoticed. Gregory Woods writes 'This is one of the collection's joyous passages which went unnoticed by Donald Davie.'⁷⁸ He suggests that the idea of 'the open secret' relates to 'the displacement effected by Gunn's having become what he had been all along, by coming out and as a homosexual poet. To read him otherwise is to remain outside on the street, watching the narrow boat threading its way off along other, unrecognised passage-ways of the truth.'⁷⁹

With the final section, loss breaks into the foreground. 'That was fifteen years ago', Gunn says, drawing back to recognize the scale of change: 'Tony is dead, the block where I lived / has been torn down.' The loss of his friend and the demolition of the building are comparable. They destroy the sense of shared comparable city space:

The mind
is an impermanent place, isn't it,
but it looks to permanence.
The street has opened and opened up
into no character at all. (384)

Gunn presents an odd mix of subjectivity and realism, and in a way 'the open secret' of the London canals has been well preserved,⁸⁰ whereas Talbot Road 'has opened up' by urban developments over the decades. Returning later and troubled by the changes, Gunn records a dream of the street 'as it might have been'. He dreamt of the pavement by All Saints Church and the Notting Hill 'race-riots' which raged for five nights over the August bank holiday in 1958.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Gregory Woods, 'The Sniff of the Real' in *AGENDA*, p. 97.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ The Regent's Canal in London, linking the Grand Junction Canal's Paddington Arm with the Thames at Limehouse, was opened in 1820 and much of its structure remains intact nowadays, despite the explosion at Macclesfield Bridge in 1874.

⁸¹ 'The ferocity of Notting Hill 'racial riots' as the press called them at the time, shocked Britain into realising for the first time that it was not above the kind of racial conflict then being played out in the American deep south. The carnival, which will fill the streets of west London with more than 1.5 million people this weekend, was started in 1959 as a direct response to the riots.

The battles raged over the bank holiday weekend as the black community responded in kind with counterattacks by large groups of 'men of colour' similarly armed. Thomas Williams was stopped by the police as he came out of Bluey's Club on Talbot Road, Notting Hill. He was found to have a piece of iron down his left trouser leg, a petrol bomb in his right pocket and a open razor blade in his inside breast pocket: 'I have to protect myself,' he told the arresting officer.'

The Guardian Online. Alan Travis, 'After 44 years...', November 2005.

‹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/nottinghillcarnival2002/story/0,12331,780023,00.html> ›

'Talbot Road' ends with an arresting displacement, not a memory of Tony or Talbot Road, but a cinematic scene in which Gunn remembers a boy 'in his teens, from the country', sitting 'in his white shirt at the window' 'in the house opposite'. The young boy, fascinated by the movement and energy on the street, intently makes 'out characters / from a live language he was still learning' (385). Like Gunn, the boy is a keen gazer. Totally absorbed, 'not a smile cracking his pink cheeks', he gazes down

at the human traffic, of all nations,
the just and the unjust, who
were they, where were they going,
that fine public flow at the edge of which
he waited, poised, detached in wonder
and in no hurry
before he got ready one day
to climb down into its live current. (385)

At the end of the poem Talbot Road becomes the site of 'human traffic', a multi-cultural interchange of peoples, businesses and incidents. Unlike most of the speakers and characters in *The Passages of Joy*, the boy is outside but aware of this vibrant 'public flow'. The ending brings us back to the end 'Jack Straw's Castle', where Jack says, 'With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world'. The boy in 'Talbot Road', however, is a passive gazer, 'detached in wonder / and in no hurry / before he got ready one day'. Moving the poem's focus from Tony to this anonymous boy, Gunn shifts our attention from the dead to the living, injecting a sense of continuity into this anecdotal, interrupted elegy. Gunn ends the poem by recapturing Talbot Road as a passage of joy and energy—a 'fine public flow' and 'live current'. *The Passages of Joy* illustrates Gunn's investments in the 'public flow' and 'human traffic' of the modern city. It also confirms his vocation of a city poet. In a way the London (Hampstead and Notting Hill) he left constantly reappears in his poems, intermixing with the sexual thrills of San Francisco. It may be a coincidence that 'passages' is the same word Walter Benjamin uses in his master-study of Parisian urban modernity, but Gunn's book gives Samuel Johnson's word a new currency in the homo-eroticised cities mapped in *The Passages of Joy*.

PLATE 5

Gunn's house on Cole Street in San Francisco (top) taken by the author.
Flowers and Gunn's portrait placed by his doorway one year after his death
(bottom) taken by the author.



CHAPTER FIVE

PRONOUNS & THE IMAGE OF EMBRACE IN *THE MAN WITH NIGHT SWEATS* (1992)

1

The Shield Revisited

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.

I grew as I explored
The body I could trust
Even while I adored
The risk that made robust,

A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.

I cannot but be sorry
The given shield was cracked
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.

Gunn, 'The Man with Night Sweats' (461)

Unlike many heroic shields and armours in Gunn's early poetry, the shield in the title poem of *The Man with Night Sweats* is the speaker's own flesh; it is no longer one of Gunn's poses but a 'reduced and wrecked' human body 'in time of plague'.¹ The title poem exposes the nightmarish opposite of the trusted, erotic and defensive shield: the breakdown of the human body and its immune system, its biological defence. Instead of using the language of war to articulate political responsibility, Gunn restores the martial language surrounding AIDS to its metaphorical base, as 'flesh' is 'the given shield' which is now 'cracked'. The 'man' repeatedly summons himself as 'I' in the poem, self-addressing as if to reassure and at the same time to distrust the singular and exclusive pronoun that highlights his isolated existence in face of catastrophe. Even though the meter and rhyme are surgically precise, the poem plays out the ambiguity between the fear and the reality of contagion, as we do not

¹ Gunn titles one of his elegies 'In Time of Plague' (463-4) in *The Man with Night Sweats*.

know whether the speaker is sweating about AIDS or from AIDS, about himself or his friends.² Not knowing if he has woken up from or to a nightmare, he is drenched in his own night sweats, panicky but still obedient to the banal domesticity, hurrying to 'change the bed'. Alarmed and disarmed, he catches himself 'Stopped upright' in bed, where he says, 'I am / Hugging my body to me / As if to shield it from / The pains that will go through me'. 'Hugging my body to me' differentiates 'my body' from 'me', as if the body is a separable entity. The 'shield' appears three times in the poem, and this time it functions as a verb, transforming the self-hug into a self-protective shield against 'the pains', an abstract noun that cannot be 'shielded off'. In the last couplet ('As if hands were enough / To hold an avalanche off'), the shield is literalised into 'hands' (note the syntax parallelism of 'As if to shield' and 'As if hands'). 'The pains', however, are metaphorised as 'an avalanche'. Apart from the emotional and physical turmoil, the sense of linguistic tension and convolution looms large throughout the poem, as it clenches up and releases the literal and the metaphorical: from 'Hugging my body' to 'shield' to 'hands', and finally to 'avalanche'. The image of an avalanche captures a state of collapse beyond human control. The sweating body and wet sheets suddenly look like the melting mass of snow, ice and rock falling rapidly, only in this poem not down a mountainside, but 'through' the human body. The domestic scene of panic and insomnia turns into an extreme site of danger, where the question of survival is at stake.

The linguistic barrenness of 'The Man with Night Sweats', its plain register, evokes a genre of AIDS elegy very different from, for example, Paul Monette's politicised elegies or Rafael Campo's therapeutic laments. Even though the shield in the title poem is permanently cracked and irreparable, Gunn's elegiac sequence, I suggest, operates like a 'poetic shield', alternating the rhetoric that permeated the political, medical, economic, sexual, cultural, critical and poetic language of AIDS. It is as if Gunn needs to disinfect his poetic language and seeks consolation from established form in a way that recalls Fulke Greville, John Donne and Ben Jonson, using tight metre and rhyme to sustain a reassuring sense of formal embrace at a time when the intimate embrace of two men had come to symbolize erotic risk and even the danger of death. In this way he dissociates the act of mourning from the AIDS rhetoric surrounding him, viewing the subject with an unsentimental eye, registering personal tragedy without bravado or the comforting iconography of contemporary AIDS anthologies. In his interview with James Campbell, he said AIDS 'became as obligatory a subject for poetry by the mid-80s, and right up to the present day, as the war in Vietnam was in its

² In the interview with Campbell, Gunn said that the poem 'is spoken by somebody who wakes sweating and assumes that he has AIDS. I was lucky enough not to be HIV positive, but in those early years, when it seemed so mysterious, and so especially nightmarish, and when people that I knew were dying, or had already died...If you sweat during the night, maybe you have flu, or maybe you just have too many blankets on, but you think: "Oh my god, this is night sweats," the night sweats that precede AIDS.' (Campbell, p. 49)

time.³ Gunn's consciousness of 'AIDS poetry' explains his resistance towards AIDS rhetoric. He was not writing about AIDS in a vacuum, however, because some of his elegies were published in Michael Klein's *Poets for Life* (1989) before appearing in *The Man with Night Sweats*. In elegy after elegy, his simple and controlled language refuses self-dramatization and touches on the tacit anguish of sufferer and witness, bringing his sceptical, formal intelligence to bear upon the crisis of AIDS in San Francisco.

Throughout *The Man with Night Sweats* Gunn avoids using most of what Jan Zita Grover called 'AIDS Keywords'.⁴ Inspired by Raymond Williams's account of historical of keywords,⁵ Grover compiles a list of 'AIDS Keywords', drawing our attention to the fact that 'AIDS is not simply a physical malady; it is also an artifact of social and sexual transgression, violated taboo, fractured identity—political and personal projections.'⁶ While Grover's list is not meant to be exhaustive, she identifies and contests some of the assumptions underlying words such as 'AIDS', 'HIV', 'virus', 'carrier', 'spread', 'condone', 'homosexual', 'community', 'treatment', 'victim' and 'guilt'.⁷ *The Man with Night Sweats* was published in the early 90s when the language of AIDS activism permeated poetic and critical language in general. Gunn's monitoring of the AIDS lexicon operates like a policy of linguistic quarantine, steering clear of the routine vocabulary associated with the medical crisis. The closest he comes to the keywords are 'plague', 'risk', 'family' and 'spread'. There is no direct reference to 'AIDS', 'HIV', 'virus' or 'homosexual' in the book. He chooses 'love' (used 14 times) in preference to 'sex', 'trouble' rather than 'crisis' and 'friend' (21 times) and 'companion' rather than 'partner'. Likewise in the place of the privileged term 'witness', he uses the more neutral 'record', 'remember' and 'recognize'. This is a writer committed to recording and remembering without putting the rhetoric to the fore.

By AIDS rhetoric here I mean both the rhetoric of activism and the rhetoric of sentimental mourning that permeated poetic language during AIDS era. If AIDS was about a crisis for bodies it also brought about a crisis of language. Paula Treichler called AIDS 'an epidemic of signification':

³ Campbell, p. 50.

⁴ Jan Zita Grover, 'AIDS Keywords' in Douglas Crimp, ed. *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism* (London & Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1988, 1989), pp. 17-30.

⁵ Raymond Williams, ed. *Keywords* (NY: OUP, 1983).

⁶ Crimp, p. 18.

⁷ Other 'keywords' include 'AIDS...the disease', 'AIDS test', 'bisexual', 'carrier', 'family', 'general population', 'lesbian', and 'PWA (Person with AIDS)'. Please refer to Grover's essay 'AIDS: Keywords' for the fascinating discussion of each 'keyword'. Treichler in 'AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification' also writes: 'CDC expand upon their early "4-H list" of high-risk categories: HOMOSEXUALS, HEMOPHILIACS, HEROIN ADDICTS, and HAITIANS, and the partners of people within these groups.' (Crimp, p. 44)

The name AIDS in part constructs the disease and helps make it intelligible. [...] The AIDS epidemic—with its genuine potential for global devastation—is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification. This epidemic of meanings is readily apparent in the chaotic assemblage of understandings of AIDS that now exists.⁸

She then identifies 38 points about the conceptualizations of AIDS in printed sources such as journals, news, bulletins and letters to the editor published since 1981, highlighting the 'dramatic symbol-inducing power' of AIDS as well as 'our continuing lack of social consensus about its meaning'.⁹ It is exactly this problematic intersection, or contagious homogenization of AIDS rhetoric across different levels of our society that requires us to review the rhetoric itself. Referring to the outpouring of writing about AIDS, David Bergman wrote that 'to the silence that was death now comes the babel which is itself a plague.'¹⁰ Such pessimism reflects an apocalyptic world-view that through the metaphor of contagion permeates the critical language itself. The linguistic and thematic homogeneity of 'pro-life' anthologies of poems 'responding' to AIDS that resulted from poetry commissions and AIDS writing workshops during the crisis is striking. From 1989 to 1997, there was at least one anthology of poems about AIDS published each year in the United States.¹¹ Writing his elegies amid the unprecedented proliferation of the genre, Gunn refuses to recycle the AIDS keywords and rhetoric, turning away from a form of repetitive and public mourning that insisted hypnotically on the antithesis of consolation and survival.

⁸ Paula A. Treichler, 'AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification' in Crimp, pp. 31-2.

⁹ Some examples of Treichler's points are: '1. An irreversible, untreatable, and invariably fatal infectious disease threatens to wipe out the whole world...8. A condemnation to celibacy or death...19. The perfect emblem of twentieth-century decadence, of fin-de-siècle decadence, of postmodern decadence...29. The price paid for the sixties...30. The price paid for anal intercourse...37. Stranger than science fiction...38. A terrible and expensive way to die.' Please refer to Treichler's essay for the full list.

¹⁰ David Bergman in *Gaiety Transfigured* also writes, 'The bibliography of AIDS grows geometrically, and now even the most devoted student could not possibly keep up with all that is written. Virtually every discipline claims an area of the subject to bring the elusive figure of AIDS into manageable and recognizable shape, creating what Paula A. Treichler has called, "an epidemic of signification".' (David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 122)

¹¹ Michael Klein, ed. *Poets for Life: Seventy-six Poets Respond to AIDS*. (NY: Crown, 1989), Rachel Hadas, ed. *Unending Dialogue: Voices from an AIDS Poetry Workshop* (NY: Faber & Faber, 1991), Andrew Miller, ed. *Don't Hang Up...an Anthology of Poems About AIDS* (South Dakota: Uni South Dakota Press, 1992), John Harold, ed. *How Can You Write a Poem When You're Dying of Aids?* (NY: Continuum International Publishing, 1993), Peter Daniels & Steve Anthony, ed. *Jugular Defences: An AIDS Anthology* (NY: Oscars Press, 1994), Marie Howe, ed. *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1995), Joan Logghe, *Catch Our Breath: Writing from the Heart of AIDS* (NY: Mariposa Printing & Publishing Co., 1996), Michael Klein & Richard McCann, ed. *Things Shaped in Passing: More "Poets for Life" Writing from the AIDS Pandemic* (NY: Persea Books, 1997).

Though the readers of Gunn's poems were moved and shocked by the scale of human suffering in the book, this was in large measure because there are no shock tactics in *The Man with Night Sweats*, just a tough record of facts, presented without emotive rhetoric or conspicuous poetic armour. Gunn's model of plain elegy earned critics' applause and re-staged him a major poet in the UK and the US. Reviewing the book in *Agenda*, Roland John wrote, 'Many poets have attempted to deal with the harrowing subject of AIDS; few have been able to register personal tragedy in a general way without becoming sentimental. Gunn triumphs in these restrained poems and touches us all with the anguish of acceptance. The language is simple and controlled; there are no flashy images, just a clear statement of how it is.'¹² Hugh Haughton in his *TLS* review underlined Gunn's 'scareful lucidity' and argued that the book's 'very translucency...its plainness tends to conceal the scale of the poet's involvement in his material.'¹³ In *The Sunday Telegraph* Peter Porter suggested that 'it is as if a lifetime's struggle with the problem of form and subject matter has found a terrible solution. While the poems are complex and moving, their technique has been simplified.'¹⁴ In *The Sunday Times* Peter Reading praised Gunn's 'toughly human pieces' and 'ruthless fidelity to fact', saying it was his 'ability to declare pity without waxing sentimental' that was his 'main achievement.'¹⁵ More intimately in *Gay Times* Dennis Lemon suggested that 'By avoiding sentimentality and dramatic excess, the quiet dignity, deep sadness and controlled anger expressed in *The Man with Night Sweats* may well prove to be emotionally and spiritually uplifting to many readers.'¹⁶

Avoiding AIDS rhetoric and keywords, Gunn's elegies, I suggest, create a moving record of his dead and dying friends by suppressing his own elegiac self, the 'I' in mourning. Focussing on the second and third person pronouns, Gunn initiates the difficult dialogue between the 'I' and the multiple 'you' and 'he' of the book, evoking a sense of solidarity between the poet and the dying or dead. 'For the record,' Gunn writes in the endnotes of *The Man with Night Sweats*, 'for my record if for no one else's, because they were not famous people—I wish to name them here: "The Reassurance" and "Lament" are about Allan Noseworthy [...]' (492) Although his close friends clearly figure in the elegiac sequence, instead of foregrounding their presence in the poems and subtitles, Gunn then lists names in the endnotes. In an interview with Jim Powell, Gunn says, 'It seems to me that one of my subjects is friendship, the value of friendship.' By 'backgrounding' the names of the dead in

¹² Roland John, 'Two Poets from the Sixties', *AGENDA*, p. 99.

¹³ Hugh Haughton, 'An Unlimited Embrace', *TLS* (1 May 1992), p. 12.

¹⁴ Peter Porter, 'Doing what comes naturally', *Sunday Telegraph* (23 February 1992).

¹⁵ Peter Reading, 'Street Life', *The Sunday Times* (8 March 1992), p. 7, Omnibus Review.

¹⁶ Dennis Lemon, 'Book of the Year', *Gay Times* 171, London (December 1992), p. 80, Omnibus Review.

the endnotes and using the paradoxical, anonymous 'you' and 'he', Gunn resolves to speak as an impersonal 'self' whose 'I' enunciates a kind of personal mourning in public without writing sentimentally mournful poems. Refusing to speak as a public spokesperson for any group, but speaking only in his voice and that of his friends, Gunn paradoxically became the most searching 'witness' to the crisis of grief and identity experienced by the gay world he was part of.

Whenever there is an embrace between pronouns, there is an embrace between bodies. In the last section of this chapter I will explore how different forms of embrace seek to recover a sense of trust, friendship and solidarity in time of plague overshadowed by isolation, mistrust and anxiety, as well as loss, pain and grief. Even though Gunn does not directly use 'recover' or 'heal' in the book, in 'A Sketch of the Great Dejection' he speaks of 'a place of recuperation'. The poem occupies a section of its own, and as James Campbell suggests, generates 'the gravitational centre of the book' (50-2):

My body insisted on restlessness
 having been promised love,
as my mind insisted on words
 having been promised the imagination.
So I remained alert, confused and uncomforted.
I fared on and, though the landscape did not change,
it came to seem after a while like a place of recuperation. (424)

The verse here condenses Gunn's preoccupations in *The Man with Night Sweats*: his life-long preoccupation with the tension between the mind and the body, his sense of restlessness during the AIDS crisis, and the intricate correlations between 'love' and 'body', 'words' and 'imagination'. Many speakers in the book are indeed 'alert, confused and uncomforted'. But they too, like Gunn, 'fared on', in the landscape that did not change, during the dark times when the book was published. Even in the darkest time, Gunn suggests that 'after a while', the landscape might come to seem 'like a place of recuperation.'

Gunn's Pronouns

Gunn's 'You'

'Your dying is a difficult enterprise', Gunn begins his equally difficult 'Lament' giving primacy to the second person. In a world overcome by a vertiginous sense of disappearance, Gunn in *The Man with Night Sweats* addresses the 'you'—his dying friends—and by plunging into the second person, Gunn asks us to experience the sensation of a difficult relationship between the poet and whoever the 'you' out there might be engaged in this 'difficult enterprise'. The idea that Gunn's 'you', though defined by his friends, may not be visible and knowable, and needs to be imagined as 'one of us', is central to the struggle of *The Man with Night Sweats*. Jonathan Culler observes that 'the vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him.'¹⁷ Culler continues, 'invocation is a figure of vocation' because 'the object is treated as a subject, and I which implies a certain type of you in its turn.'¹⁸ Nevertheless, in elegy after elegy, Gunn works against Culler's model of the lyrical I implicit in the apostrophic you. He seeks to diminish the elegiac I but expand the suffering you, giving the dying 'other' their voice in the wishful absence of the addresser.

In the last section of *The Man with Night Sweats*, the second person pronoun always triggers a specific sense of intimacy and anonymity. It is the most private pronoun but also simultaneously the most public one. Through the course of the elegiac sequence, the poet not only creates but is created by the 'you' or 'yous' he addresses. Many AIDS elegists address their poems to a biographically specific you¹⁹—Wally Roberts in Mark Doty's *My Alexandria* (1993), *Atlantis* (1995) and *Sweet Machine* (1998), for example, and Roger Horwitz in Paul Monette's *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* (1987). Unlike Doty and Monette's 'yous', Gunn's elegiac 'you' is not an exclusively singular one addressed to one lover but his multiple friends. Gunn's 'you', though specifically addressed to the friends named in his endnotes, is often

¹⁷ Jonathan Culler, 'Apostrophe' in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London, Routledge, 1981), p. 142.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ A lot of AIDS elegies are clearly dedicated to a specific you in their subtitles. For example, David Bergman writing to Jerry Thompson in 'Dream of Nightingale' (*Poets for Life*, p. 29), Robert Cording's 'Elegy for John, My Student Dead of AIDS' (ibid, p. 53), Marilyn Hacker writing to Lewis Ellingham in 'Nights of 1965: The Old Reliable' (ibid, p. 90), David Kalstone behind James Merrill's 'Investitures at Ceconi's' and 'Farewell Performance' in *The Inner Room* (1998),

undecidedly singular or plural in the poems, serving as a tether to hold us, to make us feel that we are addressed or accompanied in even the most forbidding terrain of terminal disease.

Without mentioning any names in the poems, Gunn summons the second and the third person pronouns throughout the elegiac sequence, creating an elusive quasi-public poetry without overtly public (political) statements. Writing about bearing witness in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, Marita Sturken notes that 'all memorials participate in the act of naming, from the engraving of individual headstones to the pointed non-naming of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.'²⁰ The notion of recording lost names is central in the discourse of AIDS activism, as well as fiction and poetry about AIDS. Political and intimate names frequently enter Larry Kramer's *Reports from the Holocaust* as part of his coercive campaign against governmental authority.²¹ At the beginning of his title article he writes: 'over the past seven years I have lost some five hundreds acquaintances and friends to AIDS [and] I have for over seven years kept a record of these names.'²² Writing about *The Names Project* in San Francisco,²³ the poet and anthologist Michael Klein in 'Naming the Element' aligns the art of memorialising with AIDS activism: 'The names of the dead/ are messages on black marble / and plunge into the earth. // They are the notes / of a war / we imagined forgetting.'²⁴ The 'you' and 'he' in Gunn's elegies, however, are not nameless but unnamed, not lost but remembered: he prefers recording them in the endnotes of his collection to flagging them in the title of his poems.

If the act of announcing dead lovers' and friends' names in poems is as powerful a testament as sewing those names together on a gigantic quilt and paying tribute to an individual life behind the statistics, then Gunn, instead of incorporating the names of his lost friends into poems, has consciously chosen to sew them *behind* the quilt. Tom Sleight observes that 'Gunn never intrudes on these lives by pushing himself into the foreground—he never

²⁰ Marita Sturken, 'Conversations with the Dead: Bearing Witness in the AIDS Memorial Quilt' in *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (California: University of California Press, 1997), p. 186.

²¹ See Kramer's 'An Open Letter to Dr. Anthony Fauci' (1988) in *Reports from the Holocaust*, in which he begins his raging letter by overtly dramatizing the 'you': 'I have been screaming at the National Institutes of Health since I first visited your Animal House of Horrors in 1984.' (193) Kramer's repetition of 'you' becomes a blade-like activist attack on Dr. Fauci's mismanagement of governmental funds on researching into AIDS vaccine. More intimate names enter 'Who Killed Jeff?' (1993) in *Reports from the Holocaust*, a memorial speech delivered at The Dalton School for Jeffrey Schamaiz, a close friend and ally of Kramer.

²² Kramer, p. 218.

²³ See Cindy Ruskin, *The Quilt: Stories from the Names Project* (USA: Pocket Book, 1988) for a detail account of the project. Douglas Crimp, 'The Spectacle of Mourning' in *Melancholia and Moralism* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 195-202.

²⁴ *Poets for Life*, p. 129.

appropriates his subjects' sufferings for stylistic bravura.²⁵ A good example of Gunn's non-intrusive technique in 'Memory Unsettled', a plain yet memorable poem seeking to record the urgent need to remember and be remembered in a world of imminent disappearances:

When near your death a friend
Asked you what he could do,
'Remember me,' you said.
We will remember you. (479)

Told from a first person perspective, the tightly knitted stanza addresses the second person (the sufferer and 'your death'), before moving onto the third person (the comforter and 'a friend'). Gunn introduces the directed speech of 'you', speaking as an 'I', asking his friends to 'Remember me'. 'We will remember you' seems to be a direct answer to the dying friend's request, but the line is unmarked by quotation marks, creating a disorientating effect that suggests both timelessness and an assertion of collective memory, as well as registering the fact of death. Neither the speech of first person (the speaker) or third person (the friend who 'asked') is recorded in the way the second person's is. Ann Keniston observes that apostrophe 'persists in address that its speaker knows to be unheard, while demanding that both the speaker and reader pretend that this absent other is in fact present and capable of hearing.'²⁶ While traditional apostrophe assumes the absence of its addressee, Gunn in 'Memory Unsettled' foregrounds the presence of the dying and dead 'you'. Unlike Culler or Keinston's sense of apostrophe which 'pretends that the other is present',²⁷ Gunn in his elegiac sequence does exactly the opposite: he pretends that the speaker is absent and insists that the other is present, or at least he wants the other to be more present than the poet himself. Although most of Gunn's elegiac records in *The Man with Night Sweats* are spoken by the 'I' addressing the 'you', the 'I' enigmatically does not literally 'speak' in the poems. The speaker becomes so totally absorbed in recording the 'you' that the poems seem sometimes on the verge of bypassing the singularity of the elegiac first person in mourning.

In the 'you' poems such as 'The Reassurance' and 'Memory Unsettled', Gunn speaks through an absent 'I', conveying an implicit, imaginary sense of distance between them. It is as if by 'not being there', the unbridgeable distance between 'I' and 'you' is cancelled, freeing the 'you' from 'the other' and extending the pronoun to its potential inclusiveness. Robert Pinsky noted that 'he found ways to write as himself among others: with a sense of himself in relation to other people that combined surgical accuracy with theatrical panache, cloaked in

²⁵ Tom Sleight, *Boston Review*, 19:3

²⁶ Ann Keniston, "The Fluidity of Damaged Form": Apostrophe and Desire in Nineties Lyric' in *Contemporary Literature* 42:2 (Summer 2001), p. 298.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 302. Culler claims that apostrophe is 'the pure embodiment of poetic pretension' (143), confirming the poet's status as poet.

his own suave understatement.²⁸ Such concentration on addressing the inclusive 'you' asks the reader to participate in the process of identification, making 'us' as actual readers. Describing reading out Gunn's 'Lament' in a hospital room, the poet-physician Rafael Campo documents the way Gunn's 'you' cuts through the professional boundary between doctor and patient:

Late at night, after restarting an I.V. or evaluating a new fever, I have lingered in a patient's room to talk. Or in one particular case, to read Thom Gunn's poetry aloud—when we heard the respirator functioning in the plunging up-and-down iambs of "Lament," we nearly cried together. I have mixed my voice in among theirs. I have been fortunate to breathe in their sweet exhalations. I have, in fact, exchanged the same bodily secretions, albeit with others, but knowing somehow that all desire is the same.²⁹

For Campo's patients, Gunn's inclusive 'you' directly speaks *to* and *for* them—their 'hard headache', 'bad dream', 'hours of waiting for pills, shot, X-ray / Or test' (465). They are the 'you' going through the 'difficult enterprise' of dying. For Campo, reading 'Lament' aloud with his patients creates or recreates a sense of solidarity, licensing his assertion that 'I have mixed my voice in among theirs.' For Campo, 'Lament' becomes a vehicle for connectedness between the 'you' and 'I', awakening a real sense of solidarity embedded in the latent 'we' ('we nearly cried together'). If this is a tribute to the public circulation of Gunn's poems, it also re-inserts them into the theatre of AIDS experience the poem resists.

The work of elegy, according to Peter Sacks and others, involves a personal approach to, then gradually relinquishment of the dead, expressing the 'experience of loss' to 'search for consolation.'³⁰ Working against the establishment of the poet as the 'I' who survives and speaks, Gunn in *The Man with Night Sweats* seek neither to relinquish the dead nor to console the speaker or the reader. Jahan Ramazani in *Poetry of Mourning* (1994) re-examines the consolatory status of modern elegy. He questions Peter Sacks's idea in *The English Elegy* (1985) that 'compensatory mourning is the psychic basis of elegy'³¹ where 'the poet redresses loss and overcomes grief by installing a substitute for the lost person, thus recapitulating the oedipal resolution of the child.'³² As an alternative, Ramazani uses 'the psychology of melancholia or melancholic mourning', arguing that 'modern elegists tend not to achieve but

²⁸ 'California Alumni: In Memoriam Thom Gunn', Robert Pinsky, April 2005, <http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/Alumni/Cal_Monthly/September_2004/In_Memoriam.asp>

²⁹ Rafael Campo, 'AIDS and the Poetry of Healing' in *In Company of My Solitude*, p. 26.

³⁰ Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins UP, 1985), p. 1.

³¹ Sacks, p. 5.

³² Sacks, p. 14.

to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss.³³ For Ramazani:

Modern poets reanimate the elegy not by slavishly adopting its conventions; instead, they violate its norms and transgress its limits. They conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre.³⁴

Ramazani's subversive take on the genre has transformed the critical discussion of modern elegy. Published during the crisis of mourning represented by AIDS, Ramazani's book ends with a brief discussion of Gunn's poems: 'though they eschew easy consolation, Gunn's clear-eyed elegies for friends, like panels of the AIDS Quilt, are triumphs over the mute indifference of the media, the state, and a normativist society.'³⁵ He concludes that such:

elegies and the elegies of other modern poets, together with the AIDS Quilt, the Vietnam Memorial, and other inventive memorials, are powerful refusals of the modern taboo on death and grief—imaginative acts that may finally be prodding our society beyond denial and embarrassment and toward reaffirmation of the human work of mourning.³⁶

As the AIDS Memorial Quilt engages us in the paradox of intimacy in anonymity, of loneliness in collectivity, Gunn's inclusive 'you' resists the social taboo against open mourning and generates a space of potential solidarity. Nevertheless, I suggest that the question of mourning is more reticent and implicit in Gunn's elegies than in other 'AIDS poets' like Mark Doty and Paul Monette. Gunn's speaker does not identify himself as a mourner for the dying or the dead, and often suppresses self-identity and records the unprecedented physical, social, and psychological realities, taking place around him in an everyday world transformed by AIDS. Gunn is more like a witness, desperate to understand rather than a conventional mourner. By looking closely at 'Lament', I will explore the way in which Gunn stages his play of pronouns, prioritising the 'you' and involving him (and us) in a complex reflexive process of identification that results in a new kind of elegy.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Ramazani, p. 1.

³⁵ Ramazani, p. 364-5. Writing on the AIDS Memorial Quilt, Ramazani notes 'each panel within the collection achieves deconventionalized intimacy in representing the dead and mourning. Unlike the standardized newspaper obituary, many of the panels of the Quilt evoke the absent bodies of the dead through clothing they once wore—threadbare jeans, montages of ties, haunting empty jackets, flattened vest and hats. [...] Objects of the dead person's attention—wooden rulers, sheet music, books—are metonymies stitched to the surface of the quilt, evocative of the absent consciousness that will never again encompass them. [...] Unlike the hospital death statement or the condolence card, many of the panels self-reflectively insist on their materiality—foregrounding the work of the quilting, superimposing quilts on quilts, punningly referring to the "last stitches."' (p. 363-4)

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

First written in 1984,³⁷ for Gunn 'Lament' is a defining poem of the elegiac sequence. Gunn told James Campbell that

The first poem I wrote about the AIDS epidemic was about a very close friend of mine who died—he was the first of my friends to die from this—and I started writing that poem the day after his death. I was amazed that I knew how to do it so soon.³⁸

The fact that 'Lament' is written in couplets helps Gunn establish the form and tone of the sequence,³⁹ even though during the writing process the poems were not first conceived of being 'a single continuing work.'⁴⁰ Out of 116 lines in iambic couplets in 'Lament', the pronoun 'you' and its possessive form 'your' occur 75 times, almost once in every two lines. Even though neither rhymes with other words in the poem, their relentless repetition creates a centripetal force in and out of the hospital room, calling our attention to the second person suffering from AIDS. The speaking 'I', which appears only 11 times in this long elegy, minimizes the presence of his own voice, condensing his emotional upheaval into 9 lines. Gunn's intimate play with pronouns reveals the nature of his engagement with others. The complex play of sympathy, empathy, distance, and self-defence, in Gunn's book, is worked through by way of his deft, analytic, and resourceful investment in the intercourse of pronouns—as well as the people they represent.

Gunn begins 'Lament' with a sense of subdued violence: 'Your dying was a difficult enterprise.' (465) This striking understatement manages to sound banally vigilant but also sharply empathetic, investing the narrative with precision and suspense. Robert Pinsky noted 'the understatement widens out into the word "enterprise"—a little as though this hard death were a mere business venture. Yet the word has somewhat a Shakespearean and Yeatsian bravura to it as well, a flair emphasized by how the poem circles back to this same noun as a concluding note.'⁴¹ In 'Lament' Gunn focuses on the 'un-enterprising' health of his

³⁷ Campbell highlighted that 'the book was published in 1992', and Gunn added, 'I started writing them in 1984, and I finished in 1988.' (Campbell, p. 50) In 'Lament' Gunn inherits Donne's colloquial theatricality and intellectualism, transposing Donne's elegiac vision of Renaissance courtly love to his lament for the premature death wrought by AIDS in the late 20th century. Consciously titling his poem 'Lament', Gunn evokes the dialectic of mourning and consolation central to centuries of elegies such as Byron's 'The Lament of Tasso', Shelley's *Adonais*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Hardy's *Poems 1912-1913* (one of Hardy's elegies for his wife is also titled 'Lament'), Owen's war elegies, and Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'.

³⁸ Campbell, p. 18.

³⁹ Clive Wilmer in an interview asks, 'writing "Lament" in couplets established that as the kind of form you would use for the rest of them?' Gunn answers, 'That's probably right.' (PR, p. 175)

⁴⁰ 'I didn't think of them as a series until very much toward the end. They came out one by one. I was writing about things that matter to me—about the people disappearing all around me. I never thought about it being a single continuing work, but that, in fact, is what it was.' (Hennessey, p. 14)

⁴¹ 'California Alumni: In Memoriam Thom Gunn', Robert Pinsky, April 2005,

⟨http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/Alumni/Cal_Monthly/September_2004/In_Memoriam.asp⟩

friend—‘the small clustering duties of the sick’ and ‘the cough’s dry rhetoric’. The medical details that clatter into many AIDS poems are given a formal tone, self-consciously reflecting on the ‘dry rhetoric’ (of pared-down rhymes and unadorned metres) he adopts in the poem and sequence as a whole. It is perhaps too easy to say that Gunn’s rhetoric attunes itself to that of illness. The poet however comes closer to the ‘you’ by withdrawing from the scene—the ‘clumsy stealth / Distanced you from the habits of your health’ (465)—and gradually the idea of distance becomes more abstract and aggressive, like the disease itself: ‘How thin the distance made you.’ (466) Concentrating on the second person, the speaker, similarly, distances himself, allowing the story of gradual decline to be told in a more unshaped, freewheeling way.

In a footnote Treichler discusses Gunn’s ‘Lament’, which unlike many comparably narrative AIDS poems, sponsors equivocation and multiplication: ‘AIDS is a story of change and the death of friends. The stories we tell help us determine what our own place in the story is to be.’⁴² But in ‘Lament’ the question of where the ‘you’ stands precedes any account of where the speaker stands. If ‘Lament’, as Treichler rightly noted, is ‘a story of change’, it is also a story of resisting such inevitable change. The ‘you’ in the poem strives to ‘stay the man that you had been, / Treating each symptom as a mere mishap / Without import.’ (465) Rather than being a visual ‘witness’, Gunn’s ‘I’ appears initially as a distant listener rather than a speaker:

I heard you wake up from the same bad dream
 Every half-hour with the same short cry
 Of mild outrage, before immediately
 Slipping into the nightmare once again
 Empty of content but the drip of pain. (465)

Shutting off the visual, the poet, keeping vigil, asks us to listen to the repetitive ‘rhetoric’ of ‘short cry’ and ‘mild outrage’, and the flat, unsettling rhyme of ‘again’ and ‘pain’. While Gunn focuses on the ear attending the ‘you’, the idea of the speaker being an outsider, particularly an observer in the suffering scene, is ubiquitous in AIDS poems.⁴³ Gunn makes minimal use of metaphor in ‘Lament’ when depicting the suffering body: ‘Your cough grew thick and rich, its strength increased’ (465) and ‘You breathed through a segmented tube, fat, white, / Jammed down your throat so that you could not speak.’ (466) In deadpan tone, Gunn notes that the cough gradually strengthens and takes charge of the infected body. Showing the

⁴² Treichler’s footnote in ‘AIDS, ‘Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification’ (1987) in Crimp’s *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, p. 43.

⁴³ See Paul Monette’s ‘Manifesto’ in *Love Alone* (1988), p. 40. Monette focuses on the shocking visual experience of visiting an AIDS ward, exploring the politicised homophobia embedded in the act of seeing. Monette’s ferociously expressive first person can ‘scream’ and ‘rattle on’, venting his anger and pity over the ‘pale sore body’ in the ward, casts Gunn’s stance in clearer relief.

irreversible symptom is a way to say that the AIDS virus 'attacks' the immune system. Even though 'Lament' is a poem implicitly about the patient's 'fight' against the virus, Gunn avoids using the war metaphors that permeate AIDS anthologies.⁴⁴ Gunn's poem, by contrast, keeps focussed on one man's cough, breath, body, rather than the larger metaphoric war.

The aim of this chapter is not to assess the political correctness of war metaphors in 'AIDS poetry', or to retrace the ground covered by Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*.⁴⁵ I am more interested in the way Gunn, by toning down and avoiding war metaphors in *The Man with Night Sweats*, questions the activist tendency embedded in many AIDS elegies, re-imagining a kind of elegy disinfected of the 'grand-narrative' of AIDS activism. 'Given that AIDS does not involve "real" war and that alternative languages exist for its expression,' Michael S. Sherry argues that 'the pervasive use of war metaphors [is] to justify and define a host of social, political, and economic crusades.'⁴⁶ Gunn however describes himself as a 'survivor' rather than a 'warrior'. Asked by James Campbell if he was troubled by survival guilt, Gunn answered, 'Yes, everybody was, everybody who had friends who were dying. You felt "Why not me?" You know, I had run around, and had had sex in various forms of extraordinary risk in the late '70s, just when everybody was starting to get infected.'⁴⁷ Significantly, however, neither 'survival' nor 'guilt' is used in *The Man with Night Sweats*, even though the book grapples to represent an extinction by a disease that was used to stigmatize sexual identities as sexual guilt, when, according to Leo Bersani, it was 'as if gay men's "guilt"

⁴⁴ Penelope Shuttle in 'Love' asks, 'So many people are dying/ it must be wartime, surely?' (*Jugular Defences*, p. 6) Tim Dlugos in 'Retrovir' hears 'a shell/ projectile through the neutral air/ above a world war.' (*Poets for Life*, p. 65) David Matias in 'Some Things Shouldn't Be Written' writes 'During my battle with mycobacterium avium intracellulare, withering me to 102 pounds—my 7th grade weight.' (*Things Shaped in Passing*, p. 134) Poets summon war metaphors partly to articulate the body's heroic struggle against the virus 'attack', and partly to represent a scale of extinction that reminds us of the casualty figures of the Second World War.

⁴⁵ Sontag establishes a close connection between military metaphors and medical thinking. She writes, 'Modern medical thinking could be said to begin when the gross military metaphor becomes specific. [...] It was when the invader was seen not as the microorganism that causes the illness that medicine really began to be effective, and the military metaphors took on new credibility and precision. [...] Disease is regularly described as invading the society, and efforts to reduce mortality from a given disease are called a fight, a struggle, a war.' (Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 95.)

⁴⁶ 'The very term *war on AIDS* implied that enemies, allies, battle plans, and strategies must exist. Who, or what, was fighting whom, or what, where and how? Since the most obvious enemy—the viral agent—was faceless and invisible, it served poorly as the object of those intense emotions that war presumably arouses; it located the war within the bodies of the disease's victims, not in the arena of social and political action. [...] So, too, a "war on AIDS" incited identification of enemies—faceless bureaucrats and callous politicians, but also carriers of the disease or whole groups whose members were prone to it.' Michael S. Sherry, 'The Language of War in AIDS Discourse' in Timothy F. Murphy & Suzanne Poirier, ed. *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language and Analysis* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 39, 41.

⁴⁷ Campbell, p. 50.

were the real agent of infection.⁴⁸ Even though Gunn describes himself as a 'survivor' in the interview, the elegies do not present him as a war-survivor or Holocaust-survivor, or the model of Monette or Kramer. Repeatedly addressing the 'you', the speaker in 'Lament' distances even himself from his status as survivor, steering the poem away from politicized notions of survival and victimhood. There is only one scene in 'Lament' in which Gunn touches on the politically charged term of 'sexual partner', if only via a more euphemistic term:

You wrote us messages on a pad, amused
At one time that you had your nurse confused
Who, seeing you reconciled after four years
With your grey father, both of you in tears,
Asked if this was at last your 'special friend'
(The one you waited for until the end). (466)

There are eight 'yous' and 'yours' in six lines. The 'you' here is also depicted as a writer and storyteller, despite being sick and bedridden. Though not overtly political, this comic interlude of mistaken identity—'father' taken for "special friend"—undercuts the stereotypes at work during the AIDS epidemic.

The phrase "special friend" is further encoded by the quotation marks. Its use plays out the taboo of what Lee Edelman termed 'the contradictory mythology of homosexuality, "the love that dare not speak its name."⁴⁹ Edelman suggests this taboo combines 'something lurid, shameful, and repellent' simultaneously with 'something so attractive that even the name or represent it is to risk the possibility of tempting some innocent into a fate too horrible—or too seductive—to imagine.'⁵⁰ On the other hand, 'special friend' draws attention to one of Gunn's special keywords, since the term 'friends' is consciously foregrounded across the elegiac sequence (being used 21 times in all). This explicitly neutral but heavily (en)coded word steers clear of culturally constructed homosexual categories such as 'gay lovers' or 'sexual partners' which were stereotyped as 'high-risk groups'. Both Gunn and the nurse engage in a process of encoding homosexuality in a public context. For the Philippine nurse working in the hospital (probably the AIDS ward), the term "special friend" is her politely euphemistic way of talking about a 'gay lover'. The way she assumes the patient's father is his lover but hesitates to address the speculative relationship in plain words show a heightened sense of anxiety and self-surveillance in play. For Gunn, using the term 'friends' is a way to studiously avoid the normative notions of 'lovers', 'partners' or

⁴⁸ Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in Crimp, p. 210.

⁴⁹ Lee Edelman, 'The Plague of Discourse: Politics, Literary Theory, and "AIDS"' in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (NY & London: Routledge, 1994), p. 86-7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

'boyfriends'. He never refers to Mike Kitay as his 'partner' or 'lover' in interviews. Sharing his house in the Upper Haight-Ashbury, Gunn lived with four other friends and had dinner 'every night at 7 pm.'⁵¹ Even though his poems rarely touch on his domestic life, his everyday life was largely shaped by domestic routines. Not wanting to be seen through the currency of romantic love or high-risk group, Gunn finds refuge with 'friends', a de-sexed, slightly phobic term but also a more neutral term sponsoring a sense of openness and anonymous intimacy, set apart from a world defined by illnesses, politics, religions and homophobia.

In *The Man with Night Sweats*, Gunn not only avoids the name of the disease, but also the names of symptoms, treatments and pills.⁵² In 'Lament', Gunn merges the metrical into the medical in order to focus on the patient's psychological struggle to control the rate of change, as the heroic couplet insists with its own equability of tonal and prosodic consistency. The contrast between the collapsing body and the well-established, intact heroic couplet creates a lustrated heroism, as Gunn depicts the unresolved tension between the burden of staying alive and the limbo state of dying:

You'd lived as if your time was infinite:
 You were not ready and not reconciled,
 Feeling as uncompleted as a child
 Till you had shown the world what you could do
 In some ambitious role to be worked through,
 A role your need for it had half-defined,
 But never wholly, even in your mind.
 You lacked the necessary ruthlessness,
 The soaring meanness that pinpoints success.
 We loved that lack of self-love. And your smile,
 Rueful, at your own silliness. (467)

Gunn's rhyme implies its own continuation as well as its own conclusion. To capture the unresolved knot of hope and despair, Gunn uses the closed couplets employed by Pope, pushing each line into a regular metrical unit with minimal variations, and counter rhyme of 'silliness' with 'ruthlessness' and 'success'. If we listen carefully, we can hear Gunn's subtle

⁵¹ Billy Lux's interview with Gunn in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, 7:3, Summer 2000, p. 41.

⁵² Many 'AIDS poems', especially amateur poets writing from workshops, magnify the sense of physical decline by minute, sometimes, microscopic descriptions of symptoms. Rachel Hades's *Unending Dialogue: Voices from an AIDS Poetry Workshop* (1991) and John Harold's *How Can you Write a Poem When You're Dying of AIDS?* (1993), are full of grandiose yet abstract statements of grief and mourning, as well as detailed portrayal of explicit physical suffering. If the first *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS* (1989) is an anthology about shock and loss, its companion anthology *Things Shaped in Passing: More "Poets for Life" Writing from the AIDS Pandemic* (1997) is a collection dealing with the suspense of death due to improvement on medication, hospital treatment and our understanding of the virus. In poem after poem *Things Shaped in Passing* shows us the 'difficult enterprise' of dying. Melvin Dixon, for example, in 'I'll be Somewhere Listening for My Name' says, 'As for me, I've become an acronym queen: BSM ISO same or other. HIV plus or minus. CMV, PCP, MAI, AZT, ddl, ddC. Your prescription gets mine.' (*In Company of My Solitude*, p. 183).

metrical variety within the line, the way he freely substitutes trochaic lines ('Feeling as uncompleted as a child' and anapaestic lines 'In some ambitious role to be worked though') for normal iambs. By arranging phrases and clauses (units of syntax and logic) of different lengths within single lines and couplets, Gunn moves the verse with fluency of thought and feeling, modulating the harmony by unobtrusive patterns of alliteration and assonance, as in the line 'lóved the láck of sélf-lóve'. Gunn disentangles the subject of elegy from explicit activism, recasting his friend's 'apolitical' interest that does not involve narcissism, and rethinking 'self-love' (or the lack of it) as a personal quality rather than political identification. The poem is about the way his friend lived as well as how he died, stressing his role not as victim but as agent.

While the closed couplets earlier capture the inner struggle, the couplets become more 'open' towards the final phase of the disease, suggesting a sense of relief and release:

Your lungs collapsed, and the machine, unstrained,
Did all your breathing now. Nothing remained
But death by drowning on an inland sea
Of your own fluids, which it seemed could be
Kindly forestalled by drugs. Both could and would:
Nothing was said, everything understood,
At least by us. Your own concerns were not
Long-term, precisely, when they gave the shot
—You made local arrangements to the bed
And pulled a pillow round beside your head.
And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey,
Achieving your completeness, in a way.

(467-8)

The couplets slow the poem down, forcing us to pause over details that might otherwise be overlooked. The iambic rhythm sounds more fragmentary as Gunn uses an 'open' pentameter, allowing the couplets to run on freely and vary the pattern of stresses. This sense of rhythmic openness is countered by the closure of the patient's life. 'Nothing was said' foregrounds the silence of dying, as if the metrical vessel, however formal and intact, were about to fall into pieces. Henri Cole notes Gunn's 'metrical patterns help control elegiac emotions, like the steady drum tap accompanying a coffin to its cemetery.'⁵³ Gunn's rhythm, I suggest, shuts down the reader's automatic associations with the death imagery of coffins and cemeteries, refocusing on what actually happens to the dying body, the fact that death, however well prepared, happens unexpectedly, and is a question of 'local arrangements'. The phrase 'skin gone grey' apparently rhymes effortlessly with 'in a way', creating a paradoxical sense of loss and completion that accentuates the complexity of

⁵³ Henri Cole, 'Sketches of the Great Epidemic' in *Nation* 31 (August 1992), p. 221.

confronting death for both the patient and the observer. 'In a way', however, acknowledges the limits of 'completeness', the inadequacy of this poetic consolation.

William Bowman Piper notes in *The Heroic Couplet*, 'as a medium for public discourse...[which] satisfied the vital need of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to formulate public statements and to carry on public discussion.'⁵⁴ Dryden's political satire *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) and Johnson's 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' (1741) all address the public with the confident march of heroic couplets, allying poetic fluency with political ambitions. David Caplan argues that 'even if Gunn's couplets were to adhere strictly to the Augustan conventions, they still would not function as a medium for public discourse, because the late twentieth-century public no longer accepts this form as the proper vehicle to satisfy their civil needs.'⁵⁵ Since 'Lament' was the first elegy in the sequence to be written, Gunn must have been conscious of the heroic couplet as a public metrical form. Avoiding the Kramerian activist rhetoric that permeated the poetic language during the 80s and 90s, 'Lament' ruthlessly depicts the last journey of Gunn's dying friend Allan Noseworthy, his investment in the 'difficult enterprise' without any witnesses except his nurse, father and friend. Reading 'Lament' in the 21st century, I am struck by the way Gunn underlines the seemingly personal experience of his dying friend, while using the heroic couplet to formally extend the private events into the public sphere encompassing AIDS patients in the 80s, who occupied a limbo between living and dying because of limited medical options. Perhaps Gunn's heroic couplets are not meant to be read as a 'medium for public discourse', but they certainly address what and whom the public discourse ignores. The 'you' of 'Lament' achieved his 'completeness' in 1984, while many other were embarking on the same 'difficult enterprise'. Gunn's 'you', therefore, is not a singular pronoun but a potentially plural other. It seeks solidarity by focusing on the simultaneous singularity and plurality of 'you', testing our ability to think of 'the other' as included in the range of 'us'.

Gunn's 'He'

While Gunn suppresses the 'I' in the second person poems, he becomes more vocal and self-aware in the poems describing the third person. Gunn's 'he' predominates in the elegiac sequence. While his second person includes the dying and the dead, his third person

⁵⁴ William Bowman Piper, *The Heroic Couplet* (USA: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), p. 23.

⁵⁵ David Caplan, 'Why Not the Heroic Couplet?' in *New Literary History* 30:1 (Winter 1999), p. 228.

is strictly restricted to the dying or the living dead. In third person poems such as 'Terminal', 'Still Life', 'Courtesies of the Interregnum', and 'The J Car', the 'I', neither absent nor being an uninvolved seer or listener, actively reaches out to connect with the 'he', trying to establish and understand the difficult sense of intimacy and distance between the 'survivor' and the dying. In the third person poems, Gunn speaks through a more present 'I', exploring an explicit distance between the uninfected 'I' and the dying 'he' who are caught up in this struggle to solidarity. On the one hand the 'I' underlines the 'he'—the sense of otherness, vulnerability and grief sponsored by the disease. On the other hand, the 'I' is desperate to find ways to cancel this widening distance between the living and dying. Even though the speaker in the 'he' poem is often as reticent and resigned as in the 'you' poems, at least the 'I' is literally present in those poems, reminding us the sensation of speaking as 'the speaker' and what speaking means when the 'he' turns speechless while still alive, like Gunn's friend Larry Hoyt in 'Still Life'.

It is interesting to note that generally AIDS elegists address the 'I' and 'you' more often than the 'he'.⁵⁶ What makes 'AIDS poets' stop writing to and for the third person when so many 'hes' and 'shes' died in the 80s and early 90s? What makes the third person pronoun sound 'politically incorrect' or 'forbidden'? Is it because of the Kramerian imperative of the 'I' to address the apolitical gay community as 'you'? Or poets' urgent need to speak directly to their dead or dying friends? The 'political incorrectness' of addressing 'one of us' as the third person, i.e. as the other? While Doty and Monette more or less exclude the third person pronoun in their elegies, in a few elegies in *The Man with Night Sweats* Gunn directly talks about the dying 'he' as 'the other', the speaker struggles to understand the 'difficult enterprise' of the AIDS patient dying.

In 'Still Life', Gunn's 'I' looks at this image closely by focusing on the third person pronoun, using a reticent, withdrawn tone that counters the immediacy of 'Lament'. He depicts the bodily frozenness of his dying friend as an inanimate object in a still life painting. With the tube down his throat and his breath regulated by a respiratory machine, the patient—the subject of Gunn's still life—is neither officially dead nor consciously alive. He is quiet and immobile like a still-standing thing:

I shall not soon forget
The greyish-yellow skin
To which the face had set:

⁵⁶ Roughly less than ten poems in Mark Doty's trilogy—*Alexandria*, *Atlantis*, and *Sweet Machine* directly refer to the dying third person. In Paul Monette's *Love Alone* too the pronoun 'he' is rarely used (only 12 times in 18 elegies, with not a single one narrating 'Rog' as 'he'). Internalizing the third person pronoun, Rafael Campo titled his second collection *The Other Man was Me* (1993).

Lids tight: nothing of his,
No tremor from within,
Played on the surfaces. (470)

Written in unemphatic iambic tri-meter, the stanza, uniformly rhymed *abacbc*, synchronizes with the mechanical air-drum of the respirator, drawing attention to the consciously shaped poetic form as well as the logistics of breathing. His canvas-like 'greyish-yellow skin' shows 'no tremor from within', as if the body were already a corpse, the lid-tight face a death mask. The poem is about stopping breathing, and 'nothing of his' ironically pitches that. Even though the poem begins with 'I shall not soon forget', the speaker asks us to concentrate on the barely living person the speaker identifies as 'he':

He still found breath, and yet
It was an obscure knack.
I shall not soon forget
The angle of his head,
Arrested and reared back
On the crisp field of bed (470)

The 'obscure knack' of breathing through the respirator puts the neck an in an unnatural 'angle'. Gunn's minimal geometry conveys the chilling reality of what it means to be still alive when the lungs have lost their respiratory function. Many AIDS poems that draw on the harrowing reality of the sickbed⁵⁷ but few give such focussed attention to the details of the body *in extremis* without mentioning blood, body fluids, or medical jargon.

Being a witness to such silent endurance, the speaker in 'Still Life' detachedly shows us the way the 'he' is forced into the reality of mechanically assisted 'life':⁵⁸

Back from what he could neither
Accept, as one opposed,
Nor, as a life-long breather,
Consentingly let go,
The tube his mouth enclosed
In an astonished O. (470)

The patient is trapped in a 'neither-nor' situation: he is unable to accept nor discontinue the respirator imposed upon him. The phrase 'a life-long breather' re-imagines a commonplace,

⁵⁷ I have in mind: David Bergman's *The Care and Treatment of Pain*: 'See these bubbles rising from my head, / purple cancers "winking at the brim" / which nothing's stopped.' (*Things Shaped in Passing*, p. 13) Carl Phillips, 'In the Blood Winnowing': 'Before the dumb hoof / through the chest, the fine hair / of wire drawn over the head, snapping / free the neck's blue chords, // before the visionary falling away / from a body left mumbling to itself.' (*ibid*, p. 162)

⁵⁸ It is such a big contrast looking back 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', in which the speaker consciously chooses to incorporate the machine to represent his individuality: 'I urge my chosen instrument/ Against the mere embodiment'. (54)

making the patient's breathing seem like a choice, a taste, an occupation (as in life-long smoker or singer). The speaker in 'Still Life' keeps emotionally still. The poem ends however with the shocking image of 'an astonished O', capturing the visual, painterly quality of the scene where the mouth is forced open by an enclosed tube. It also re-enacts the ambivalent 'Oh' sound that could convey astonishment, pain, or grief. On apostrophe, Culler argues that 'the poet makes himself a poetic presence through an image of voice, and nothing figures voice better than the pure O of undifferentiated voicing'.⁵⁹ In Gunn's 'Still life', however, the apostrophic 'O' is given to the dying 'you' rather than the 'I' who refuses to claim 'poetic presence'. The poem achieves a ruthless sense of continued human perseverance encapsulated in the contained energy of metrical stanzas, where the dignity of the 'life-long breather' is set beside the spectacle of his undignified reduction of being like a 'still life' who is 'still life' (but only just).

The reticent speaker in 'Still Life' refuses to express his emotions explicitly but focuses on the bodily estrangement of the third person. In 'Courtesies of the Interregnum' Gunn records his visit to Norm Rathweg, 'the Colonnades', whose 'prime flesh' was once 'sternly regulated in the gym', but now only 'holds the immune cells firm' and 'awaits the day's event' (476). This visit marks an unusual moment in the sequence, in which the 'I', uninfected and healthy, comes face-to-face with the dying 'he'. Even though the poem is told from the first person's point of view, Gunn shifts the perspective suddenly onto the third person by using a passive voice, emphasizing the fact is that it is his sick friend who is

confronted by a guest so fit,
 Almost concerned lest I feel out of it,
 Excluded from the invitation list
 To the largest gathering of the decade, missed
 From membership as if the club were full.
 It is not that I am not eligible,
 He gallantly implies. *He is*, for sure
 —The athlete to be asked out one time more. (467)

Though the poem is written in heroic couplets like 'Lament', the iambic pentameter is constantly interrupted by meandering syntactical formations, suggesting a sense of unresolved tension. Undercutting the popular rhetoric of AIDS literature, Gunn ironically represents the epidemic in allegorical terms: to be infected is to join 'the invitation list', turning the casualty figures into 'the largest gathering of the decade', treating it as a travesty party or mass demonstration, comparable to those of the upbeat movement of Gay Liberation. Gunn's 'membership' of the sick evokes Susan Sontag's introductory note to *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she pronounces that 'Illness is the night-side of life, a more

⁵⁹ Culler, p. 142.

onerous citizenship.⁶⁰ While Sontag's 'citizenship' has a political edge that entails rights and responsibilities, Gunn's 'membership' is a more neutral take on the highly politicised issue of categorization based on sexuality and disease. 'Membership' also has a personal edge, as the 'he' in the poem was a gym owner (as in 'To the Dead Owner of a Gym'). The poem is entirely about how the third person interprets the sheer difference in circumstance between italicised 'He' and the 'I'. On the one hand, the third person playing the role of the hospitable host is 'concerned' about his 'guest' feeling 'out of it'. On the other, the 'I' is being looked at as someone who is ironically fortunate to be 'excluded from' the 'gathering of the decade'. By playing on such dualistic opposites, the 'he' 'gallantly implies' that the 'I' has 'membership' to a different club—the category of 'survivors' haunted by 'survival guilt.'⁶¹ There is a keen sense of shame and suppressed bitterness between the lines, as if any moment 'such informal courtesy' might develop into a real confrontation. There is also a sense of withdrawing from such potential confrontation as the 'I' retreats and re-focuses the scene on the patient's ambivalent 'bravery': 'for he knows/ That even as he gets them in his grip / Context itself starts dizzyingly to slip.' (477)

If 'Courtesies of the Interregnum' is about the third person painfully aware of his fatal 'membership' of a club that excludes the 'ineligible' speaker, 'The J Car' (480) is the only poem in the sequence in which the 'I' tries to digest the fact that his long-term closeness with his now dying friend has widened out to an unbridgeable distance. Also written in the form of sustained heroic couplets, 'The J Car' records Gunn's taking 'the J CHURCH Line' to visit his dying friend, the young poet Charlie Hinkle. Even though the 'I' is more visible in 'The J Car' than 'Lament', the speaker is equally reticent about his feelings and looks at the world from his dying friend's point of view.

The poem begins 'Last year I used to ride the J CHURCH Line,' implying a sense of distance in time when his friend has died a year ago. Looking at the 'ordered privacy' of 'plots of flowers' between 'small yards', the speaker imagines the scenery as 'like blameless lives we might imagine ours.' Being a 'survivor', the imagined 'blameless lives' include the speaker's but zooms out to a more inclusive viewpoint, and a non-specific first person plural ('ours'). Meeting his 'smiling but gaunt' friend 'at the door', the speaker set out with his friend 'for the German restaurant.' Gunn insists on depicting his visit as an ordinary excursion, though such everydayness is overshadowed by reminders of the illness, for example: 'since his sight is

⁶⁰ Sontag, *Illness and Its Metaphors*, p. 3.

⁶¹ Talking about 'Courtesies of the Interregnum' with Campbell, Gunn says, 'It's another of the ones employing couplets—in which I talk about going to see a friend of mine in New York, somebody I knew very well, who was HIV positive: 'He is, confronted by a guest so fit...' He was trying to make me feel so much at ease: it wasn't my fault that I wasn't infected; I was really just as good, or just as attractive, as the people who were infected.'

tattered now, I would/ First read the menu out.' The reader is alerted of the harrowing story-to-come, but Gunn closes down all explicit devices for emotional outbursts, dwelling instead on feelings of taste and food:

He liked the food
In which a sourness and dark richness meet
For conflict without taste of a defeat,
As in the Sauerbraten.

From 'conflict' to 'taste of a defeat', the verse encodes emotional 'sourness' and 'dark richness', concealing his friend's internal 'conflict' and ultimate 'defeat'. Often some poets also explore the intricate relationship between AIDS and diet. Neil Powell in 'A Virus' notes that 'Your breakfasting on booze has given way / To healthy muesli, yoghurt, wholemeal bread, / Storing up strength for the wasted days ahead.'⁶² Unlike Powell's anecdotal pessimism, Gunn portrays the difficult dinner as a strange sense of solidarity:

The connection between life and food
Had briefly seemed so obvious if so crude.
Our conversation circumspectly cheerful,
We had sat here like children good but fearful
Who think if they behave everything might
Still against likelihood come out all right.

For the patient, the connection between life and food no longer represents pleasure but an obvious crudeness—the postponement of imminent death. Everyday sociability, poised against the sense of fatal risk, turns into something treated 'circumspectly', engaged in by 'fearful' children 'against likelihood.' The image of the 'I' and 'he' sitting behaving 'like children good but fearful' is a touching example of Gunn's startling gentleness, evoking a vulnerable child-like solidarity in the face of mortality.

Walking his friend 'through the suburban cool' after supper, the speaker realizes he has to 'leave him to the feverish sleep ahead' (481). For the first time the poem focuses directly on the 'I' in the aftershock of their meeting:

Myself to ride through darkened yards instead
Back to my health. Of course I simplify.
Of course. It tears me still that he should die
As only an apprentice to his trade,
The ultimate engagements not yet made.

Throughout Gunn manages to make personal statements without drawing attention to himself. This is a rare moment in *The Man with Night Sweats* where Gunn allows the first

⁶² *Jugular Defences*, p. 36.

person's emotions to flow directly into the verse: 'It tears me still' reports his own pain, though the sentence unfolds to dwell on his friend's uncompleted work. Riding 'through darkened yards / Back to my health', the 'I' realizes the road that he has not taken. 'Of course I simplify' has a similar effect to Bishop's '(Write it!)' in 'One Art'. Both elegists, trying to break through reticence and self-defensiveness, confront the established mannerism of the elegiac form. Gunn's foregrounding of the elegiac self here gives a new dimension to the two-dimensional pronouns 'you' and 'he', steering the elegy inwards to the poetic self. 'The J Car' asks us immediately to jump out of the speaker's self and refocus on the 'he', the fact that his 'optic nerve would never be relit;/ the other flickered, soon to be with it':

Unready, disappointed, unachieved,
He knew he would not write the much-conceived
Much-hoped-for-work now, nor yet help create
A love he might in full reciprocate.

In the interview with James Campbell, Gunn said that 'there is a deliberate steal in there.' He says he:

took the first of its last four lines from the ghost in *Hamlet*, who says "Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled." I thought that was too good a line not to copy: 'Unready, disappointed, unachieved...' Charlie, to whom the 'The J Car' is addressed, wrote poetry, and even wrote a novel. [...] He was very young; he died at the age of thirty.⁶³

Subliminally transposing the paternal ghost in *Hamlet* to evoke the future ghost of Hinkle, Gunn resuscitates one of the most famous ghosts in English literature to confront 1980s San Francisco. The allusion transposes the haunting filial relationship between Hamlet and the ghost into a lost poetic kinship between Gunn and Hinkle. Even though the young dead poet is unable to 'create / A love he might in full reciprocate,' the ironically alive, older poet reciprocates Hinkle's 'gifts' a year after his death, confirming 'much-conceived / Much-hoped-for work' that could have been written in the years to come. And with the word 'reciprocate', Gunn's 'I' ventures into a kind of elegy in which the elegiac self does not internalize the second and third person pronouns but plunges into a complex world of grief and loss. Such moments are rare in *The Man with Night Sweats*. But they ask us to think about what happens to elegy when the elegiac self is missing, and more gently, what it means to be alive when everyone is dying or dead.

⁶³ Campbell, p. 50.

Gunn's 'I' and Elegiac Distance

Peter Sacks observes that 'few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living.'⁶⁴ Asked by Michael Klein and Richard McCann in *Things Shaped in Passing: More "Poets for Life" Writing from the AIDS Pandemic* (1995) of what writing about AIDS told him, Gunn said:

Well, as far as possible not to write about myself, but to concentrate in my poetry on the man with AIDS—how he copes with it, how he dies of it. That is both more important and more interesting. Of course, I have written whiny poetry too. I'm human, but I've tried to do more of the other thing. Self-pity makes for seriously boring poetry, after all, and writing such poetry makes for a seriously contemptible human being.⁶⁵

In the first two parts of this section I look at the way Gunn concentrates 'in my poetry on the man with AIDS—how he copes with it, how he dies of it.' By 'backgrounding' the 'I', Gunn foregrounds the second and the third person pronouns. 'Not to write about myself' touches on other questions. Is it possible to write an elegy without an explicit elegiac self? What happens to elegy if the elegiac self has either consciously retreated to the background, or, as often in Gunn's case, gone missing? What happens to mourning when the mourner has absented himself?

In an interview of Christopher Hennessey, Mark Doty discussed the distance required in writing elegies:

To my mind, the therapeutic element of art is not self-expression, but rather the distance from oneself [one has] to discover in order to shape a poem for the reader. A poem may begin in the need to speak, to name the private unbearable thing, but it ends with standing back from the personal, looking at what one's made with the disappearing eye of craft.⁶⁶

Self-distancing, according to Doty, is a prerequisite of 'the therapeutic element of art.' Unlike Gunn, Doty sees elegy itself as potentially therapeutic. In elegies like 'Grosse Fuge' and 'Atlantis', Doty struggles to stand 'back from the personal', whereas in elegies such as 'Terminal' and 'Words with Some Ash' Gunn presents us the resolved struggle with almost no investment in the first person. The struggle towards self-detachment is particularly salient in Doty's 'Lament—Heaven', where the 'I' looks at 'the branches / late in March' and comes to terms with the bond between death and distance. This is played out in the dialogue between different pronouns and this bond:

⁶⁴ Sacks, p. 19.

⁶⁵ *Things Shaped in Passing*, p. 88.

⁶⁶ Hennessey, p. 81.

I think
 this is how our deaths would look,
 seen from a great distance,
 if we could stand that far
 from ourselves: the way birch leaves
 signal and flash, candling
 into green then winking out.⁶⁷

Many of Doty's elegies are in the genre of meta-elegy, with the 'I' at their axis. Doty's 'Lament—Heaven' can be read a counterpart to Gunn's 'Lament',⁶⁸ and it was published in *My Alexandria* (1993), a year after *The Man with Night Sweats*. Standing 'that far / from ourselves', the 'I' in the foreground of Doty's poem imagines death 'seen from a great distance.' In Gunn's 'Lament', the resigned first person in the background also looks at his friend's 'difficult enterprise' of dying from a distance. While Doty views 'distance' from where 'I' and 'we' stand, Gunn imagines 'distance' from the point of view of the 'you': the 'clumsy stealth / Distanced you from the habits of your health' (465) and 'How thin the distance made you' (466). If we can measure distance in terms of pronouns, Doty's ruler measures from the 'I', Gunn's from the 'you'. Doty begins with the 'great distance' between 'our deaths' and our living selves. In 'Lament', the 'I' hovers in the background, while the 'you' gradually distances himself 'from the habits of [his] health'. Though their tones of voice and personal stances are so different, both Doty and Gunn compose their Laments in terms of an abstract relationship between pronouns.

Even though Freud in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) uses different terms, the way he portrays the internalisation implicit in both 'normal' and 'pathological mourning' also draws attention to the relationship between the elegiac self and the dead 'other':

In the case of mourning, we found that inhibition and apathy were fully explained by the absorption of the ego in the mourning-work. The unknown loss in the case of melancholia will also lead to similar internal work, and will consequently be responsible for the inhibition of melancholia.⁶⁹

Both mourning and melancholia share the 'similar internal work'—what Freud calls the 'inhibition and restriction of the ego is a manifestation of exclusive devotion to mourning,

⁶⁷ Doty, *Alexandria*, p. 82.

⁶⁸ In the interview with Hennessey, Gunn says, 'Poetry never exists in a vacuum; it's written in dialogue with other poems, part of a vast web of utterance and response and further response.' (Hennessey, p. 15)

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. Maud Ellman, intro, Shaun Whiteside, trans. (UK: Penguin, 2005), p. 205.

leaving nothing over for other interests and intentions.⁷⁰ While in the case of mourning 'the ego is left free and uninhibited once again after the mourning-work is completed,'⁷¹ the melancholic transforms the loss of the object 'into a loss of ego, and the conflict between the ego and the beloved person in a dichotomy between ego-criticism and the ego as modified by identification.'⁷² Freud calls such self-identification 'narcissistic identification', and argues that:

If the love of the object, which cannot be abandoned while the object itself is abandoned, has fled into narcissistic identification, hatred goes to work on this substitute object, insulting it, humiliating it, making it suffer and deriving a sadistic satisfaction from that suffering.⁷³

Freud's interpretation of mourning and melancholia not only helps us draw a distinction between 'normal' and 'pathological' mourning, but questions the way we look at the elegiac self, and the traditional functions of elegy. Challenging Peter Sacks's take on Freud's 'normal mourning' as the psychic basis of elegy, Ramazani questions Freud's binary distinction between mourning and melancholia:

Modern elegists tend to enact the work not of normative but of "melancholic" mourning—a term I adapt from Freud to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent. They are like the Freudian "melancholic" in their fierce resistance to solace, their intense criticism and self-criticism, even as they "mourn" specific deaths, not the vague or unconscious losses of melancholia. Unlike their literary forebears or the "normal mourner" of psychoanalysis, they attack the dead and themselves, their own work and tradition; and they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself.⁷⁴

Citing Karl Abraham, Melanie Klein and John Bowlby, Ramazani re-stresses the overlap between mourning and melancholia, and argues that "melancholic mourning" is a term for the kind of ambivalent and protracted grief often encountered in the modern elegy.⁷⁵

In *Memories for Paul de Man*, Derrida also returns to Freudian mourning, seeing 'Memory and interiorization' as the way the 'normal' 'work of mourning' is described. Since Freud, mourning 'entailed a movement in which an interiorizing idealization takes in itself or upon itself the body and voice of the other, the other's visage and person, ideally *and* quasi-

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 204.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 205.

⁷² Ibid, p. 209.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 211.

⁷⁴ Ramazani, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 29-30.

literally devouring them.’⁷⁶ In ‘By Force of Mourning,’ Derrida reiterates this urgency of ‘interiorization’ in mourning: ‘ever since psychoanalysis came to mark this discourse, the image commonly used to characterize mourning is that of an interiorization (an idealizing incorporation, introjection, consumption of the other).’⁷⁷ But unlike Freud, Derrida suggests that this interiorization is impossible because in mourning, we must recognize that the friend is now both only ‘in us’ and already beyond us, in us but totally other. Referring to the loss of Louis Marin, he says, ‘We are all looked at, I said, and each one singularly, by Louis Marin. He looks at us. *In us...* He is completely other, infinitely other, as he has always been, and death has more than ever entrusted him, given him over, distanced him, in this infinite alterity.’⁷⁸ Derrida calls this dilemma ‘the unbearable paradox of fidelity’⁷⁹ because the work of mourning is obsessed with the possibility of an interiorization of what can never be interiorized, of what is always before and beyond us as the source of our responsibility. Mediating between interiorizing the dead ‘in us’ and realizing its ‘infinite alterity’, Derrida challenges the Freudian narcissistic impasse of melancholia and questions the effectiveness of ‘normal’ mourning. In doing so he too engages in a staged dance of pronouns: ‘We are all looked at, I said, and each one singularly, by Louis Marin. He looks at us. *In us...* He is completely other, infinitely other.’ From the ‘we’ to ‘I’ to ‘Louis Marin’, from the ‘he’ to ‘us’ to ‘other’, Derrida’s intricate web of pronouns negotiates the irreparable distance between life and death in the impossible work of mourning.

With Derrida in mind, I do not intend to equate Freud’s ego with the elegiac self. Nevertheless an elegy does not come from nowhere: it has to be spoken by a mourner, however reticent. Memorialising a victim of a Nazi concentration camp, Geoffrey Hill’s ‘September Song’ begins with the singular ‘you’ that evokes the plural lost to the Holocaust: ‘Undesirable you may have been, untouchable / you were not.’⁸⁰ While the poem explores the inaccessibility of the elegiac subject, Hill’s ‘I’ withdraws from the poem and only comes in brackets: ‘(I have made / an elegy for myself it / is true)’.⁸¹ The bracketed ‘I’ reveals and conceals itself, acknowledging the poem as elegy but also refusing this, or seeking to transcend it. Recording a different Holocaust, Gunn’s elegiac ‘I’ is not bracketed like Hill’s, but his reticence also refuses elegy and turns towards the second and the third persons.

⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Memories for Paul de Man*, rev. ed., trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (NY: Columbia UP, 1989), p. 34.

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida’s ‘By Force of Mourning’ in Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas, ed. *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 159.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 161.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 159.

⁸⁰ Geoffrey Hill, *New and Collected Poems 1952-1992* (Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 55.

⁸¹ *ibid*

In Doty's 'Lament—Heaven' the speaker and his partner look at the 'countless circuits of lightbulbs' in the carnival and discover 'letters blinking on—/ G-H-O-S-T.'⁸² This spectral scene inspires the 'he' to accept his imminent death and the 'I' to disclose the shadowy brevity and to rethink the status of elegy. Rejecting the third person's zen-like resolution, the 'I' meditates on his own version of lament that extends beyond 'the borders of this world / or any other', as well as 'the twin poles of yes and no'.⁸³ Doty's meditative 'I' makes the dissolving world spin round his eloquent self-lament. Unbracketed and foregrounded, his self-elegizing 'I' makes a stark contrast to the bracketed 'I' of Hill and distant 'I' of Gunn. Towards the end of 'Lament—Heaven' the speaker walks in 'the enormous church / in Copley Square' and listens to violin music played by a twelve-year-old black girl. Deploying the universal 'we' again, Doty's congregational 'I' revisits the idea of distance set out in the beginning of the poem:

If we could stand far enough away
to hear it: lovely, and inconsoling,

each phrase played out
into a dense thicket of variations,
into its web of meanings⁸⁴

In a sense, Doty's first person—its sheer elegiac urgency—is an essential vessel that holds these 'thicket of variations' together. At the end of 'Lament—Heaven', after reflecting on the whole elegiac process the elegist returns upon himself in the first person and declares himself to be 'inconsolable':

The music mounts up,
assembles its architecture

larger than any of us
and doesn't need you to continue.
Do you understand me?

I heard it, the music
that could not go on without us,
and I was inconsolable.⁸⁵

While the music 'doesn't need you to continue', it also 'could not go on without us'. It is as if the poet has differentiated the 'you' (the dead) from the 'us' (the living). Such a distinction is not necessarily consoling but it generates the music. Challenging Douglas Crimp's 'activist

⁸² Doty, *My Alexandria*, p. 83.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 84-5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88-89.

aesthetic' position that 'art saves lives',⁸⁶ Doty says, 'Art, for all its power and durability, does not remedy anything'.⁸⁷ Even though Doty trusts this non-redemptive art, his elegiac self returns ambivalently to the question of consolation. 'I was inconsolable' not only announces a kind of Ramazanian 'melancholic mourning', but projects this psychic irresolution onto himself, steering the lament back to his personal estrangement. Doty's 'I' elegizes the lost 'he' as much as his poetic self. Even though he rejects self-expressive poetry, his elegies begin with a kind of self-address, then reach out to a 'you' (often his lover) or a third person, before returning to himself. In fact the mournful, irresolute 'I' is the centre throughout his elegiac journey.

The contrast with Gunn could not be starker. Nevertheless, after withholding the speaker's feelings for 98 lines, Gunn in 'Lament' finally lets the 'I' respond to his friend's death:

Outdoors next day, I was dizzy from a sense
Of being ejected with some violence
From vigil in a white and distant spot
Where I was numb, into this garden spot
Too warm, too close, and not enough like pain. (468)

The outdoor garden is not only a stark spatial contrast to the indoor hospital ward, but a refuge where the 'I' digests the painful experience of loss and confronts his feelings. In Gunn gardens are usually sites of conviviality,⁸⁸ but in 'Lament' the garden becomes a place for solitary reflection where the 'I' is confronted with his own elegiac self. Instead of venting emotions like Doty, Gunn focuses on bodily shock: 'I was dizzy', 'I was numb'. Dizziness and numbness signal emotional turmoil without pinpointing the specific nature of grief. While the 'white' hospital 'spot' is now 'distant', the 'garden spot' is 'too warm, too close, and not enough like pain.' 'Too close' here refers to the humid air, as well as to closeness in the sense of physical and emotional distance. The garden, therefore, is both 'distant' and 'close' to the hospital room, as the 'spot' in two successive lines are 'too close' to each other.

⁸⁶ In 'AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism' Crimp writes in his seminal essay: 'Raising money is the most passive response of cultural practitioners to social crisis, a response that perpetuates the idea that art itself has no social function (aside from being a commodity), that there is no such thing as an engaged, activist aesthetic practice. It is this third point that I want to underscore, by insisting, against Rosenblum, that art *does* have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognised, fostered, and supported in every way possible. But if we are to do this, we will have to abandon the idealist conception of art. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.' Crimp, p. 6-7.

⁸⁷ Hennessey, p. 80.

⁸⁸ In 'Last Day at Teddington': 'How sociable the garden was./ We ate and talked in given light./ The children put their toys to grass/ All the warm wakeful August night.' (237)

This vertiginous spatial doubleness collides with the interconnectedness between the 'I' and 'you' in the poem. Gunn then intermixes the spatial ambivalence with anachronism:

I was delivered into time again
—The variations that I live among
Where your long body too used to belong
And where the still bush is minutely active. (468)

Compassing time to 'the variations that I live among' identifies life with variation, variability, the capacity to register the 'minutely active' world around him. This is unlike Doty's 'dense thicket of variations' in 'Lament—Heaven'. David Caplan notes that

"variations" calls the reader's attention to this passage's underlying metaformalism. The need for metrical variation is particularly acute in extended heroic couplet verse such as "Lament", because the proximity of the rhymes to each other, their easily discernible pattern, and the repetitiousness inherent in a longer verse form demand departures from the established metrical pattern.⁸⁹

The 'variations' in Gunn's poem are not Doty's musical variations, but a sense of possibility in time and space given where one is alive, 'where your long body too used to belong' in the past, and 'where the still bush is minutely active' in the present. In a sense, these nine lines about the first person's reaction to the recent death represents the variation that defines continuing life itself.

Letting go of the 'I' and returning to the 'your long body', at the end of 'Lament' Gunn draws our attention to the 'it', which is the 'you's' body:

You never thought your body was attractive,
Though others did, and yet you trusted it
And must have loved its fickleness a bit
Since it was yours and gave you what it could,
Till near the end it let you down for good,
Its blood hospital to those guests who
Took over by betraying it into
The greatest of its inconsistencies
This difficult, tedious, painful enterprise. (468)

Nominating 'your body' as an impersonal 'it' underlines not only the deathliness of the once 'attractive' body, but the hostility between 'it' and 'you'. The poem mentions 'blood' but avoids specific medical jargon such as white blood cells or T-cells, redefining the fatal infection in figurative terms that, rather than mythologizing the disease, invites us to look at

⁸⁹ David Caplan, p. 227.

it in terms of human agency. 'Hospitable', 'guests', and 'betraying' translate the established medical and political accounts of AIDS into human terms, asking us to look at the complicated identities underpinned the poem—the fact that the 'I' is a 'guest' and the 'you' is a hospitable host hospitalized on his deathbed. Dwelling on the 'it' enables the first person to subside into the background, preventing the elegiac self venting its grief. 'Lament' does not end with the friend's death but recasts the blood's 'greatest...inconsistencies' and returns to a variation of the first line. Each adjective in 'This difficult, tedious, painful enterprise' bears its weight after we re-experience the second person's journey of dying. The chilling irony of 'enterprise' is carried over from the beginning, closing the elegy on a familiar note. Perhaps this loop can be read as an estranged form of 'melancholic mourning'. It is as if in 'Lament' and the sequence as a whole, the pronoun 'I' was almost too unbearably painful to utter. In a sense, Gunn's elegiac self is either denied or in denial. Unlike Doty announcing 'I was inconsolable', Gunn's 'I' refuses to pronounce its emotional inwardness or enter the domain of consolation.

In 'Mourning and Militancy', Douglas Crimp challenges 'activist antagonism to mourning' as something 'indulgent, sentimental, defeatist', and argues that 'mourning *becomes* militancy.' He continues:

Freud does not say what might happen if mourning is interfered with, but insofar as our conscious defences direct us toward social action, they already show the deference to reality that Freud attributes to mourning's accomplishment. Nevertheless we have to ask just how, against what odds, and with what unconscious effects that has been achieved. [...] For many gay men dealing with AIDS deaths, militancy might arise from conscious conflicts *within* mourning itself, the consequence, on the one hand, of 'inadvisable and even harmful interference' with grief and, on the other the fate of the mourned.⁹⁰

Reinstating militancy within mourning, Crimp presents a complicated relationship between 'the external obstacles to grief' and 'our own antagonism to mourning.'⁹¹ He concludes that the fact that 'our militancy may be a means of dangerous denial in no way suggests that activism is unwarranted.'⁹² Indeed, I would argue that 'conscious conflicts *within* mourning' are salient in many AIDS activist poems. Richard Howard, for example, in 'Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals Reported to Have AIDS Virus' resists the same kind of moral equation when he takes on the press: 'The Times keeps referring to a *life-style*/ as having consequences. That is why/ I've made this gesture:/ not to dispute your claim, but to insist the consequences

⁹⁰ Crimp, 'Mourning and Militancy' in *Melancholia and Moralism*, p. 137, 139.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 139.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 149.

are *not* judgment!⁹³ Channelling grief and anger through activist rhetoric, such elegists consciously combine mourning and militancy, finding ways to mediate between the unspeakability of personal grief and the activist pursuit of de-mythologizing AIDS. Gunn, by contrast, resists this form of militancy, redefining public grief in terms of personal experience.

In 'Rewriting the Elegy', her introduction to the seminal AIDS anthology *Poets for Life*, Carol Muske quotes Gunn's 'Still Life' and suggests that 'The elegy itself is changing. It has always been a competent traditional vessel to hold grief and praise of the dead. Now it seems to overflow, shatter, reform.'⁹⁴ I would argue that in *The Man with Night Sweats* Gunn does the opposite: he does not 'shatter' the vessels that he inherits. He is sceptical about speaking from an explicit personal 'I' and refuses to ally mourning with public militancy. His elegiac self withholds rather than overflows. His elegies do not ask us to sympathize with the mourner but internalize and empathize with the sufferers. In his account of reading 'Lament' with his patients Raphael Campo associates Gunn's metre and rhyme with healing:

So-called formal poetry holds the most appeal for me because in it are present the fundamental beating contents of the body at peace: the regularity of resting brainwave activity in contrast to the disorganised spiking of a seizure, the gentle ebb and flow of breathing, or sobbing, in contrast to the harsh spasmodic cough, the single-voiced, ringing chant of a slogan at a ACT UP rally in contrast to the indecipherable rumblings of AIDS funding debate on the Senate floor. [...] The poem is a physical process, is bodily exercise: rhymes become the mental resting places in the ascending rhythmic stairway of memory. The poem perhaps is an idealization, or a dream of the physical—the imagined healthy form. Yet it does not renounce illness; rather, it reinterprets it as the beginning point for healing.⁹⁵

Drawing on his experience as doctor, Campo suggests that 'formal' poetic rhythm is aligned with the healthy, regular body and counters the 'disorganised spiking of a seizure'. Materializing poetic musicality as 'bodily exercise', Campo gives us a therapeutic take on Gunn's elegies, representing metre and rhyme as a form of psychological medicine. Though in 'A Sketch of the Great Dejection' Gunn imagines the ghostlike landscape coming 'to seem after a while a place of recuperation' (424), the elegiac sequence does not in general seek to recuperate from loss. It is also hard to imagine Gunn finding it easy to accept Campo's 'poetry of healing' given his reticence towards the elegiac self and the work of mourning. However, it is useful to take Campo's romantic, 'self-help' approach to poetry into account. Perhaps Gunn's refusal to invest in the rhetoric of mourning, melancholia and consolation, in

⁹³ *Things Shaped in Passing*, p. 105.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁵ Rafael Campo, 'AIDS and the Poetry of Healing' in *In Company of My Solitude*, p. 27-28.

poems like 'Lament', is precisely the reason for their capacity to serve as powerful conductors between the doctor and his patients, and establish a convincing medium to generate solidarity in the face of AIDS.

3

'An Unlimited Embrace'

Contact of a friend led to another friend,
Supple entwinement through the living mass
Which for all that I knew might have no end,
Image of an unlimited embrace.

Gunn, 'The Missing' (483)

When *The Man with Night Sweats* was first published in the UK in 1992, the total reported number of HIV infection cases was 22,252 (male: 19,541; female: 2,678). The total reported number of AIDS cases was 7,766 (male: 7,204; female: 562).⁹⁶ The total number of death was 5,439.⁹⁷ In the US by the end of 1992, 341,115 people were diagnosed with AIDS and 201,419 of them died.⁹⁸ Of course these statistics were unavailable in the 90s, but they show the scale of death and contagion. In a time of heightened anxiety, contagion fosters suspicion and redefines sexual and social intimacy. As Susan Sontag writes, 'Fear of sexuality is the new, disease-sponsored register of the universe of fear in which everyone now lives.'⁹⁹ In 'No More Kissing—AIDS Everywhere' the American poet Michael Blumenthal depicts 'the young couple / passionately kissing on the street' and reflects on the fact that 'risk had so clinical a name, / so precise a passage.' In despair, the poet despairingly asks, 'Yet why should they not embrace/ these beautiful two?'¹⁰⁰ Larry Kramer in 'Report from the Holocaust' (1988) depicts a similar kind of anxiety about physical contact, trust and pleasure:

Is it fatal if his semen on my hand enters the tiny exposed cuticle under a minuscule hangnail on my thumb? Or my sweat into his scraped knee (he

⁹⁶ Please refer to Appendix: AIDS Statistics, Table 1: UK HIV infected individuals and AIDS cases by year of diagnosis and sex.

⁹⁷ Please refer to Appendix: AIDS Statistics, Table 2: Deaths with or without reported AIDS in HIV infected individuals by year of death in the UK.

⁹⁸ Please refer to Appendix: AIDS Statistics, Table 3: AIDS diagnoses and deaths of persons with AIDS in the USA by year.

⁹⁹ Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Klein, ed. *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Responds to AIDS*. (NY: Crown Publishers, INC., 1989), p. 33.

belongs to a gay wrestling team)? Is kissing really safe? I know they say it is, that no cases have been discovered that result from kissing, but do they really know? How do you define 'kissing'? How do you draw distinction between kisses and kisses? There are reported cases of single-contact infection. Contact with what, exactly, and where?¹⁰¹

As David Bergman points out, 'no one is more responsible for the rhetoric of AIDS than Larry Kramer, whose pronouncements, ultimatums, vilifications, lampoons, and dramatizations seemed ubiquitous in the early years of the epidemics.'¹⁰² Of course we need to bear in mind Kramer's confrontational tactics, but his blazing rage is often countered by gentle observation that subverts the theoretical writings of militant Leo Bersani and Simon Watney. In the passage I have quoted, Kramer captures a fatalistic view of physical intimacy but also suggest a new security-conscious self-surveillance. Though he question the effectiveness of such fatalism and self-surveillance. Kramer continues, 'And yet I found myself falling in love. Like other human beings, I desire the experience. I wanted to hold this man and to kiss him. Is this wanting too much? Is this wanting too much *now*?'¹⁰³ In similar vein Michael Blumenthal ends 'No More Kissing—AIDS Everywhere' with a couple 'breathing their young lives into each other's lungs/ kissing their way towards heaven till they die.'¹⁰⁴ Blumenthal suggests that the final kiss in the poem is 'that last metaphor/ we have all been waiting for'. It incorporates kissing and fear, as well as death and liberation.

Published in the climate of self-surveillance and suspicion towards bodily pleasure, *The Man with Night Sweats* represents not only the desperate self-hug of the title poem, but many other kinds of embrace between life-long lovers, casual sexual partners, the mythological Philemon and Baucis, the living and the dead, AIDS patients, and a father and his adopted son. The image of embrace is a protean and recurring theme throughout Gunn's *oeuvre*. In his interview with Clive Wilmer, Gunn recognizes Hugh Haughton's comment on the pervasive embrace that runs throughout the book. He continues:

If you use the idea of sport, you think of the violence of the push, yes, but there's an ambiguity: an embrace can be a wrestler's embrace or it can be the embrace of love. There's tremendous doubleness in that image, which I have used elsewhere in fact: the idea of the embrace which can be violent or tender. But if you look at it at any one moment, if it's frozen, it could be either, and maybe the two figures swaying in that embrace are not even quite sure which it is. Like Aufidius and Coriolanus: they embrace, they're enemies. They embrace in admiration at one point. It's ambiguous because

¹⁰¹ Kramer, pp. 227-8

¹⁰² Bergman, p. 123.

¹⁰³ Kramer, p. 228.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 34.

the two things are connected. I could turn, at any moment, from the one to the other, I suppose.¹⁰⁵

In *Fighting Terms*, the image of the embrace combines the martial and the erotic. The speaker in 'The Beach Head', torn between defence and attack, ending the poem with a wishful 'pincer-move to end in an embrace' (27). In *The Sense of Movement*, the Baudelaireian speaker in 'In Praise of Cities' recalls, 'And all at once you enter the embrace / Withheld by day while you solicited.' (60) In 'Santa Maria del Popolo' in *My Sad Captains*, Gunn refers to Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul*, translating the saint's moment of faith into an existentialist moment of choice: 'For the large gesture of solitary man, / Resisting, by embracing, nothingness.' (94) *Jack Straw's Castle* opens with the image of an embrace in which two lovers 'lie soft-caught' on their post-orgasmic bed, 'loose-twined across the bed / Like wrestling statues' (229). In *The Passages of Joy*, speaking through the voice of a taxi-driver, Gunn affirms his stubbornly urban existence as he asks: 'Do I pass through the city / or does it pass through me? / I know I have to be loose, / like my light embrace of the wheel, / loose but in control' (387).

Though the embrace runs through his *oeuvre*, it becomes a central organizing figure *The Man with Night Sweats*. The opening poem 'The Hug' celebrates a world of trust and physical intimacy among lovers and friends. Set in a birthday celebration for Gunn's lover Mike Kitay, the poem has a strong autobiographical edge without being confessional:

It was your birthday, we had drunk and dined
Half of the night with our old friend
Who'd showed us in the end
To a bed I reached in one drunk stride.
Already I lay snug,
And drowsy with the wine dozed on one side. (407)

Rhymes and internal rhymes interlace the stanza tightly, though indentations loosen its formal shape. 'Dined/end' and 'friend/stride'—rhymes work so closely and similarly together that makes it very hard to decide which side does 'side' rhyme with.¹⁰⁶ While 'lay snug' refers to a world of cosy comfort, 'drowsy with the wine dozed on one side' is light-hearted and comic. Gunn here celebrates a sense of sociability in a domestic setting unaffected by the shadow of AIDS. The poem begs the question of sexual orientation because neither the gender of the host nor the guest is specified. Though the poem is, as Martin Dodsworth

¹⁰⁵ Campbell, pp. 158-9

¹⁰⁶ Martin Dodsworth in 'Gunn's Family of Man in "The Hug"' points out, 'Lines of varying length are bound together unpredictably with full rhymes that also chime with other rhymes.' (AGENDA, p. 75)

points out, an 'unplatonian version of Donne's "The Extasie"¹⁰⁷, there is nothing archaic about it; its plain diction and title are undeniably twentieth century.

The rhythm of 'The Hug' slows down as the speaker 'dozed' and 'slept'. But his 'sleep broke on a hug, / Suddenly, from behind' (407). This account of his lover going to bed with him recalls the similar scene in 'Touch' written almost three decades earlier:

You are already
asleep. I lower
myself in next to
you, my skin slightly
numb with the restraint
of habits, the patina of
self, the black frost
of outsidersness, so that even
unclothed it is
a resilient chilly
hardness, a superficially
malleable, dead
rubbery texture. (168)

There is a sense of insecurity about the hug as the speaker unveils layers of metaphors like the casings of a Russia doll. The taut, nervous free verse evokes a rather unhomely sensation of numbness and restraint, as 'the patina of / self' is juxtaposed with the potentially dangerous image of 'the black frost / of outsidersness'. Though the speaker is 'unclothed', his skin has a 'rubbery texture', and his lover is 'a mound/ of bedclothes'. When 'You turn and / hold me tightly' (169), the speaker, instead of being simply reassured by the embrace, asks: 'do / you know who / I am or am I / your mother or / the nearest human being to / hold on to in a / dreamed pogrom.' The mother figure signals a gender as well as an identity crisis, while 'a dreamed pogrom' compares the *real* embrace to a sense of comfort in an imagined massacre of Jews. 'The Hug' in *The Man with Night Sweats*, however, is about the security of a life-long friendship between two lovers. There is neither the abstract idea of 'the patina of self' nor the endless sprouting of metaphors, only the frame-by-frame image of 'the full lengths of our bodies pressed':

Your instep to my heel,
My shoulder-blades against your chest.
It was not sex, but I could feel
The whole strength of your body set,
Or braced, to mine,
And locking me to you
As if we were still twenty-two
When our grand passion had not yet

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 79.

Gunn captures the hug in slow motion with bodily details. The poem explores a kind of gradual compression ('pressed', 'braced', 'locking') brought together by the relaxed yet braced rhyme. The hug envelops the speaker's body from 'the instep' and 'heel' to 'shoulder-blades' and 'chest'. Unlike the hug at the end of 'Jack Straw's Castle' in which the 'ass to ass' contact between Jack and the other man is kept minimal and symbolic, the verse here insists on a full-body contact, in which 'The whole strength of your body' locks the couple together. The alternating rhyme scheme ('pressed/chest/set' and 'heel/feel/mine') is countered by a more round-sounding couplet ('you/two') suggesting union. 'It was not sex' echoes Donne's 'it was not sexe' in 'The Extasie',¹⁰⁸ and steers the poem towards the deep, long-term companionship. There is something touching about this non-sexual hug between two middle-aged men 'in time of plague', when all intimate physical contact, even with one's closest lover, was considered risky and potentially fatal. The hug in the poem celebrates the pleasure of human intimacy and trust, as well as exploring the tension between privacy and shared life, drunkenness and consciousness, in a world overshadowed by the fear of contagion.

The intensity embodied in this plain embrace reminds the speaker of their 'grand passion' at 'twenty-two'. The poem underlines the transition from 'grand passion' to the 'familial' but is reticent about the details of the story. The phrase 'Become familial' rethinks the family as an inventive and flexible unit rather than a biologically determined one. The idea of the family had become problematic in the cultural debates over AIDS. In Peter Daniel's 'Family' the speaker imagines the complicated relationships he has with his friends and his 'three-times-ex-lover's next lover's lover' as something familial. He says, 'We may not ever have been that close/ but we're family, I think you'd say.'¹⁰⁹ In a more polemical style Larry Kramer highlights the American obsession with 'the family' 'from campaign rhetoric to television commercials,'¹¹⁰ while asserting 'AIDS goes against *all* family values.'¹¹¹ Gay men's attitudes to the idea of the family were marked by violent ambivalence. On the one hand, as David Bergman points out, 'AIDS has forced gay men to reconsider their relationship with their families and with the non-homosexual community [because it] broke the spell of gay

¹⁰⁸ 'This Extasie doth unperplex/ (We said) and tell us what love,/ Wee see by this, it was not sexe,/ Wee see, we saw not what did move' (Donne, p. 100)

¹⁰⁹ Peter Daniels & Steve Anthony, ed. *Jugular Defences: An AIDS Anthology* (NY: Oscars Press, 1994), p. 71.

¹¹⁰ 'The family. The family. How these words are repeated and repeated in America...This is a country that prides itself on proclaiming family values, as if there were no others, as if every family was homespun and united and loving, as if it is necessary to produce a child—like a product—to justify or countenance a sexual act.' (Kramer, p. 271)

¹¹¹ He continues: 'It is perceived as happening mostly to gay men; it is spread sexually (as if heterosexuals did not have sex); it is an embarrassment. Well, I am a member of a family, too. Or I once thought so. Every gay man has two parents, and other relatives, too.' (Kramer, p. 271)

self-sufficiency.¹¹² On the other hand, as Leo Bersani and others observed the media targeted 'an imaginary national family unit which is both white and heterosexual',¹¹³ because 'almost all the media coverage of aids has been aimed at the heterosexual groups now minimally at risk, as if the high-risk groups were not part of audience.'¹¹⁴ He continues:

TV doesn't make the family, but it makes the family *mean* in a certain way. That is, it makes an exceptionally sharp distinction between the family as a biological unit and as a cultural identity, and it does this by teaching us the attributes and attitudes by which people who thought they were already in a family actually only begin to *qualify* as belonging to a family.¹¹⁵

Gunn uses the elusive adjective 'familial' rather than the controversial 'family', as he attempts to map out the new kinds of affective sociable and social relationship current in a gay culture under threat. In the early 90s in cities such as New York, San Francisco or London, it was hard to imagine an embrace between two men, either in private or in public, without the attendant stigma of 'promiscuity' or the threat of death.¹¹⁶ The closing image of 'The Hug', however, resists such stigmas by recasting the subject of embrace once again:

My quick sleep had deleted all
Of intervening time and place.
I only knew
The stay of your secure firm dry embrace. (407)

The hug from his lover works like a lullaby, putting the speaker back to 'quick sleep'. 'Quick' as in 'rapid', but also 'quick', as in 'alive', the opposite of Hamlet's 'sleep of death'. There is no loosening, no 'touch in/ continuous creation', no 'dark/ enclosing cocoon', and no 'dark/ wide realm where we/ walk with everyone' as there had been in 'Touch'. There is even no 'intervening time and place' as sleep 'had deleted' them all. What is left is not 'Resisting, by embracing, nothingness',¹¹⁷ but 'the stay' of a 'secure firm dry embrace.' Robert Frost described poetry as a 'momentary stay against confusion', and the 'stay' of the embrace here is an essential resonance of Gunn's 'secure firm dry' poetry. The final lines reassure us by countering the stigmatized portrayal of gay intimacy in the time of AIDS: 'stay' challenges the supposed transience of gay relationship, 'secure' confronts the climate of insecurity ('crisis'),

¹¹² Bergman, pp. 135-136.

¹¹³ Bersani's 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' (Crimp, p. 203) He quotes from Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), p. 43.

¹¹⁴ Crimp, p. 203.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ In 'AIDS and Its Metaphors' Susan Sontag writes 'AIDS obliges people to think of sex as having, possible, the direst consequence: suicide.' She continues. 'AIDS reveals all but long-term monogamous sex as promiscuous (therefore dangerous) and also as deviant, for all heterosexual relations are also homosexuals one, once removed.' (pp. 158-59)

¹¹⁷ The final line of 'Santa Maria del Popolo'.

'firm' as opposed to 'loose' (meaning promiscuous), and finally 'dry' contradicts 'wet' (the terror of exchanging bodily fluids).

'The Hug' is a loving poem but the word 'love' itself is withheld from the poem. Gunn is not widely recognised as a 'love poet' of his age. There are, nevertheless, many poems in *The Man with Night Sweats* celebrating the love of friends, sexual partners, and family during a period when love between men was in crisis and subject to violent critique. 'Love' is in fact one of the most frequently used words in *The Man with Night Sweats*, and it is bound up with the pervasive image of embrace. This is especially evident in the two contrasting poems 'The Differences' and 'Philemon and Baucis'. In 'The Differences', the speaker (presumably Gunn himself) remembers his sexual encounters with a 'sturdy' young man with 'blond hair bouncing like a corner boy's' (413). The title signals plurality, and the speaker reflects on the excitement of casual pleasures and the meaning of transient thrills. The poem is constructed around different level of *pastness*, as well as voices of different poets. Even though told in the first person, it begins with the speaker remembering a young man 'Reciting Adrienne Rich on Cole and Haight' (413). It is then interrupted by Gunn's own translation of a Guido Cavalcanti poem on love, before going back to the speaker's dream of embracing the young man and his distinctive memory of sleeping with him 'that night in January'. This makes it an unusually *literary* love-poem in Gunn's work, with a self-conscious cultural as well as personal history.

Opening with the account of the flirtatious young man walking 'with sturdy almost swaggering gait', 'The Differences' initially gives the reader the impression a rewriting of sexy street poems in *The Passages of Joy*. However, the tone suddenly changes when the speaker regathers his consciousness. Unable to 'lose myself', he says he 'turned into the boy with iron teeth/ Who planned to eat the whole world bit by bit'. Strangely this werewolf-like transformation is presented as a fantasy of self-control, a way not 'to lose my self'. The speaker then comes to an abrupt revelation as to the nature of love: 'My love not flesh but in the mind beneath.' Gunn's quotation of Cavalcanti's poem is one possible response to the speaker's attitude:

*Love takes its shape within that part of me
(A poet says) where memories reside.
And just as light marks out the boundary
Of some glass outline men can see inside,
So love is formed by a dark ray's invasion
From Mars, its dwelling in the mind to make.
Is a created thing, and has sensation,
A soul, and strength of will.*

The verse comes from one of Cavalcanti's *Canzone*,¹¹⁸ which includes the famous line 'dova sta memoria' that acts as a refrain in Pound's *The Cantos*. Gunn would have known Pound's translation of the song and produces his own less heightened version.¹¹⁹ He recaptures Cavalcanti's reflective tone, which starkly contrasts with the wandering anecdotal tone of 'The Difference'. The translated passage articulates a version of love and memory as 'shape', and Gunn uses a difficult image to embody the obscure sense of shape. It is hard to visualise how 'light marks out the boundary / Of some glass outline men can see inside'. Pound, however, uses a more terrestrial image of 'a mist of light / Upon a dusk'. In Gunn's translation, there is a sense of tension between different kinds of transparency (light and glass) and different spaces (outline and inside), even though the similar materials, light and glass, create a sense of clarity that 'men can see inside'. He then draws a mysterious analogy between the glass image and love (which is equally mysterious in Cavalcanti's original and Pound's translation). Gunn, however, gives it as Science Fiction: 'Love is formed by a dark ray's invasion / From Mars, its dwelling in the mind to make.' If there is something extraterrestrial about the formation of love, it dwells in the mind and takes 'its shape within that part of me'. It is 'a created thing, and has sensation', like 'A soul', and bears a 'strength of will' that transforms 'a dark ray's invasion / From Mars' into a place 'where memories reside'. Instead of affirming Cavalcanti's complicated elucidation of love, Gunn follows his translation with a potentially critical line, 'It is opaque'. 'Opaque' here rhymes with the crucial 'make' and makes a critical difference as to how we read the Cavalcanti. The line abruptly, almost comically, interrupts the serious medieval discussion of love. But it is ambiguous: if Cavalcanti's metaphysical conceit is 'opaque', so, the poem implies, is love. The image of love as 'dark invasion' was particularly poignant during the AIDS crisis, where bodily 'invasion' was the target of so much anxiety and commentary, invading the very notion of love itself.

What comes out of this opaque vision of erotic memory are memories of the speaker sleeping with the young man on two different occasions. In the first time the speaker remembers how they 'lay at ease, an arm loose around a waist'. Though they were 'not quite embraced', their bodies were 'always in contact' as if they 'were two trees, bough grazing bough, / The twigs being the toes or fingertips.' (414) This image of half-embrace is also half-

¹¹⁸ The original in Italian reads: 'In quella parte/ dove sta memoria/ Prende suo stato/ si formato/ chome/ Diafan dal lume/ d'una schuridade/ La qual de Marte/ viene e fa dimora/ Elgli é creato/ e a sensato/ nome/ D'alma chostume/ di chor volontade' from Ezra Pound, *The Translation of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1953, p. 134).

¹¹⁹ Pound's translation of the song reads: 'In memory's loctus taketh he his state/ Formed there in manner as a mist of light/ Upon a dusk that is come from Mars and stays. / Love is created, hath a sensate name,/ His modus takes from soul, from heart his will;' (ibid, p. 135)

real. Their loose embrace, unlike the 'secure firm dry embrace' in 'The Hug', is in tune with the poem's elusive form.¹²⁰ It is halfway to Ovidian metamorphosis. Suddenly realizing that he has not met the man for 'three weeks now', the speaker recalls another memory when two of them 'lay upon a bed of clarity':

In luminous half-sleep where the will was lost.
We woke at times and as the night got colder
Exchanged a word, or pulled the clothes again
To cover up the other's exposed shoulder,
Falling asleep to the small talk of the rain. (414)

Gunn told Clive Wilmer that 'The Differences' revisits the idea of the will prevalent in his early poetry:

'In luminous half-sleep where the will *was lost*.' So that is not *willed* love at all. This was a very conscious reference back to my over-use of the word *will* in my early books. I'm saying in a sense that I'm no longer the same person as I was then, and I'm pleased that I'm not the same person. So there is a certain consciousness of themes but, at the same time, there's a certain blessed unconsciousness.¹²¹

It is interesting to connect the 'half-sleep' and half-embrace in the poem with Gunn's half-consciousness of themes operating written the poem. What is the sense of clarity the speaker experienced when 'the will was lost'? And how does it relate to the Cavalcanti poem, that stands at the origin of so much of our literature of love? The intermittent sleepers seem to be intimate and caring towards each other, as well as foreign and separate. The two memories recall two occasional lovers sharing a sense of deep emotional connection after orgasm, and are juxtaposed with the poet's memory of Cavalcanti's notion of love. The suggestion is that casual relationships are a form of love too, as '*Love takes it shapes...where memories reside*.' Where 'The Hug' celebrates a secure sense of continual commitment in life-long friendship and relationship, 'The Differences' suggests the embodied devotion in casual (sexual) friendship, recalling what Hugh Haughton in his review called 'a faithful monument to a casual encounter.'¹²² The embrace in 'The Hug' is 'firm' and affirmative, whereas the embrace in 'The Differences' is half-formed and sporadic. However, the two poems are characteristically free of any moral stance: the two kinds of embrace are equally memorable and valuable. Unlike sexy street poems such as 'Sweet Things' and 'San Francisco Streets' in which sexual encounters are seen as playful thrills, 'The Differences' explores the emotional complexity of 'love not flesh but in the mind beneath'. The mind tends to be seen as 'above'

¹²⁰ This image of half-embrace recalls the end of 'Jack Straw's Castle' in which Jack and the man 'lie sheetless', 'leaning ass to ass' like 'a hinge': 'it separates but not too much.' (278)

¹²¹ PR, p. 155.

¹²² Hugh Haughton, 'An Unlimited Embrace' TLS May 1, p. 12.

'flesh', not 'beneath' it, and Gunn's poems insist that no form of the erotic is 'beneath' a mind seriously reflecting on love.

In the last section of *The Man with Night Sweats* the image of the embrace changes drastically in terms of the embracer and embraced. I will look at five poems, 'The Reassurance', 'Memory Unsettled', 'The Missing', 'Death's Door' and finally 'A Blank', in which the limiting embrace of rhyme is used to explore protean forms of embrace, creating a sense of solidarity not only between the living and the dead, the sick and the healthy, but also within the community of the sick and the dead. 'The Reassurance' describes a dream in which a dead friend returns and embraces his living friends:

About ten days or so
After we saw you dead
You came back in a dream.
I'm all right now you said. (471)

Unlike 'The Hug' and 'The Differences', the poetic form of 'The Reassurance' is condensed and minimal. The speaker's tone is direct, anecdotal and journalistic. Nevertheless the shift of pronouns develops an intricate web of friendship, as well as enabling the reader to experience loss from different perspectives. While the poem essentially focuses on the intimate 'you' (his dead friend), it begins with the unspecific collective 'we', 'We saw you dead', creating a painful contrast between the world of the witness and the world of death. The 'you' then directs the flow of the poem back, not to *our* dream, but 'a dream', the speaker's personal dream. Seeking to record the voice of his dead friend, the speaker's voice is usurped, as the 'I' is actually 'you' in 'I'm alright now you said.' As the only rhyme in the stanza, that between 'dead' and 'said' affirms the voice of the dead.

In the second stanza the speaker underlines his experience of realizing the identity of his dead friend and the second person pronoun dominates every line:

And it was you, although
You were fleshed out again:
You hugged us all round then,
And gave your welcoming beam.

The rhyme scheme is again irregular, despite the fact that 'although' rhymes with 'so', and 'beam' with 'dream' in the first stanza. The dead friend is 'fleshed out again' in the dream, continuing the idea of him as ghost-like and insisting on the currency of 'flesh'. One can 'flesh out' an idea, but for Gunn the idea of a person, his friend is inherently 'fleshed'. In 'The Embrace' in Mark Doty describes a similar dream. In it, Doty dreams that he and his dead

lover Wally Roberts 'held / each other for the time the dream allowed.'¹²³ Doty ends the poem with a reassuring yet imaginary embrace:

Bless you. You came back, so I could see you
once more, plainly, so I could rest against you
without thinking this happiness lessened anything,
without thinking you were alive again.¹²⁴

Like Doty addressing Wally, Gunn in 'The Reassurance' bears his lost friend Allan Noseworthy in mind. Unlike Doty's 'The Embrace' in which the details of private intimacy (his 'unguarded, reliable face' and their 'warm brown tea') builds up the 'clarity of you', Gunn's 'The Reassurance' insists on withholding details, on not giving away. Its clarity is achieved through plain form and diction. In 'The Embrace' there is a sense of reassuring sentimental coupledness, the eloquent 'I' and 'you', whereas in 'The Reassurance' the only 'I' in the poem is spoken by 'you', and more importantly, there is a sense of group of friends represented by 'we' and 'us'. 'You hugged us all round', he says, and the speaker's dream stages a second farewell crowded with friends, where the 'welcoming' hug demonstrates a deep sense of sociability and group recognition. This hug embodies the tension between the imaginary and the real: is it the speaker's mind seeking reassurance in a dream of his dead friend or the dead friend coming back to give him a dream of reassurance? The final stanza taps into this paradox:

How like you to be kind,
Seeking to reassure.
And, yes, how like my mind
To make itself secure.¹²⁵

The rhyme is finally in place. The stanza is rhythmically 'secure' in a reassuring symmetrical *abab* form. 15 Out of 33 rhymed poems in *The Man with Night Sweats* are written in *abab* rhyme scheme, suggesting the presence of well-built forms of poetic insurance.¹²⁶ Here the poem's sheer precision makes every word count. 'How like you' evokes a world of familiarity, calling up the dead friend's kindness and instinct to reassure. 'How like my mind', however, subtly restores the speaker's voice and focuses on his mind's automatic need for security. Hugh Haughton writes 'what is impressive about these "terminal" poems is the poet's unsettling

¹²³ Mark Doty, *The Sweet Machine* (NY: Harper Perennial, 1998), p. 73.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ 'What I'm saying there is that we control the content of our dreams. I was dreaming that dream to make myself feel good. But you know it's not a choice. This was the effect of it, and the dream comes from inside me.' Hennessy, p. [Cf. 'Jack Straw's Castle': 'That dreams don't come from nowhere: it's your dream/ He says, you dreamt it. So there's no escape.' (276)]

¹²⁶ The 15 poems are: 'The Differences', 'Looks', 'Nasturtium', 'The Man with Night Sweats', 'Still Life', 'The Reassurance', 'Words for Some Ash', 'Sacred Heart', 'Her Pet', 'Memory Unsettled', 'To a Dead Graduate Student', 'The Missing', 'Death's Door', 'A Blank'.

refusal to make himself secure by such false reassurance.¹²⁷ The ending of Doty's 'The Embrace' achieves a sense of security through not 'thinking this happiness lessened anything' and not 'thinking you were alive again', but 'The Reassurance' allows the speaker to be confused. The rhyme 'secure' and 'reassure' is based on parallel sounds but potentially opposed meanings. How 'secure' is the speaker's mind seeking his dead friend in dream to 'reassure' himself? Is it self-deception or self-consolation, or both? Unlike the images of embrace in 'The Hug', 'The Differences' and 'Philemon and Baucis' which capture reassurance and security, the hug in 'The Reassurance' questions the meaning of reassurance and security in time of loss and bereavement.

Unlike the hug between the dead and the survivor in 'The Reassurance', 'Memory Unsettled' records a bleak embrace between a terminally ill friend and another dying friend. The poem is built up through three different remembered scenes, with each stanza going further back in time. While the first two stanzas are firmly rooted in the traditional *abab* rhyme, the rhyme scheme in the third stanza becomes irregular and confusing, as the speaker taps into the specific memory of his dying friend visiting another dying friend 'in a like hospital bed':

Once when you went to see
 Another with a fever
 In a like hospital bed,
 With terrible hothouse cough
 And terrible hothouse shiver
 That soaked him and then dried him,
 And you perceived that he
 Had to be comforted (479)

We speak lightly of 'terrible cough' but here the repetitive 'terrible hothouse cough' and 'shivers' return force to the cliché, as 'hothouse' turns the hospital into a feverish sauna. Through in *The Man with Night Sweats* Gunn uses a lot of familiar, low-key, even clichéd adjectives, such as 'terrible', 'tedious', 'painful', 'plain' and 'difficult'. These are difficult adjectives to make work in a poem without sounding either clichéd or grandiose. Gunn, however, uses them starkly and confidently, as if they constituted a crucial part of the fractured world about him.

Versions of this painful scene of suffering rehearse with different patients and details throughout Gunn's book as in other poems about AIDS. Gunn de-sentimentalises the meeting of the two terminally ill men, creating a sense of almost analytic detachment by using 'perceived' (instead of 'thought') and the passive 'he / Had to be comforted' (instead of

¹²⁷ Haughton, p. 13.

'to comfort him'). The poem ends with a memorable image of the embrace of the two dying men:

You climbed in there beside him
And hugged him plain in view,
Though you were sick enough,
And had your own fears too. (479)

This desperate embrace is the opposite of the one in 'The Hug', where two loving men hold each other in a 'secure firm dry embrace.' A lot of AIDS poems feature embraces between HIV negative and positive people, creating a sense of terminal comfort and empathy. An example is Tim Dlugos's 'G-9' where he remembers his 'last lover' coming to see him 'with a visitor's pass' and describe how they 'kiss, embrace'.¹²⁸ In 'Memory Unsettled', however, Gunn depicts one dying friend hugging the other 'plain in view'. The comfort in the poem is implicit, but not 'plain'. There is something powerfully reassuring, as well as sad and unsettling, about the hug 'plain in view' that the displays of this unique bond between the sick men, and their understanding of what is needed for comfort.

Moving from the world of the sick to the world of the dead, 'Death's Door' imagines four dead people who 'sit side by side / Together in front of the same [TV] set' and 'watch friend relative/ And life here as they think it is / —In black and white, repetitive / As situation comedies.' (485) Gunn's dark comedy makes a contrast to his early 'My Sad Captain', in which he images dead friends and heroes in orbit, turning 'with disinterested / Hard energy, like the stars.' (129) The once heroic, celestial elite is now transformed into the outnumbering legion of the underworld, 'superbly trained / Into the perfect discipline / Of an archaic host'. (486) Apart from the anonymous dead, the poem has unexpectedly revived a memory of Gunn's own mother 'archaic now as Minos' as 'she died forty years ago', a difficult subject he returns to in his last book *Boss Cupid*. It took the crisis of mourning as a result of AIDS to re-awaken this 'familial' image of mourning for the poet. The posthumous embrace in poem is comical and grotesque:

Arms round each other's shoulders loosely,
Although they can feel nothing, who
When they unlearned their pain so sprucely
Let go of all sensation too. (485)

The loosening embrace recalls the erotic half-embraces in 'The Differences' and 'Touch', but the dead 'can feel nothing' because in unlearning pain they let go of 'all sensation too.' The *abab* rhyme used throughout 'Death's Door' has a strong mechanical edge; its rhythmic

¹²⁸ Tim Dlugos, 'G-9' in *Things Shaped in Passing*, pp, 58-9.

uniformity echoes the march of 'recruiting armies'. The same rhyme in 'The Reassurance' and 'Memory Unsettled', however, provides rhythmic unity and reassurance by interrupting the irregular rhyme dominated in the poems. After watching the living's sitcom for a while, the dead's boredom turns into impatience: 'Their habit of companionship / Lapses—they break themselves of touch.' Hugh Haughton remarks that such physical separation 'is the ultimate image of death for the author of *Touch*', as the phrase 'edging apart at arm and hip' suggests that 'their individual physical dissolution is inseparable from their mutual separation—the "edging apart" which ends all possibility of further embrace.'¹²⁹ If the poem is about the breakdown of touch and the embrace, it is also about loss of recognition: 'none of the recruits now knows them [Minos and Gunn's mother], / Nor do they recognize each other'. The snow that 'blurs the picture' is surreally transformed into the 'Snow [that] blows out toward them'. The snowstorm fills up the landscape, as at the end of James Joyce's 'The Dead', the protagonists 'find themselves with all the dead' (486).

The protean image of the embrace in the book has a strong physical basis. Whether it is a panicky self-hug in the title poem, a tight embrace between two life-long lovers in 'The Hug', a loose one between two casual lovers in 'The Differences', a mythical one between Philemon and Baucis, a dreamy one in 'The Reassurance', a terminal one in 'Memory Unsettled', or a surreal one among the dead in 'Death's Door', for Gunn, it is real bodily touch—the actual act of hugging—that counts. In 'The Missing', however, Gunn features the 'image of an unlimited embrace', the only conceptual embrace in the book which operates as a paradigm of communal connection and solidarity within the gay population in time of AIDS. The speaker (presumably Gunn) 'watch[es] the progress of the plague' (483). He is an outsider in the sense that he is not an AIDS sufferer, but has experienced massive loss too, as the opening registers: 'The friends surrounding me fall sick, grow thin, / And drop away.' 'The Missing' explores the shock to Gunn's own bodily identity when faced with the death of so many friends and lovers. It works like a summary of all the other elegies in the book. Feeling physically and emotionally 'bared', the speaker asks: 'is my shape less vague /— Sharply exposed and with a sculpted skin?' The poem then draws an arresting comparison between the speaker's body and 'the statue's chill contour'. Gunn abruptly changes the following line into past tense, recapturing a sense of sexual and familial 'warmth' before the outbreak of AIDS: 'The warmth investing me / Led outward through mind, limb, feeling, and more / In an involved increasing family.' (483)

Gunn's retrospective account of expanding 'warmth' must refer to a sense of recognition and solidarity among the gay population. The idea of 'an involved increasing

¹²⁹ Haughton, p. 13.

family' echoes the 'familial' embrace in 'The Hug', in which the idea of family is rendered as a socio-cultural construction rather than something biologically determined. Even though Gunn's past tense seems to describe the sexual and emotional ease that preceded AIDS, the two adjectives casually allude to the tense political climate of AIDS activism during the 1980s and 90s. 'Involved' means 'complicated' and 'tangled', of course, but it also echoes the tune of most AIDS activist campaigns that screamed out for political and financial involvement among gay and heterosexual communities, religious groups, and government agencies. The revealingly named ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was co-founded by Larry Kramer on 14th March 1987 and became one of the most provocative hubs to generate regional and national involvement to stop the spread of AIDS. The emblematic slogan SILENCE - DEATH and its pink triangle evoked the memories of the Nazi Holocaust, underlining the point that 'silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, *then and now*, must be broken as a matter of our survival.'¹³⁰ 'Increasing' not only signals the rapid increase in the number of HIV-AIDS cases at the height of the outbreak, but suggests the self's increasing sense of belonging to a 'family', a once marginalized community being pushed to the edge of decimation. By recycling the AIDS activist words in a different slant, Gunn tones down the political rhetoric, making us to rethink the those words and ideas in terms of intimacy and personal experience. It is hard to decide whether the notion of 'an involved increasing family' expresses Gunn's nostalgic investment in the sexual freedom explored in *Moly* and *The Passage of Joy*, or actually his ironic hesitation about spelling the AIDS headline issues out.

There is a similar sense of ambivalence in the following stanza. On the one hand Gunn recaptures the sexual freedom and intimacy before the outbreak of AIDS, on the other hand the poem subverts such freedom:

Contact of friend led to another friend,
 Supple entwinement through the living mass
 Which for all that I know might have no end,
 Image of an unlimited embrace. (483)

The private, sensual touch in 'The Hug' has become public 'contact', a condition of physical contagion. The erotic 'supple entwinement of the living mass' contrasts with 'perfect discipline / Of an archaic host' in 'Death's Door' which offers a grim version of crumbled solidarity. The 'supple entwinement' of the 'unlimited embrace', which was the source for his sense of belonging within the 'involved increasing family', has now become the source of his

¹³⁰ Douglas Crimp, *Aids Demographics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), p. 14. Writing about the scale of involvement, Crimp highlights 'One measure of our success [in the Fifth International AIDS Conference in Montreal in June 1989] was that by the end of the conference perhaps one-third of the more than 12,000 people attending were wearing SILENCE - DEATH buttons.'

crisis. In the interview with Clive Wilmer, Gunn talked about his ambivalence towards this conceptual embrace:

I'm speaking about a sense of 'the gay community' (a phrase I always thought was bullshit, until the thing was vanishing). In 'The Missing' I speak about the 'Image of an unlimited embrace,' and I mean partly friends, partly sexual partners, partly even the vaguest of acquaintances, with the sense of being in some way part of a community.¹³¹

The 'image of an unlimited embrace', therefore, celebrates the 'aggressive' energy inherent in pre-AIDS sexual friendship, 'the ceaseless movement thrilling through the whole' that Gunn aspires to in 'The Geysers' and 'At the Barrier'. Melissa Zeiger notes that in Gunn 'the social and sexual are interconnected rather than compartmentalized and placed at odds. Gunn's classically informed, deliberate crafting of a life requires an intense involvement with others, with a community, but communal contact is not necessarily sentimentalised or devoid of aggression.'¹³² While Gunn's 'unlimited embrace' suggests the 'ease' and reassurance that 'kept me as firm as their support', it also opens up new wounds, he says, as 'their deaths have left me less defined'. For Gunn, one crucial aspect in 'The Missing' is the way friendship sponsors a 'pulsing presence', a sense of clarity and purpose for the living. The speaker plainly confesses 'I borrowed from it, I was unconfined'. The idea that one can 'borrow' one's friend's presence and feel energized and 'unconfined' goes deep in the sociable selves articulated in poems such as 'Last Days at Teddington' and 'Another All-Night Party'. 'The Missing', however, ends with a chilling sense of instability and frozenness, as if the speaker has been transformed into a marble statue:

Eyes glaring from raw marble, in a pose
Languorously part-buried in the block,
Skins perfect and no calves, as if I froze
Between potential and a finished work. (483)

'Pose', one of the most crucial words in Gunn's early poetry, is rhymed here for the first time with 'froze', suggesting the rigidity of a living corpse. The speaker imagines himself as a statuary torso, 'part-buried', 'skins perfect and no calves', like one of the Michelangelo's unfinished slaves half-emerging and half-buried in the marble. The missing calves, like his missing friends, literalize loss on the body. Stuck at this intermediate stage between 'potential and a finished work', the speaker internalizes this dilemma, and concludes with a sense of spectral 'unwholeness':

¹³¹ PR, p. 158.

¹³² Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy*. (Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1997), p. 121.

—Abandoned incomplete, shape of a shape,
In which exact detail shows the more strange,
Trapped in unwholeness, I find no escape
Back to the play of constant give and change. (484)

The verse insists on 'strange' repetitive paraphrase—'incomplete/ unwholeness', 'trapped/ no escape'—as if his sense of abandonment had a reductive impact on his poetic imagination. Even though there is a self-elegizing touch in 'I find no escape', Gunn does not dwell on grief or loss but the sexually encoded word 'play' that litters *The Passages of Joy*. The paradox of 'constant' and 'change' insists on his continuing 'sense of movement', and his fidelity, across these passages of mourning, to the principle of 'play' and 'joy'.

In this section I have closely looked at the protean image of embrace foregrounded in *The Man with Night Sweats*, exploring the way Gunn insists on actual human contact in a world phobic about men embracing each other. Wherever there is an embrace between bodies, there is an embrace between pronouns: the 'you' hugging the 'I' in 'The Hug', the 'I' and 'you' not knowing the half-embraced caught between them in 'The Differences', the 'he' and 'she' being turned into an eternal embrace of 'it' in 'Philemon and Baucis', the dead 'you' coming back to hug the 'I' in a dream in 'The Reassurance', the terminal 'you' climbing in the sick bed of the dying 'he' in 'Memory Unsettled', the 'image of an unlimited embrace' between an implicit 'we' in 'The Missing', and finally, the dead ('they'—the third person plural) loosely hugging the dead in 'Death's Door'. While the title poem is about self-hug, recognizing the impossibility of being hugged by either a 'you' or 'he', in the rest of *The Man with Night Sweats* Gunn's variations on hugging literalize the human connectedness between pronouns, celebrating, in the midst of an epidemic caused by erotic contact, one of the most primal, intimate, comforting if not consoling human touches, the embrace.

I will end this chapter with an account of the last poem in *The Man with Night Sweats*, 'A Blank', which summarizes the book and translates its grimness into a kind of hope and continuity. The poem features another complicated interplay of pronouns and an unlikely embrace between an AIDS survivor and his newly adopted son. Unlike other elegies in the book, 'A Blank' begins with a direct address of grief:

The year of griefs being through, they had to merge
In one last grief, with one last property:
To view itself like loosened cloud lose edge,
And pull apart, and leave a voided sky. (487)

Is this Gunn's attempt at a sad landscape painting, or a rewriting of 'My Sad Captain', in which the 'disinterested, / hard energy' of the stars becomes 'a voided sky'? The striking

plurality of 'griefs' is uncannily addressed as 'they', and the 'they' is countered by the mysterious force of merging the plural into a singular 'one last grief'. What is the 'one last grief' which is comparable to the 'one last property'? Gunn's lucid, deadpan answer evades clarity. Is 'one last grief' the way we 'view' the grief 'itself like loosened cloud lose edge'? Is it such viewing of grief that makes it a kind of property we own and 'pull apart'? Can we own 'grief'? Is elegy a form of owning grief? Does this ownership like pulling clouds apart, leaving us nothing but 'a voided sky'? Is it good or bad to be left 'a voided sky'? The poem tantalizingly sponsors and begs these questions. Instead of answering them Gunn throws us back to the city of San Francisco, where the speaker 'caught sight of a friend / Stopped on a corner-kerb to let us pass':

A four-year-old blond child tugging his hand,
Which tug he held against with a slight smile.
I knew the smile from certain passages
Two years ago, thus did not know him well,
Since they took place in my bedroom and his.

Gunn uncomplicatedly uses the first person pronoun to address the personal encounter he had with his friend 'two years ago'. Without making any moralistic statements, the poem subtly registers the change in his friend's life by comparing the 'slight smile' of a foster-father with the 'smile' of the ex-street-cruiser in the passages of joy. Even though we are not told directly why the speaker's friend decides to adopt a child, we are constantly reminded of the deaths accumulated throughout the elegiac sequence. Gunn records his friend's direct speech: 'He said "I chose to do this with my life." / Casually met he said it of the plan / He undertook without a friend or a wife.' His role of foster-father is implied between the lines, and 'without a friend' inevitably reveals his other roles, as a gay male 'AIDS survivor' like Gunn.

Gunn calls his friend 'A sturdy-looking admirable young man.' The question for Gunn and us is: Why does 'he' do it? Why is he 'admirable'? Gunn attempts to answer:

What I admired about his self-permission
Was that he turned from nothing he had done,
Or was, or had been, even while he transposed
The expectations he took out at dark
—Of Eros playing, features undisclosed—
Into another pitch, where he might work
With the same melody, and opted so
To educate, permit, guide, feed, keep warm,
And love a child to be adopted, though
The child was still a blank then on a form. (487-8)

Transposing 'the expectations he took out at dark', his friend self-permissively turns to what 'was still a blank', the idea of adopting a child. Gunn, too, transposes his friend's 'expectations' into musical variations—'another pitch, where he might work with the same melody'. Unlike Doty's violin variations in 'Lament—Heaven', the variations in 'A Blank' include a list of parental verbs: 'To educate, permit, guide, feed, keep warm, / And love a child to be adopted'. The verbs reaffirm the very basis of parental love and care, as Gunn imagines his friend's new role of being a single gay parent. The poem however does not seek a kind of traditional recovery from elegiac grief in the form of renewal, but offers a context for new responsibilities unimaginable before the AIDS crisis when homosexuality was thought to be anti-familial. Henri Cole notes the poem 'is human story unwritten in American poetry to date. It is a gay poem, of course, though the experience remains non-gender specific.'¹³³ However, I think that it is exactly its gender specificity, the fact it is Gunn's male friend adopting a boy, which the poem seeks to affirm. Alan Sinfield emphasizes that 'A Blank' is 'fighting against gay poetry' because it touches on adoption.¹³⁴ Peter Swaab adds that the poem 'fighting not only in looking at the vexed issue of adoption, but in choosing an unmollifyingly extreme instance: the adopting father seems to be not only gay, but single, and formerly promiscuous. The speaker praises him in a sentence which winds through his life with wonderfully apt clarity of syntax and firmness of direction.'¹³⁵ It is hard to decide on what grounds Gunn's poem is anti-'gay poetry', but it certainly resists the popular AIDS rhetoric and imagines a new kind of elegy that goes beyond the urgency of grief and mourning.

If we do not know why his friend opts to adopt the child, we also do not know why the child was abandoned in the first place. Gunn, however, asks us not to look back to the past but ahead to the present and future:

The blank was flesh now, running on its nerve,
 This fair-topped organism dense with charm,
 Its braided muscle grabbing what would serve,
 His countering pull, his own devoted arm. (488)

From the sense of grief that leaves 'a voided sky' at the beginning of the poem to his friend's idea of adoption as 'a blank' on a 'form', Gunn connects 'the year of griefs' with 'the blank' that 'was flesh now', subtly translating the grimness of the book into a sense of youthful liveliness. As the end of 'Lament' refers to his friend's once attractive body as 'it', in 'A Blank' Gunn addresses the child's 'flesh' as 'This fair-topped organism'. The two 'its'—'running on

¹³³ Henri Cole, 'Sketches of the Great Epidemic', *The Nation*, NY Aug 31-Sept 7, 1992, p. 223.

¹³⁴ Alan Sinfield, 'Thom Gunn and the Largest Gathering of the Decade', *LRB* 14 (1992), p. 17.

¹³⁵ Peter Swaab, 'The Man with Night Sweats and the idea of Political Poetry', *AGENDA* p. 113.

its nerve' and 'its braided muscle grabbing'—intermix the non-human pronoun 'it' with its animate actions, reminding us the body's terrifying autonomy ('The greatest of its inconsistencies') as well as its potentials ('I grew as I explored / The body I could trust / Even while I adored / The risk that made robust'). But the 'it' is finally countered by a 'he' in the last line: 'His countering pull, his own devoted arm.' Even though we are unsure if the two possessive pronouns refer separately the father and the child, the parallelism suggests a sense of reciprocity between the two, as 'countering' entails 'encounter'. The line also features the final embrace in the book, in which the father's 'devoted arm' reciprocates the son's 'countering pull'. This moving, physical connection can also be read as another instance of the 'play of constant give and change' lost in 'The Missing'.

Even though 'A Blank' does not seek to console, this final embrace conveys a reciprocal sense of comfort that is missing in the self-hug featured in the title poem. We have certainly come a long way from the 'large gesture of solitary man, / Resisting, by embracing, nothingness' affirmed in 'Santa Maria del Popolo'. Faced with the crisis of mourning represented by AIDS, Gunn continues to emphasize the embrace and existential choice ('I chose to this with my life'), but in a context, dense with not why 'Eros playing' and 'self-permission', but the complex presence of others. Rafael Campo claims that in 'so called formal poetry' like Gunn's, 'rhymes become the mental resting places in the ascending rhythmic stairway of memory. The poem perhaps is an idealization, or a dream of the physical—the imagined healthy form.' Gunn does not present rhyme as a consoling refuge, but he affirms its exploratory qualities:

In looking for a rhyme, even just in mechanically trying all the consonants in turn on your suffix, you are exploring possibilities in your subject: how can this word be applied to my subject, how can that one? As you get more desperate, you actually start to think more deeply about the subject in hand, so that rhyme turns out to be a method of thematic exploration.¹³⁶

In the last stanza of 'A Blank', to shift from 'nerve' to 'serve' not only explores a kind of bodily limit, but also requires a change in perspective—the friend's decision to 'serve' his son 'running on his nerve'. To discover 'arm' in 'charm' also affirms the image of an embrace as a source of comfort, if not consolation.

¹³⁶ SL, p. 221.

CHAPTER SIX

'AMOROUS SCRIPTS': DESIRE AND AGING IN *BOSS CUPID* (2000)

1

Sir Cupid, Dan Cupid, Boss Cupid

In 'A Blank' (487-8), the concluding elegy of *The Man with Night Sweats*, Gunn invokes 'Eros playing'. He does so when he imagines his friend transposing the erotic 'expectations he took out at dark' to 'another pitch' which would enable him to 'love a child to be adopted, though / The child was still a blank then on a form.' In the poem Cupid's 'features [are] undisclosed', but his presence in the 'dark' discloses a 'melody' which Gunn speculates his friend 'might work with' to become a responsible parent: 'To educate, permit, guide, feed, keep warm, / And love'. The poem ends with an image of physical reciprocity, a comforting if not consoling embrace ('His countering pull, his own devoted arm'). It is made the more poignant in being set in the aftermath of the AIDS poems. Nevertheless, it recognises Eros as the mischievous but generous love-god 'playing' in the background, inspiring if not dictating the shift from the erotic to the domestic.

If Cupid is presented as a source of domestic tenderness in 'A Blank', in Gunn's last book he is transformed into a much more troublesome master, often darting his arrows at the seventy-one-year-old poet in the wrong times and places. Re-titling Ovid's 'Sir Cupid'¹ and Spenser's 'Dan Cupid'² as 'Boss Cupid', Gunn resuscitates Cupid's earlier poetic career as the

¹ 'Oh Venus and thy tender sonne, Sir Cupid, what delyght, / How present feeling of your sport hath touched mee this nyght. / How lay I as it were resolvd both maree, flesh, and bone.' Arthur Golding, trans. *Metamorphoses* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006). IX, 573-5.

² 'And after all came Life, and lastly Death; / Death with most grim and griesly visage seene, / Yet is he nought but parting of the breath; / Ne ought to see, but like a shade to weene, / Unbodied, unsoul'd, unheard, unseene. / But Life was like a faire young lusty boy, / Such as they faigne Dan Cupid to have beene, / Full of delightfull health and lively joy, / Deckt all with flowers, and wings of gold fit to employ.' Spenser, *The Faerie Queen*, Mutabilitie Cantos, VII, vii, 46. The Spenserian 'Dan', according to the *OED*, refers to 'an honourable title', such as 'Master and Sir applied to distinguished men, knights, scholars, poets, deities.' In *The Faerie Queen*, Spenser underlines his poetic kinship with Chaucer by calling him 'Dan Chaucer'. Spenser, *The Faerie Queen*, IV, ii: 'Whylome as antique stories tellen vs,/ Those two were foes the fellonest on ground,/ And battell made the dreddest daungerous,/ That euer shrilling trumpet did resound;/ Though now their acts be no where to be found,/ As that

master of love and desire, and recasts the 'devious' love-god as 'the source' of homoerotic desire in the wake of the AIDS epidemic in the 80s and 90s.³ Beautiful boys and men are everywhere in *Boss Cupid*. In the post office a 'sturdy kid' with 'long blond hair' waits in a queue gleaming with 'brilliant restive charm' and 'boyishness' (13). On the street during 'an operation' there are 'a couple of policemen dressed / In plain-clothes best' (20). In the bedroom an 'affectionate young man' feeds the poet's 'dried-up impulses' (45). In a gay bar the bartender Scorpio has chewable 'jumbo tits' and 'was also a porn star' (64). In Gunn's Berkeley 'big handsome / sweaty boys /with their goatees' are skating outside his office, while Gunn and his student 'do not flirt with / one another' because it is a poet that they 'flirt with / together' (77). This imaginary utopia of sexual encounters with young boys supersedes the disinfected world of *The Man with Night Sweats* and recalls the earlier 'sexual New Jerusalem' (42) of the San Francisco streets in *The Passages of Joy*. The first entry of 'boss', according to the *OED*, was recorded in New England when 'an expert engineer or work base' arrived at 'a small Norse bark.' Taking off from its colonial and commercial root, 'boss' is now used as an American equivalent of 'master' in the sense of employer of labour, mainly in a business context. Gunn playfully promotes Cupid's Classical and Renaissance poetic status to the top of the contemporary entrepreneurial hierarchy.

In *Boss Cupid* while Gunn uses the word 'young' about others, he frequently describes himself as an 'old man'. In 'In the Post Office', he writes, 'In several years, that old man's greed for youth' is 'like Pelias's that boiled him to a soup' (13). Gunn is caught in an age-complex that recalls the estrangement of Yeats's 'That is no country for old men'⁴ or Cavafy's 'He knows he's very old now: sees it, feels it'.⁵ We feel it in his many erotic poems devoted to nameless young men on Alexandrian streets. Unlike Yeats, Gunn was obviously very much at ease with the re-igniting gay life in San Francisco in his seventies. The poet Michael McClure remembers seeing Gunn 'as a flare of testosterone as he went galumphing through the leather district at 2 or 3 in the morning and striding up the 17th Street hill on his way home after the night's adventure.'⁶ Even though Gunn could 'quote Yeats from memory'⁷ and was certainly

renowned Poet them compyled,/ With warlike numbers and Heroicke sound,/ Dan Chaucer, well of English vndefyled,/ On Fames eternall beadroll worthie to be fyled.' Like Ovid and Spencer, Gunn addresses his poetic kinship with his Boss Cupid.

³ Aligning Death with a 'shade' and Life with Cupid, Spenser in the 'Mutabilitie Cantos' questions the conventional figurations of Cupid, suggesting that Life only looked like 'a faire young lusty boy', such as Cupid who was feigned to possess 'delightfull health and lively joy'. Even though Cupid is traditionally seen as a generous sponsor of sexual desire, he is not often regarded as an erotic figure, perhaps because throughout the Classical and Renaissance poetry he is usually portrayed as a mischievous pre-pubescent boy.

⁴ Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', p. 217.

⁵ Cavafy, 'An Old Man', p. 4.

⁶ Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part One' on SFGate.com

<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/25/DDGUFCD4SP1.DTL>>

an aged man, he was not 'a paltry thing' or 'tattered coat upon a stick', but sitting happily with a leather jacket on a barstool. Unlike Cavafy in later years devoted to recapture the pleasures of youth, Gunn records his latest sexcapades in 'Gossips', the middle section of *Boss Cupid* where free verse is used to articulate the foreplay and flirtatious conversations.

Torn between desiring and being desired, the aging poet in *Boss Cupid* creates a privileged but embarrassed position for himself, as someone happy to be living at the mercy of Cupid's random but dominant presence. Many poems in *Boss Cupid* record a sense of erotic privilege about erotic encounters with younger men. In a biographical context, Don Doody, Gunn's long-term friend, who was manager of the Stud, the 'definitive SOMA bar' of the 60s, remembers that Gunn 'laughed about what he would call gerontophiles—lovers of old men. He had never expected by the time he was 70 that there would still be young men who were interested in him.'⁸ Despite that, and under the guise of flirtatious gossip and promiscuous encounter, *Boss Cupid* also captures Gunn's sense of estrangement. It celebrates sexual conquest but elegizes the aging body; it flirts with the casual crowd but commemorates domestic intimacy and gossips about casual sex but revolves around the idea of trust. Its historical cast include Jeffrey Dahmer and King David but it also memorialises the poet's mother.

Confronted with these dilemmas, Gunn resuscitates Cupid as both troublemaker and mediator of desire. Even though Cupid can easily be read as just one more of Gunn's poses or a metaphor for his troubled self, throughout the book Gunn gives Cupid a sense of autonomy and bossiness that overrides authorial control. Or this at least is what the poet wants to believe. It is as if Gunn had finally discovered a refuge under the regime of Cupid, speaking from his own experience as happy but confused victim. Cupid, in some sense, offers a crafty alibi for Gunn to articulate his passivity and helplessness, as he represents himself subordinated to the love-god's authority. In this respect Gunn aligns himself with the tradition of classical and Renaissance lyric, which invokes Cupid as inspiration and Muse. In the guise of one of *Boss Cupid*'s employees or devotees, Gunn struggles to mediate between the two contrasting forces in his life, the desire for youth and the burden of aging. These are the equivalent of Freud's Eros and Thanatos. However, if *Boss Cupid* showcases the bonuses (i.e. the exciting encounters) offered by his full-time job, it also records the relentless confusion and anxiety it entails, the poet's accumulating debts to Cupid, love, and pleasure.

⁷ The poet Steve Silberman recalls this in Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part One' on SFGate.com <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/25/DDGUFC4SPL.DTL>>

⁸ Don Doody remembers Gunn in Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part One' on SFGate.com <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/25/DDGUFC4SPL.DTL>>

The book captures this difficult, complicated struggle between authority and subordination, desiring and being desired, flattery and embarrassment, as well as the painful but erotic division between the young and the old. Although in a sense Gunn struggles to find a new footing after 'A Blank' and the terrifying emptiness after the AIDS elegies of *The Man with Night Sweats*, *Boss Cupid* contains some of Gunn's finest elegies such as 'The Gas-poker' for his mother and some of his riskiest songs, such as 'Troubadour' to Jeffery Dahmer. Reviewing it, Gregory Woods captures what he calls a 'vertiginous experience' of reading the book:

To read it for the first time, even if already familiar with some of the poems it contains, is to be led through an unpredictable sequence of changes of direction in topic, technique and tone whose initial effect was, for me, one of thrilling bewilderment. On subsequent reading, however, everything falls into place. What might have seemed perverse, or even out of control, at first, is suddenly entirely logical, precisely in keeping with the whole of the rest of the poet's career.⁹

Woods's perceptive phrase 'thrilling bewilderment' may refer to the reciprocity between free verse and metre, and the weird, angular sectioning of the book. While the first section, written mainly in metre and rhyme, introduces literary and familial elegies ('Duncan', 'Shit', and 'My Mother's Pride'), it also explores many kinds of secular and classical desire in such poems as 'American Boy', and the lyrics about the Greek goddesses Arethusa and Arachne. Section 2 presents a promiscuous web of 'Gossips' in free verse, intermixing accounts of gay bar chitchat with formal elegy 'To Donald Davie in Heaven'. The final section begins edgily with the five 'songs for Jeffery Dahmer' groups under the title 'Troubadour', then gradually relaxing into 'Rapallo' and 'In Trust', two of Gunn's most intimate poems celebrating his long-term relationship with Mike Kitay, and into detailed studies of Cupid and King David. Gunn uses a comparable mix-and-match approach in compiling most of his collections, as in the metre-syllabic divide in *My Sad Captains* and the AIDS elegies in *The Man with Night Sweats*. But *Boss Cupid's* diverse, 'miscellaneous' shape is unprecedented in Gunn's *oeuvre*. In a sense *Boss Cupid* poses a question about the continuity of Gunn's career. The book resists the sense of finality embodied in *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) and *Collected Poems* (1993) represented, seeking to undo the seeming completion and finding new poetic possibilities. Langdon Hammer observes that '*Boss Cupid* responds in part by pushing the boundaries of his poetry to include, in one loose whole, the materials of legend, myth, phantasmagoria, autobiography.'¹⁰ By putting contrasting poems together, Gunn seduces the reader to rethink why and how

⁹ Gregory Woods, 'Affectionate Gifts', *PN Review* 133, p. 67.

¹⁰ Langdon Hammer, 'Thom Gunn and the cool queer tales of Cupid', *Raritan* 2:2 (2000).

different poems in the same section collide with each other, imagining a poetic habitat in light of unlikeness and unlikeliness.

Apart from the book's complicated structure, I suggest that what Gregory Woods calls the 'thrilling bewilderment' evoked by the book is related to Gunn's underlying 'age-complex'—the connection between his realization of being old and his undefeated desire for troubled young boys. It is as if the poet of identification found himself unable to identify with Cupid or anyone else. He writes as an old man who has apparently deserted his circus animals but is desired by younger 'animals'. Indeed for many critics, Gunn's age appeared paradoxically reassuring. Niall McGrath wrote that 'Gunn is so trendy and cool, it is difficult to imagine him as an aging gentleman.'¹¹ 'Gunn is not, thankfully, one of poetry's respectable elder statesmen,' Craig Arnold said, 'but it's tough old tomcat, still gadding about the roofs and alleys.'¹² For David Orr, 'Boss Cupid isn't just an aging man's book about loss; it is also an old man's book about sex, especially the sexual allure of youth.'¹³ Devin Johnston was even tempted to call Gunn with 'Catullus of his age', saying that Gunn 'takes erotic life as his principle subject—at the age of seventy-one—and offers poems which are at once emotionally profound and exuberant.'¹⁴ Gregory Woods was impressed by Gunn's account of the 'relationship between youth and old age', knowing that Gunn 'is forever being startled by the affectionate gifts (in both senses) of young men.'¹⁵ Langdon Hammer points out that Gunn's book is 'preoccupied with endings, aging, decathexis, detumescence, death. But it is also about renewal and recovery.'¹⁶ The poet Steven Silberman brings the two extremes together, saying Gunn 'had the charisma of an old rock star with the delicatessen of an English gentleman. He represented both the best virtues of civilization and the inscrutable power of staying a wild animal.'¹⁷ With *Boss Cupid* Gunn came to be seen by many critics as an icon of geriatric cool, a poetic equivalent of Harrison Ford.

In poem after poem of *Boss Cupid*, I suggest, Gunn finds himself in a painfully impossible situation where the sugar-coated reality of being desired becomes a source of embarrassment, since the poet cannot find anyone to identify with except his own aging, but still strangely attractive body. With youth at such a premium in modern culture, especially

¹¹ Niall McGrath, 'Boss Cupid', *The Black Mountain Review*,
<<http://www.blackmountainreview.com/issues/issues0120/issues03/is03reviboscup.html>>

¹² Craig Arnold, 'Boss Cupid', *The Austin Chronicle* (16th June 2000).

¹³ David Orr, 'Boss Cupid', *Poetry*, 177:5 (March 2001), p. 391.

¹⁴ Devin Johnston, 'Boss Cupid', *Chicago Review* 46:2 (2000).

¹⁵ Gregory Woods, 'Affectionate Gifts', *PN Review* 133, p. 67.

¹⁶ Langdon Hammer, 'Thom Gunn and the cool queer tales of Cupid', *Raritan* 2:2, 2000, p. 114.

¹⁷ The poet Steve Silberman remembers Gunn in Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part One' on SFGate.com
<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/25/DDGUFC4SP1.DTL>>

gay culture, aging represents a particular challenge to notions of sexual identity. The sociologists Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs talk of *The Culture of Ageing* and observe that:

The socialized desire for self-definition of 'ageing' has come to play an important role...[It is] not so much as a key of element of adult identity, but because of its capacity to constitute an ever-present risk to the success of identity project itself. Resisting not just old age but ageing itself is becoming an integral component of many 'adult lifestyles.'¹⁸

In the contemporary gay poetic scene, male poets are either immortalized by sudden, premature death like Hart Crane and Frank O'Hara, or like James Merrill and Gunn, converted into anti-aging icons, still charged with sexual allure in their 70s. Those who escaped these two fates, such as Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg and John Ashbery, are conceived as fatherly founding figures, pouring out new collections as if to 'compensate' diminished sexual potency by increased poetic productivity. In her groundbreaking book *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991), Kathleen Woodward observes that aging is metaphorically bound up with 'the sterility of an age', as well as 'a figure of speech for the exhaustion of energy or of the spirit.'¹⁹ Looking at aging within the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, she highlights the often unbridgeable antithesis between youth and old age:

Psychoanalysis itself has given us the concept of *splitting* which can help explain this psychic division of representations of age into polar opposites—into youth and crabbed age. [...] Youth, represented by the youthful body, is good; old age, represented by the aging body, is bad; in addition we find *subsplitting*: idealized images of old age constitute a polar opposite to those which express fear. But in the West our representations of old age reflect a dominant gerontophobia.²⁰

Indeed, age, like desire, is more a site of contradiction and split-identifications than of community. In a sense, Gunn's critics and readers often eliminate the split or sub-split between 'youth' and 'crabbed age', glamorizing the poet's youthful appearance and identifying it with an attractive, inspirational quality that sponsors Gunn's 'promiscuous' energy.

Though this problem of identification is not foregrounded in *Boss Cupid*, we can infer Gunn's troubling relationship with Cupid by looking at the book covers adopted for it in the UK and the US. While Spenser tackles the problem of configuring Cupid as a young boy,²¹

¹⁸ Chris Gilleard & Paul Higgs, *Culture of Ageing: Self, Citizen and the Body* (UK: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 59.

¹⁹ Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991), p. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 6-7.

²¹ It is interesting that the god of eroticism, with the exception of his brief encounter with Psyche, is usually portrayed as a pre-pubescent boy. Like Narcissus and Ganymede, Cupid symbolizes erotic

Gunn is less interested in the boss's appearance than his iconic presence in homoerotic love. Even though Gunn does not verbally describe Cupid in the poems, the jacket-cover of the American edition offers the reader a conspicuous portrayal of what the presiding deity might look like in Gunn's imagination [PLATE 6]. The cover features one of Attila Richard Lukas's four life-size portraits in a series called 'True North' [PLATE 7]. Alluding to British pop-cult references of the 80s, Lukas portrays four British youths in their Doc Marten boots, jeans and Fred Perry jackets, tapping into a genre reminiscent of Gainborough & Stubbs in the boom of mass production, marketing and advertising strategies. Craig Arnold suggests that Gunn's 'cover model is, in fact, Boss Cupid.'²² 'The model's suspenders and laces', he continues, 'are a cheery shade of red, and around his mouth there's a certain gentleness, composure rather than bravado. He's more of an imp than a hardened thug.' Indeed, Lukas's hardnosed skinheads, low-life figures in highbrow form, casually posed in uniform, remind us of Gunn's macho figures of the soldier and motorcyclist. Many erotic figures Gunn and we encounter in *Boss Cupid* might have stepped out of Lukas's pictures—the homeless kid from 'A Home', the sexually abused boy in 'A Los Angeles Childhood', the bar cruiser with 'cowboy boots', and hip-hop goateed skateboarders in 'Office Hours'. Like Lukas, Gunn's portrayals of troubled, sexy, marginalized social figures challenge cultural prejudices towards the 'underclass' with their 'Anti-Social behaviour', such as teenage pregnancy, delinquency, drug abuse and alcoholism in council estates. If Gunn elected Lukas as a model for Boss Cupid, this is a Cupid who is at odds not only with mainstream culture, but also the Californian 'lifestyle' Gunn had adopted for decades. Indeed there is something quintessentially British about Lukas's model. If we see Cupid as Gunn's alter-ego, it might be that Gunn too was at odds with his poetic identity as Anglo-American poet, as he continued discreetly to associate the god of desire with the homoerotic masculinity of 1980s' Britain.

Though we cannot judge a book by its cover, Gunn's choice of Lukas's portrait for the American edition draws our attention to Boss Cupid's erotic profile, suggesting that the love-

desire, and yet unlike them, his boyish body is considered undesirable; indeed in most cases, it is too dangerous to become desirable. It is 'perverse' to desire Cupid, but 'chaste' to associate him with desire. What lies beneath the body of desire itself is the fear of paedophilia that configures Cupid's prepubescent body. In fact, Cupid has a rather diminished career in the modernist and contemporary poetic scene, especially compared to other mythological figures who have survived and been reborn again, such as Odysseus in Pound's *The Cantos*, Achilles in Walcott's *Omeros* (1990), Telemachus and Penelope in Louise Glück's *Meadowlands* (1998), and Hermes and Eurydice in Carl Dennis's *Practical Gods* (2001). With this in mind, I suggest that Gunn not only recruits his bossy Cupid as one of his most compelling homoerotic icons, but re-launches Cupid's career as a muse of homoerotic desire for the new millennium.

²² Craig Arnold, 'Boss Cupid', *The Austin Chronicle* (16th June 2000).

god is as desirable as any beautiful mortal youth.²³ In the Faber and Faber edition, however, Gunn chose to take a more ambivalent slant on Boss Cupid's identity. Instead of Lukas's provocative youth, the British edition features Lucien Freud's self-portrait *Interior with Hand Mirror* (1967) [PLATE 8]. With a tiny hand mirror stuck between the gap of a sash window, Freud vaguely captures his own face framed by the oval mirror. Because the composition is carefully arranged, the self-portrait gives an impression of the coincidental, as if the painter just happened to be captured by the mirror's reflection from a distance. The reflection of a male face recalls the account of homoerotic Narcissus and the Freudian psychoanalytical homosexuality as narcissistic desire. But coincidentally, and rather uncannily, Lucien Freud's self-portrait reminds us at first glance of Gunn's iconic photograph on the cover of *Collected Poems*. Such a playful association not only raises the question of pose and impersonation integral to Gunn's poetics, but complicates the version of Boss Cupid's identity suggested by the American edition. If Gunn happens to look like Lucien Freud in his self-portrait, the exclusive 'self' of the painter ambiguously includes the other self of the poet. In this way the book cover plays on the likeness of two faces, as well as the doubleness of two selves. The idea that Boss Cupid's literal identity sprung from Lukas's portrait is challenged by the more elusive 'self-portrait' of Lucien Freud, which brings the love-god from the surface of a painter's mirror into the inward territory of Gunn's own poetic self.

The two contrasting covers allegorically present the two contrasting themes unresolved in Gunn's last book—a 71-year-old gay poet conscious of his old age and his consciousness of the youth of the young boys he falls for (and they for him). 'Front Door Man' is a poem which illustrates this unresolved dilemma between Gunn's 'salary' received from and 'debt' to Cupid. Modelling on a 16th Century lament, the two-part poem consists of 'Prelude' and 'Plaint'. In the style of the casual-encounters recorded in *The Passages of Joy*, Gunn stumbles upon Andy, a 'big young blond', 'a smiling sexual saint' who sleeps 'at the end of four / Tumultuous nights on speed.' (100) Instead of relishing the moment, Gunn is perplexed as well as aroused, asking himself, 'Is my thought love or duty?' Unlike Gunn's previous erotic poems which are more about the lovers than the speaker, in 'Plaint' Gunn draws attention to himself. According to the OED, a plaint is an intermix of an 'audible expression of sorrow' and 'a statement or complaint of injury and injustice suffered.' Asking the 'Love-god, Cupid, why / Did you have to send me him', in 'Plaint' Gunn directly addresses Cupid, giving him dual-identity as both troublemaker and mediator of the poet's estrangement:

²³ Gunn's friend W.S. Di Piero said that Gunn 'knew more about the visual arts than he let on and had faultless taste in choosing cover art of his books.' ('A Symposium on Thom Gunn', *The Threepenny Review*, Summer 2005, p. 8.)

What on earth can I hope?
 This, Cupid, is my plaint.
 I seem to be more and more
 Attracted by the unstable
 Bright and accident-prone
 Homeless, who look a lot
 Like hustlers but are not.
 And in this I am shown
 A cycle of my own. (101)

Self-reflective but helpless, the poet imagines himself subordinate to Cupid's arrangements, but simultaneously asks for the god's counsel, realizing his own estrangement ('a cycle of my own') in being repeatedly attracted to 'unstable', 'accident-prone' and 'homeless' boys. The stanza refuses to be perfect couplets, and towards the end the poem's initial rhyme of 'hope' is rhymed ironically with 'cope':

Are you appointing me
 To hold him safe tonight
 Or use him for my delight?
 If he doesn't know why he
 Comes back to my front door,
 How, Cupid, can I cope? (101)

Gunn's decidedly lucid diction and syntax sharpen the dilemma between holding 'him safe tonight' and using 'him for my delight'. The seeming rhetorical questions not only highlight Cupid's (and the poet's) mischievous design, but protests about the incomprehensible scenario he dictates. While Gunn is in the thrill of irresponsible Cupid, he also feels obliged to take responsibility for the front door man. The poet who claims to be used by Cupid is offered a chance to 'use' the young man for his own delight. This complicated threesome plays on the double meanings of 'safe' and 'use', protection and risk, flirting with the sense of repetition as the young man 'comes back' to the poet's front door. The recurring visit complicates obvious readings, suggesting the visitor is a not a stranger but a familiar face. There is also something elegiac about the visit, as if this one could be the last. 'Front Door Man' explores the complicated dynamics between outdoors and indoors, youth and old age, one-night-stand and commitment, erotic love and quasi-parental responsibilities. As the tone oscillates between the poetic formality of 'This, Cupid, is my plaint' and the contemporary experience of 'hustlers', so the six-syllable lines generate variable, syncopated stresses, and the stanza is torn between rhymed couplets and irregular, staggered rhymes. The effect is of composure discomposed, or something 'safe' and 'instable'. Deeply entrenched in an established poetic form, it is a cautiously playful poem about coping with desire and contradictions, rather than plunging recklessly in the erotic passages of joy.

Paraphernalia of Desire

Aging

Having taught creative writing at UC Berkeley for 25 years, Gunn retired in May 1999. For Gunn, his retirement symbolized a sense of ending, and to counter it, he told Campbell that the day he retired he would 'send off the manuscript of *Boss Cupid*, and that will mean there is still something left to live for: publication of this book.'²⁴ In his own mind, retirement may have symbolized physical, creative, and sexual decline. Mike Kitay remembered that Gunn 'needed people to think he was happy' after his retirement. 'But sometimes,' Kitay continues, 'when no one else was around, he'd lean against the kitchen sink and bow his head and moan, "I'm old! I'm old!"'²⁵ In a final interview with Christopher Hennessey four months before his death, Gunn was asked whether he was working on a new book of poems. He answered:

No, I haven't written anything in four years. I'm sort of dried up. But I've often done this before, so maybe it'll come back to me. Any time I finish or publish a book, I have periods of up to two years of not writing anything. But you know, I'm seventy-four now!²⁶

Underneath Gunn's candid answer, there is a sense of disappointment with the four-year stagnancy. 'Coffee on Cole' (68) playfully captures Gunn's sense of creative constipation at the time, commenting ruefully that 'the muse / avoids retuning your calls.' His partner Mike Kitay casts a rather ironic light in Gunn's sexual life:

Thom had this myth that San Francisco was full of gerontophiles. He'd go on the bus and say, 'Oh this guy couldn't take his eye off my crotch.' And he'd go to bars, and of course some of these 'gerontophiles' are very anxious to have drugs. It was like he didn't want to face the fact that he's 70, 71 and these kids are 23, 24 and 25 and maybe they want something from him!²⁷

Kitay's shrewd observation might explain Gunn's increased use of alcohol and crystal meth. Crystal, despite being highly addictive, can stimulate the sex drive and enhance stamina,

²⁴ Campbell, p. 55-6.

²⁵ 'A Symposium on Thom Gunn', *The Threepenny Review*, Summer 2005, p. 13.

²⁶ Hennessey, p. 17.

²⁷ Mike Kitay on Gunn in Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part Two' on SFGate.com
< <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/26/DDGQMCDQ941.DTL> >

something Gunn would have found desirable according to Kleinzahler and Kitay. Given Gunn's reticence about his private life, it is hard to reconstruct his ambivalent psychological journey during and after the publication of *Boss Cupid*.

There are many instances in *Boss Cupid* in which Gunn confronts his age-complex. In 'American Boy' (45-6), Gunn records being advised by a lover to ration their meetings ('You say I might get tired of you'). They therefore arranged their 'games for such and such a date' as if a 'bicoastal romance'. Puzzled and tantalized, the poet replies diplomatically:

To think I was afraid
You'd be the one to tire while we both still
Warm to the naked thrill
Precisely of that strangeness that has made
For such self-doubt.

Recalling the indented form of Hardy's late poems in *Winter Words* (1928), Gunn's seductive eloquence conceals the idea of 'self-doubt', suggesting that to delay pleasure is to renew the 'strangeness' which sponsors 'the naked thrill' between them. In the same poem Gunn disarmingly announces his distaste for 'old men'—their 'turkey-necks', 'undiminished love of sex', and 'curtains of their skin'. This is inevitably ironic, given he confesses 'I myself am old'. Suppressing the self-embarrassment, pity and doubt latent in his situation, the poem flirtatiously addresses the generosity of the 'Affectionate young man', and celebrates the way his 'wisdom feeds' the speaker's 'dried-up impulses' with 'energy and juice.' It ends with a sense of fine balance, a mutual pact, in which the speaker is maintained 'expertly' by the boy 'At the exact degree / Of hunger without starving.' (46) David Orr observes that the poem 'teeters on the edge of dreadful, but somehow the crassness seems less like a smirk than a challenge; and given Gunn's deftness in other poems, it's a challenge you respect.'²⁸ 'American Boy' captures Gunn's complicated sense of the dynamics between aging and desire, the tension between 'impulses' and 'needs'.

Many of his self-reflective, self-mocking poems about aging are grouped under 'Gossip', and some had been previously published as a pamphlet titled *Frontiers of Gossip* (1998). Ironically the only thing his gossipy poems exclude is frontiers. In 'First saw him' (81), Gunn recounts bumping into a young homeless maybe-hustler rummaging 'unfinished beers' in the bar's garbage. He finds out the stranger had 'hitched up from New Orleans' and the stranger welcomingly asks the poet, "Here, wanna feel it?" Gunn responds:

It was already out

²⁸ David Orr, 'Boss Cupid', *Poetry*, 177:5 (March 2001), p. 391.

pushed soft into my hand. It was
a lovely gift to offer an old
stranger
without conditions
a present from New Orleans
in a doggy dog world.

There is a new sense of freedom in Gunn's free verse, interlacing anecdotal jokes with memorable dialogue. Even though the poem records sexual encounter in public places, its tone and form go beyond the Herbertian model of 'The Miracle', a poem about two strangers having sex in McDonald's. Gunn's use of the line break at 'old' and 'stranger' highlights the complicated sexual dynamics across age and familiarity, as for the hitchhiker, Gunn too is a 'stranger'. The metaphor of the penis as a 'lovely gift' and 'a present from New Orleans' suggest a sense of unexpected generosity on the hitchhiker's part, and a sense of luck and privilege on the 'old' poet's. David Orr thinks that *Boss Cupid* is compromised by 'its saggy, baggy middle section, "Gossip"', where Gunn 'seems to be writing off the top of his head.'²⁹ Gregory Woods, on the contrary, argues that 'The collection is all the stronger for the vulnerable triviality of some of the free verse in the central section', because 'Gossip' saves *Boss Cupid* from a formalist tendency that might otherwise have threatened to ossify.³⁰ By flirting with the unlikely genre of gossip, Gunn allows his poems to look miscellaneous, unmapped. Craig Arnold wrote that 'Gunn has written more casual, freer verse throughout his career, but none of it quite as funny as these often untitled, almost offhand vignettes.'³¹ The loose conversational tone allows Gunn to be deceptively offhand about his age-complex, in these poems about his flirtations and pickups with bartenders and poseurs. Gunn makes uncomplicated pleasures more complicated for a man of his age, avoiding self-pity by humourously satirizing his own dilemma.

Aging, for Gunn, is a complicated business, another 'professional' predicament presented to him by his immortal boss. In 'Painting by Vuillard' (47) he explores this by way of an allegory about aging based on Edouard Vuillard's painting, *Two Women Drinking Coffee* (1893) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. [PLATE 9]. Like 'Expression' in *The Passages of Joy*, the poem reflects back on Gunn's own poetics. While 'Expression' identifies the cool mathematical symmetry in an early Italian altarpiece of the Virgin and the Child, 'Painting by Vuillard' offers the poet's uncertain guesswork about the anecdotal narrative recorded in Vuillard's composition:

²⁹ David Orr, 'Boss Cupid', *Poetry*, 177:5 March 2001, p. 391.

³⁰ Gregory Woods, 'Affectionate Gifts', *PN Review* 133, p. 67.

³¹ Craig Arnold, 'Boss Cupid', *The Austin Chronicle*, 16th June 2000.

Two dumpy women with buns were drinking coffee
In a narrow kitchen—at least I think a kitchen
And I think it was whitewashed, in spite of all the shade.
They were flat brown, they were as brown as coffee.
Wearing brown muslin? I really could not tell.

Gunn's counter-mechanism is in play: the poet swiftly undermines the assumption (which is the description) he previously made. If 'Expression' in *The Passages of Joy* is something about 'void of expression', 'Painting by Vuillard' explores how familiar, domestic objects—'women', 'buns', 'coffee', 'kitchen', 'brown muslin'—becomes expressively indeterminate under Vuillard's diffusive, wobbly brushstrokes. Trying to find the right reference to those half-recognizable objects, Gunn discovers his own way to understand the painting:

How I loved this painting; they had grown so old
That everything had got less complicated,
Brown clothes and shade in a sunken whitewashed kitchen.

As in 'Expression', the poet here develops a sense of self-identification with the painting, subtly associating Vuillard's composition with aging, suggesting that having 'grown so old', the 'two dumpy women' themselves, like everything surrounding their lives, 'had got less complicated'. The previously indeterminate and unfamiliar objects suddenly becomes clear and definite, enabling the poet too, like the women and their surroundings seem to be 'less complicated'.

While 'Expression' ends with Gunn totally absorbed in the viewing, 'Painting by Vuillard' captures the changing proms of viewing. Looking at Vuillard's domestic world offers Gunn a momentary glimpse of simplicity, but once out of the gallery, he realizes that 'it's not like that for me' because 'age is not simpler / Or less enjoyable, not dark, not whitewashed.' This line insists on a complicated attitude towards aging troubled by the idea of negation. Though not necessarily more complicated, age is 'not simpler', and 'not dark', not necessarily 'light' not 'dark', but 'not whitewashed'. By articulating what is 'not', Gunn negates the descriptive world he created from Vuillard, resisting the seductive initiative, the painter's image of twilit domesticity. Zooming out from the canvas, Gunn gives a wide-angle view of the world outside the gallery:

The people sitting on the marble steps
Of the national gallery, people in the sunlight,
A party of handsome children eating lunch
And drinking chocolate milk, and a young woman
Whose T-shirt bears the defiant word WHATEVER,
And wrinkled folk with visored hats and cameras
Are vivid, they are not browned, not in the least,
But if they do not look like coffee they look

As pungent and startling as good strong coffee tastes,
Possibly mixed with chicory. And no cream.

Age, for Gunn, is 'not simpler', because unlike Vuillard's women eternally drinking coffee in their kitchen, Gunn belongs to the outside world where the living get on with their business. The poet is intensely conscious of the contrasts of age in the crowd: the 'handsome children', 'a young woman', the 'wrinkled folk'. Though not necessarily as 'defiant' as the slogan on the T-shirt, Gunn is an outsider both belongs to the 'wrinkled folk' and identifies with the others with a touch of Whitmansque celebration while associating old age with the taste of 'good strong coffee'. The 'not' in 'they are not browned, not in the least', sets the scene against Vuillard's brownish interior. Though Gunn says that 'they do not look like coffee' they do look like now 'good strong coffee tastes'. All this complicates the poem's seeming placidity, as the contradictions surface in the mundane scene outside the gallery. For Gunn, the taste of old age ('possibly mixed with chicory') is startlingly pungent.

Songs for Jeffrey Dahmer

Before venturing into the 'crawl-space' where Jeffery Dahmer hid many of his victims' ribcages in order to construct his skeletal altar, Gunn restages Thomas Hardy's grotesque narrative late poem 'Her Second Husband Hears Her Story' in his peculiar epigraph to *Boss Cupid*—'Well, it's a cool queer tale!' The exclamation, from the last line of Hardy's poem, is spoken by the second husband after he hears how his wife killed her first husband by sewing him 'up until he died / And in this very bed.'³² The wife, abused repeatedly by her first husband, decides to exercise with her 'needle and thimble' when 'he came home one midnight, liquored deep'. Hardy lets the wife's eerie story unfold in great detail on the same bed where her second husband listens to the story. The poem ends with a terrific sense of dark humour that sends a shiver down the spine:

'Did you intend his death by your tight lacing?'
 'O, that I cannot own.
I could not think of else that would avail
When he should wake up, and attempt embracing.'—
 'Well, it's a cool queer tale!'

Hardy transposes the failed intimacy of the first husband to the second one, making the act of embrace between the couple satirical and disgusting. Gunn wittily uses the Hardysque 'cool queer tale' in a different sense, as Gregory Woods points out:

³² Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 860.

the adjectives “cool” and “queer” acquire a distinctly unHardysque tone when heard in Thom Gunn’s voice. Together they amount to a combination of chic, detachment, oddity and homosexuality. This is a blend which has fuelled Gunn’s work since the beginning of his career, but there is a new openness in the use of the word ‘queer’ to denote something more complex than the mere ‘lifestyle’ of being gay. It is an identification with marginality, but with margins (poverty, sexuality) which are—if anything is—universal.³³

Gunn uses neither ‘queer’ nor ‘gay’ elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, so the ‘queer’ in the epigraph here is an eye-catching gesture of open self-identification. With its implicit sense of abnormality, some ‘gay’ people find ‘the defiant word’ ‘queer’ offensive, though others prefer it, especially Christopher Isherwood because ‘it makes heterosexuals wince.’³⁴ Hogan and Hudson observe that “queer” came back in vogue in the late 1980s as a term that not only expressed nuances of anti-assimilations, defiance, and pride in nonconformity, but also provided a brief, inclusive, and sometimes usefully vague way of referring to “lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transvestites, transsexuals, etc.”³⁵ This loose inclusiveness suits Gunn. In his last interview, Gunn confessed:

When I first started to write, I was aware of being queer, but I didn’t write about it because queer poems would probably not have been accepted by the editors I sent them to, and I probably would never have gotten to the United States to join my lover.³⁶

The epigraph to *Boss Cupid* operates as a cryptically playful acknowledgement rather than a confession. As Langdon Hammer suggests, ‘the line might be read as a joke at Hardy’s expense: Gunn is updating him, shifting the scene from Wessex to the West Coast, the brave new world where “cool” and “queer” no longer mean what they meant to the provincial English poet a century ago.’³⁷

But *Boss Cupid* also does re-enact the Hardysque ‘cool’ and ‘queer’ violence of Hardy’s poem, even before it moves on to the songs murderous or the Jeffery Dahmer. There is sense of latent violence everywhere in the book. In ‘Arethusa Saved’ Alpheus has ‘weed-rot on his breath / rape on his mind’ (24). Seeing Arethusa melt into ‘a woman of water’, he roars ‘with joy’ and ‘reverts to river / making to plunge upon her / and deluge her with dalliance.’ (25) In the sequel ‘Arethusa Raped’, Gunn translates the violence into a more intellectual terms: ‘for

³³ Gregory Woods, ‘Affectionate Gifts’, *PN Review* 133, p. 67.

³⁴ Hogan and Hudson, p. 464. In *Goodbye to Berlin*, Isherwood plays this out juicily: ‘Men dressed as women?.. Do you mean they’re queer?’

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Hennessey, p. 10.

³⁷ Langdon Hammer, ‘Thom Gunn and the cool queer tales of Cupid’, *Raritan* 2:2 (2000), p. 114.

he / has entered her / meanings, his water /subdued to hers.' (27) Moving away from the Classical world, 'A Los Angeles Childhood' records a narrative of a boy who was sexually abused by his stepfather: 'he'd take off his belt and then / wale into me, then he'd fuck me.' (59) In 'Classics', Gunn confesses his own violent fantasies about bartender named Scorpio: 'I could have killed/ for a chance to chew/ on those jumbo tits.' (64) Even though the line is clearly playful, it verges on the sadistic territory represented by Dahmer. While Gunn generally keeps these instances of 'queer' violence coolly at bay in *Boss Cupid*, Langdon Hammer points out, the epigraph 'naturalizes his tales of queer life as a new statements of familiar themes. It is not, again, that they are universal, but that they are commonplace, however bizarre and grotesque: they belong to a familiar, collective repertoire of stories, and implicate their hearers in the passions they record.'³⁸ Something else happens, however, when Jeffery Dahmer takes central stage.

Gunn's 'songs for Jeffrey Dahmer', grouped under the title of 'Troubadour', deal with some of the most disturbing poetic materials he ever explored since Charles Manson in 'Jack Straw's Castle'. When he read the poems in Chicago, Gunn records that 'a group of about seven middle-aged or old ladies' were so offended; they 'all rose together and made to leave.'³⁹ Framing Dahmer's gay, murderous, cannibalistic and necrophiliac fantasies within the elaborate convention of courtly love, Gunn imagines him as an extreme version of a modern troubadour, composing and singing his own songs about his actions, self imprisoned in his own 'rapture'. While the last section of *Boss Cupid* opens with 'Troubadour', it ends with 'Dancing David', another song-sequence which is about King David's rape of Bathsheba after their ecstatic dance before the Ark. Even though the two sequences explore the urgency of violent desire, Dahmer's disturbing modern eloquence is countered by David's insatiable sexual hunger for Bathsheba recorded in the Old Testament. By juxtaposing two offensive kinds of desire, Gunn asks the reader to compare the biblical model of transgression with the contemporary secular one.

Gunn's rendering of Dahmer expresses the problem associated with identification throughout the book. In his early poem 'Lines for a Book' (56), Gunn had written that 'I think of all the toughs through history / And thank heaven they lived continually'. If Gunn had written of many of these toughs from Achilles to Elvis, the gay serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer represents a tough who is particularly tough to stomach. In his sequence Gunn portrays Dahmer, with his extreme form of desire, as just another of the erotically obsessed troubadours driven by Boss Cupid's commands. To some extent he 'humanizes' Dahmer (to

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Campbell, p. 54.

many a monster), portraying him as a troubled and lonely man desperate for physical intimacy, like a murderous double his own desire. Gunn's Dahmer, like his Jack Straw earlier, can be read as the troubling, negative embodiment of the poet's erotic fantasy. It is hard to say whether Gunn identifies with the serial killer or his victims but throughout the song sequence Dahmer is given a high degree of vocal, lyrical fluency, speaking as the first and only person and giving us an impression of surpassing any authorial control from the poet. In this sense, he represents the riskiest impersonation of Gunn's investment in the riskiest occasions of Eros.

When the offended members of the audience left his reading in Chicago during this poem, Gunn said, 'I'm very sorry to have upset you, but Jeffrey Dahmer didn't kill nearly so many people as Napoleon or Julius Caesar, and you wouldn't have minded if I'd written poems about either of them, would you?'⁴⁰ He told Campbell that 'When I wrote these poems, I thought I was just doing the sort of thing Shakespeare did with *Macbeth*, another serial murderer' and was 'surprised by the way people have been so shocked by them.' Almost refusing to recognize Dahmer as a perverse icon, Gunn locates the serial killer in the canonical, alongside Napoleon, Caesar, *Macbeth* and King David. The entire sequence is written in the first person. Gunn does not justify Dahmer's voice, but injects an eerie, maddening composure into his fractured self, generating a sense of scarily lucid self-definition at the heart of his derangement. The result is a sequence of powerfully pitched love songs, inviting the reader to enter Dahmer's disturbed mind and identify with distorted version of love and desire. He told Campbell, 'the poem tries to sound like an Elizabethan love poem...as the troubadours sang for love without getting much in the way of recompense for their romantic feelings.'⁴¹

Despite its twisted subject, 'Troubadour' is neatly divided into five songs, recording an anachronistic narrative of Dahmer's life. The sequence, according to Gunn, is largely based on Patricia Highsmith's *TLS* review.⁴² In a way it attempts to mirror Highsmith's calm, analytical yet moving tone, by giving Dahmer his own voice. The first song '*Hitch-hiker*' goes back to Dahmer's first murder, the killing of Steve Hicks when Dahmer's parents were going through a divorce. Avoiding the actual physical violence that took place in Dahmer's house,⁴³ the poem taps into Dahmer's psychological disturbance after the murder:

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Highsmith's *TLS* review of two books on Dahmer, *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer* by Brian Master and *Jeffrey Dahmer* by Joel Norris.

⁴³ According to Highsmith, 'For this murder, his first, Dahmer used an eight-inch long barbell without the end weights, attacking Steve from behind, then pressing his throat with the barbell until he no

Oh do not leave me now.
 All that I ever wanted is compressed
 In your sole body. As you turn to go
 I know that I must keep you, and know how,
 For I must hold the ribbed arch of you chest
 And taste your boyish glow. (85)

The irregular meter and alternate rhyme (*abcabc*) generate an illusion of a free verse but the chain of 'now', 'go', 'how' and 'glow' sets up a hollow echoic note. The first person pronoun focuses obsessively on the 'you' and 'your sole body', creating a sense of possession, with the verbs ('leave', 'go', 'keep', 'hold') all concerned with loss and ownership. Gunn highlights Dahmer's fetish for the human chest, which Highsmith in her review records his plan 'to create an altar or shrine for his private worship', consisting of 'several skulls, the arched bones of a male skeleton's chest, a section which he considered particularly beautiful and erotic, and more bones, all to be guarded by statues of griffins.'⁴⁴ The Gothic images of the chest and altar recur in Gunn's sequence. Instead of restaging Dahmer's graphic violence, Gunn portrays the murder's psychological 'strain'—'my desire to own the elusive one / I have not even possessed.' The possession of flesh is a turn-on for Dahmer, who says 'love must be ensnared while on the run, / For later it will spoil.' Gunn coordinates Dahmer's obsessive dominance by using counteracting verbs throughout the poem, such as 'recoil' and 'yield', 'gone' and 'remain', signalling the interplay of release and control. Highsmith noted that Dahmer would listen to 'the digestive functions under the skin and muscle of the abdomen, finally the subtly reluctant throttling or throat-cutting,' because he believed that 'he cannot make his treasures "stay" with him.'⁴⁵ Gunn's song excludes such shocking details but tunes into a kind of morbid romantic mode as he records how the corpse's 'long hair floods the pillow that we share / Across the mattress we lie quietly on.' The 'we' deceptively suggests a consensual connection that is totally false in Dahmer's case, as 'I trust your mute consent in which I'm free / To strip your body bare.' The words 'share' and 'consent' here obscenely travesty the murderous reality, as Browning does in 'Porphyria's Lover'.

Like his earlier sequences 'Misanthropos' and 'Jack Straw's Castle', Gunn impersonates his subject, and by replicating the psyche of the other, is possessed by his own replication. The peculiarity of 'Troubadour' is the speaker's ability to control both his

longer breathed. Then came the procedure that was to be routine: clothes off the dead, caressing the body which now he possessed, much feeling of the abdomen and chest, finally masturbation.' (Patricia Highsmith, 'From fridge to cooler: Exploring the psychology of a serial killer', *TLS* (16 April 1993), pp. 5-6.)

⁴⁴ Highsmith, p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

collection of dismembered body parts and his own lyrical voice. Like a tragic operatic hero, Dahmer addresses his lyrical self with strange lucidity:

My song in each reprise
Will follow this first order, strain by strain:
Strain of desire, and hope, and worst of all
The strain of feeling loss, but after these
Strain of the full possession once again
That has a dying fall. (85-6)

Gunn's Dahmer here speaks of his wretched state, and the obsessive reiterated 'strain' (repeated 5 times in 4 lines). Such heightened sense of self-awareness brings Dahmer into the domain of Shakespearean tragic heroes. Gregory Woods argues that 'unlike the posturing nihilism of *American Psycho*, Gunn's sympathy for Dahmer seems derived from a there-but-for-the-grace-of-God sense that the essential ingredients of the murderer are not uncommon or extreme, as they can be counted among the raw materials of common humanity.'⁴⁶ I agree with Woods that though Gunn may not identify with Dahmer's extreme desire, he certainly empathizes with him by creating Dahmer's lyrical self and letting him speak for himself.

The 'order' of 'strain' outlined here provides an elusive map for the four following songs, all of which lead to 'a dying fall.' The next song, 'Iron Man' (87), tunes into the 'strain of desire' and returns to Dahmer's adolescence a 'sullen moody summer' when he 'sat in the kennel of inaction', while his parents 'were away / Getting divorced'. Reviewing the Dahmer biography, Highsmith drew attention to this dangerously solitary period of his life when he was left on his own for weeks at eighteen, with 'inadequate money and in a house with a broken fridge, so Dahmer could hardly have eaten properly even if he had been organized enough to try.'⁴⁷ Gunn visualizes Dahmer's 'sullen' 'dissatisfaction':

The fridge was broke, but I had booze, I was seventeen,
And half-drunk all day, all of the day I masturbated.
My solace was a picture in a magazine,
A standard out of *Iron Man*, muscles inflated.

Packed into an iambic *abab* stanza, Dahmer's erotic solitude is presented here as commonplace adolescent experience. The accessible autobiographical voice captures the self desperate for fantasy and intimacy with one of the Iron Men. He confesses in the poem: 'I played with my self...absorbed in study / Of his tan body burnished like a basted fowl, / Biceps and pecs, what I could do with such a buddy.' This of course is a prelude to the

⁴⁶ Gregory Woods, 'Affectionate Gifts', *PN Review* 133, p. 67.

⁴⁷ Highsmith, p. 6.

realities of dismemberment, as calling the Iron Man's 'good enough to eat' prefigures his taste for cannibalism. Gunn focuses in this way Dahmer's naively infectious adolescent sense of appetite: 'I was hungry for a life, / Life of my own, life I could own, as cock was my witness.' Bringing hunger, self-ownership and narcissism together, Gunn turns Dahmer into a perverse incarnation of his earlier existential heroes. The disturbing slippage between the dream of autonomy ('Life of my own') and sadistic domination ('life I could own') re-capsulates the origins of his murderous desire. 'As cock was my witness' contradicts our common expression that 'a hard cock has no conscience'. Gunn here plays on the Elizabethan substitution of 'cock' for 'God', turning the phallic into an auto-erotic travesty of the divine.

'*The Visible Man*' (88) explores the 'strain of hope' in the sense that Dahmer places his love in dead corpses, as he says 'I can count on you' and 'We do not need to part.' Langdon Hammer points out that Gunn 'does not allow us to study Dahmer at a distance. Avoiding the third person, Gunn gives us only two points of view to inhabit in these poems: the killer's "I" and the victim's "you".'⁴⁸ The urgent 'I' summons the dead 'you' here, generating an eerie poignancy which goes back to the Renaissance love lyric. With its dreams of erotic permanence, 'People are restless and they move too much', Dahmer says in the poem. According to Highsmith, Dahmer

felt afraid of a living person who would move, so he stole a male mannequin from a department store. This he kept until his grandmother asked questions, and he thought it was best to get rid of it. Then came the bathhouses. Anonymity in the dark, but living people moved too much for his taste. June 1986 brought the first prescription for sleeping pills, which he requested from a doctor. Dahmer had a plan: a couple of sleeping pills in a man's drink in the bathhouse, and Dahmer could play with him for hours.⁴⁹

It is not clear here whether the corpse is a substitute for the mannequin or the other way round. Gunn imagines Dahmer talking to himself and the frigid body, as he transports the corpse to the 'crawl-space' in his parents' house:

Yet nothing lasts, you know.
I tell you what, there is a place divides
The hour's structure, hidden at the center.
If I show you that crawl-space, you must show
The inmost secrets to me that skin hides.
Here, I will help you enter.

⁴⁸ Hammer, p. 114.

⁴⁹ Highsmith, p. 5.

Echoing the *abcabc* rhyme scheme established in the first song, Dahmer speaks like a child playing hide-and-seek with his own demon in the cellar. The secretive, sensual intimacy of 'Touch' is translated here into murderous possessiveness, as Dahmer opens up Steve Hicks's body to explore the 'inmost secrets...that skin hides.' According to Highsmith, 'Dahmer bought a large knife, and dismembered the corpse under the house in the "crawl-space", where 'he cut open the abdomen and gazed long at the intestines.' Again, Gunn refuses graphic details but captures Dahmer's emotional distance. 'I will help you enter' suggests gentle intrusion, as well as spine-chilling derangement, as Dahmer literally 'enters' Hicks's body with his knife and mouth.

The longest song 'A Borrowed Man' (89-90) dramatizes Dahmer's 'strain of loss'. Dahmer is 'loose in the twilight slot between / Floor and foundation', thinking that what happens here 'would not be allowed above /Or contemplated without shame.' The sense of chronology is lost, as Dahmer seems to be speaking from the familial crawl-space, where he reassembles the members of his victims from memory:

The sidelong hungry look of him,
From him a stammer, from another
A single bicep blue with Mother,
From one a scalp, with hair's regalia,
From one large hands and lazy grin,
From someone reddened genitalia,
And last, the image of the chest
From my original conquest,
The cage once tented in its skin,
Now great free-standing ribs that I'm
Leaving as bare bone rather than
Refleshing, best part of the best,
Only Love, Iron Man. (89)

This long winding sentence represents possibly one of the most disturbing moments in Gunn's entire poetic career. The verse is simple and literal, but the simplicity of this compound erotic catalogue is an index of Dahmer's disquieting perversity. This Frankenstein-ian project of 'refleshing' is achieved by five subordinate prepositional clauses beginning with 'from', each assembles a piece of the body *from* Dahmer's memory *onto* a line on the page. Gunn stitches Dahmer's pieces together in a syncopated dissonant rhyme scheme, that captures a sense of nightmarish repetition and entanglement. The rhymes, like the blue 'Mother' tattoo on 'a single bicep', are uncomfortably precise. 'Regalia' and 'genitalia' play the royal against the obscene, while 'chest', 'conquest' and 'best' spell out Dahmer's secret fetish. The strange refrain 'Only Love, Iron Man' sets up a conflict between sentimental pop-songs and violent pornography.

Gunn then depicts Dahmer going to the kitchen for 'more tangible effects', recalling the controversial cannibalistic scene in *Hannibal* (2001) when Lector fries and eats his victim's brain in front of the living victim. In the poem, Dahmer sees 'the cold cuts on the metal shelf' and starts frying the meat. Unlike Lector, he enjoys his prey without an audience, and the poem ends with another meandering sentence which describes how the cooking meat reminds Dahmer of his victims' warm flesh when they were alive, calling up all his 'orgasms past' (90). Gunn connects the heat from stove with the heat of living flesh, translating the two kinds of heat into a 'concentrate' that assembles Dahmer's 'scattered force into a self', as if his fractured self could be made complete by ingesting his victims' members. The final couplets capture a moment of orgasmic cannibalistic consummation, as 'They mount, and break, and in recapture / Flood me with rightness of my rapture.' The heightened lyrical voice enables the 'insane' murderer to speak with a terrifyingly beautiful rhetoric that conceals and reveals his mental disturbance. If Dahmer borrows body parts to 'repair' his fractured self, *The Borrowed Man* borrows Dahmer's story to articulate forbidden zones of human desire rarely visited by poetry.

After the murderous extremity of *The Borrowed Man*, 'Final Song' (91-2) explores the 'strain of full possession...that has a dying fall.' Imagining Dahmer sitting in his room with all the 'well-maintained' heads he had collected over the years, it dramatizes his opaque self-identity. He realizes that 'I fell into myself / nothing could raise me now'. Like Jack Straw staring at Medusa's head on the table, Dahmer stares 'at each black eye' on the shelf, overwhelmed by the sense of solitude:

only myself remained
in which I wandered lost
by my monotonous coast
beneath my sky a sky
a clouded sky closed down

burdened by my erection

Self-possessed and lost, Dahmer's lonely, vertiginous self is articulated (or dis-articulated) in this 'monotonous', unpunctuated verse. The poem ends with Dahmer confronting a single head:

a face stared from a shelf
unreadable on guard

connection disconnection
between headcheese and lard

only one self remained
fresh credibly maintained. (92)

Dahmer here is totally isolated, the 'only one self' which 'remained', trying to connect with the 'unreadable' on many levels. It is as if the face had become Dahmer's final audience, his dinner guest. The word 'fresh' suggests both food and flesh and the problem presumably both ('credibly maintained'). This downplayed conclusion of 'Troubadour' isolates Dahmer from the reader, as his lyrical self loses credibility, eaten away by various self-possession. Highsmith said that 'Dahmer's name is now a household word in United States'. His name, however popular, is a troubling paradox: he is a cult and taboo, a merciless monster or an ignored psychiatric patient. Like the way she deals with her own killer Tom Ripley, Highsmith refuses to judge or classify Dahmer's crime. She instead highlights Dahmer's lack of 'normal personality structure...to build friendship or a relationship of any kind.'⁵⁰ Gunn's 'Troubadour' aligns with Highsmith's position, refusing to demonize or mythologize Dahmer's legacy but letting him share his deeply troubled mind. Through speaking in tongue of Dahmer, Gunn risks his poetic voice to the limit of desire, offence, and empathy, inviting poetry to dangerous occasions unvisited by many contemporary poets of his time.

3

Postponed Elegies, Debts & Acknowledgements

Charlotte Thomson Gunn

'Forty-eight years ago / —Can it be forty-eight /Since then?' (10) The beginning of 'The Gas-poker', Gunn's elegy for his mother's suicide in 1944, implies that the poem was written in 1992, right after the AIDS elegies published in *The Man with Night Sweats*. In fact, Gunn's mother appears at the threshold of 'Death's Door' (485-6), when Gunn imagines her 'archaic now as Minos' among the outnumbering dead 'recruiting armies.' What takes the poet so long to write about his mother? Gunn was particularly close to his mother, who was a journalist, a keen reader and inspired Gunn to write when he was eleven.⁵¹ He described

⁵⁰ Highsmith, p. 6.

⁵¹ Gunn told Campbell, 'My mother read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* when she was pregnant with me—which may say something about me, though I don't know what—and she'd recommend Jane Austen

the loss of his mother 'a traumatic experience' and confessed to Campbell that the elegy for his mother was postponed because he

wasn't able to write about it till just a few years ago. Finally I found the way to do it was really obvious: to withdraw the first-person, and to write about it in the third person. Then it came easy, because it was no longer about myself. I don't like dramatizing myself. I don't want to be Sylvia Plath.⁵²

Being another suicidal mother, Plath haunts Gunn on the home front. Gunn needs to exorcize Plath and his own dramatic self, impersonating the other in order to articulate his intimate experience. Having written his AIDS elegies through the 'you' and the 'he' apparently helps the poet to distance himself from one of his most painful experiences. For Gunn, the 'elegiac postponement' equals years of internalizing the grief and loss of his mother, and any form of elegiac articulation is a process of externalization, self-withdrawal, and eventually, self-exorcism—to exorcise his elegiac self is the way to bring back his mother to the public. The poet's elegiac self haunts the poem like an anonymous spectator, replacing the 'I' with the 'he'. The third person pronoun becomes a telepathic channel with which Gunn connects his mother through a special wavelength of 'he' and 'she'.

For Gunn, postponing the elegy is a kind of self-withdrawal, and 'The Gas-poker' (10-11) is a poem about postponing the reality of his mother's death and withdrawing from his confessional self. His mother, however, is never distant, as Ander Gunn recalls, 'I went to see Thom in 1984, he said he's just stopped dreaming about his mother.'⁵³ In fact, often in Gunn's poetry we find the self-withdrawn and self-conscious speaker anxious about showing affection and risking affection. 'The Gas-poker' captures this process of breaking out of isolation and loneliness into contact. The poem steps into the suicide scene which 'they forced the door...she had barricaded / With a full bureau's weight'. The casual use of 'they' functions as an impersonal, disconnected agent, forcing into the other side of the door where her suicide took place. Langdon Hammer observes that 'the first stanza withholds, behind implication, what the mother too had tried to withhold—the vision of her dead body, which

and things like that when she thought I was old enough to start reading them. I gobbled them up.' (Campbell, 16)

Gunn continues, 'I was eleven. It was during the Blitz, and I'd just got sent to a boarding school, Bedales, and I said, "What shall I give you for your birthday?" and she said, "What don't you write me a novel?" Every day there was a siesta after lunch, and I'd get bored—I never felt like napping—so I'd write a chapter of this so-called novel. Actually, if it were printed, it would be about ten pages long, the whole thing. But there were about fifty chapters, short ones. It was called *The Flirt*.' (Campbell, p. 50-1) Gunn's vivid memory shows the importance of his mother's request.

⁵² Campbell, p. 19.

⁵³ Ander Gunn in Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part One' on SFGate.com

<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/25/DDGUFCD4SPL.DTL>>

only the final stanza will reveal.⁵⁴ Indeed, every action of the mother is about withdrawal, isolation and blockage:

She had blocked the doorway so,
To keep the children out.
In her red dressing-gown
She wrote notes, all night busy
Pushing the things about,
Thinking till she was dizzy,
Before she had lain down. (10)

The normal household tasks become frantic and unnerving. The mother's chaotic state of mind (the red dressing-gown, notes, busy night, things being pushed about) seems to express the inexpressible—what she is actually 'thinking' ahead. The nursery-like rhyme 'busy' and 'dizzy' intensifies her disconnection from her children, who 'went to and fro / On the harsh winter lawn, / Repeating their lament.' Peter McDonald points out that the poem is equivalent in sound to the children's repetitive lament, as 'each concluding line finds its rhymed word ending in the third line, and far enough to be almost, but not quite, out of earshot.'⁵⁵ The poem, in fact, is tightly constructed seven sets of rhyme without a rigid scheme.⁵⁶ Like musical variations, each stanza in the poem recalls the former one but develops into a new variant. The poetic word 'lain' in the last line is discreetly folded into the prosaic texture of the narrative, but adds dignity and solidity to the moment.

We encounter the second 'they' in the poem, which is now the 'Elder and younger brother' who are like a 'burden to each other' because there are kept in dark, not knowing what will happen to their mother. Throughout the poem Gunn refuses to be an individual 'he', figuring only in a collective existence with his brother as 'they':

Knew all there was to know.
Coming back off the grass
To the room of her release,
They who had been her treasures
Knew to turn off the gas,
Take the appropriate measures,
Telephone the police. (10-11)

The emotional intensity is suppressed by Gunn's diffident quietness, as what is known to 'them' ('her release') is appropriately withheld. Gunn abandons the elusive rhythm pattern and lets the sharp, slithering rhyme 's' dominate the stanza, isolating it from the rest of the

⁵⁴ Hammer, p. 114.

⁵⁵ McDonald, <<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=11988>>

⁵⁶ Gunn's complicated rhyme web can be seen from scansion of the five stanzas: *abcd bdc // abce bec // aebcecb // affffff // adbgdgb*.

poem. Repeating the rhyme also tunes down the dramatic scene and intensifies the mundane, officious approach to emergency. In the interview with Campbell, Gunn retains his reticence about this traumatic experience, simply saying 'She killed herself, and my brother and I found her body, which was not her fault because she'd barred the door'.⁵⁷ Ander Gunn, on the other hand, gives a more vivid picture of the incident:

We were upstairs in the same room and it was all quiet downstairs. We went downstairs and there was a note pinned to the door of the sitting room saying, 'Don't try to get in. Get Mrs. Stoney,' who was the charwoman employed by my mother to clean the house. We pushed the door open with great difficulty because it had a bureau and several other things pushed against it. And there she was lying on the floor with a gas poker rigid over her face with a rug over her mouth. And the place was full of gas. It was all packed with newspaper to stop the gas from getting out. Rigor mortis had set in, and we turned the gas off and opened all the windows.⁵⁸

Gunn was stuck with this shocking image in his 'stubborn mind'. But in the poem he refuses to say 'my' or 'his' stubborn mind, externalising the traumatic memory as something alien and objectified:

One image from the flow
Sticks in the stubborn mind:
A sort of backwards flute.
The poker that she held up
Breathed from the holes aligned
Into her mouth till, filled up
By its music, she was mute. (11)

'Flow' rhymes with the first lines of all stanzas in the poem, pulling the loose ends together into this final image. We finally go backward in time to the suicide scene, and this sense of backwardness is literalised in the image of a 'backwards flute'. The familiar, homely object which keeps the house warm becomes a grotesque suicide weapon. But ironically Gunn refuses the element of drama and imagines the poker as a flute, turning the hiss of the poisonous gas into 'music' that 'she held up' and 'breathed'. It is 'backwards' because his mother breathed in rather than breathed out. Langdon Hammer observes that the backward flute is 'at once a kind of musical instrument and the opposite of one: its music, which is silent, makes her who plays it 'mute'. Gunn, in his own muted way, preserves his mother's silence.'⁵⁹ The stanza, however, is far from silent. The pause of 'till, filled' is complicated by the internal rhyme, and 'mute' sounds like the missing beat between 'music' and 'flute'. 'The

⁵⁷ Campbell, p. 19.

⁵⁸ Ander Gunn his mother's suicide in Edward Guthman, 'A Poet's Life: Part One' on SFGate.com
<<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/04/25/DDGUFC4SPL.DTL>>

⁵⁹ Hammer, p. 114.

Gas-poker', like many of Gunn's best poems, works with a steadied, a low-key reticence which translates urgent personal experiences into something strangely distanced from the self. The poet withdraws from his subject, retreating from his own elegiac self in order to reveal the elegiac subject. Even though he refuses to appear as 'I' or 'he', his presence is far enough away to be almost absent. In 'My Mother's Pride' (9) Gunn had said, 'I am made by her, and undone'; in 'The Gas-poker', a poem where the maker disappears into the carefully contrived artefact. Gunn's postponed encounter with the death of his mother generates a muted impersonal music out of its literal (like the poem) reportage from the scene of loss. In passing, we could note the dramatic contrast between Gunn's handling of a parent's suicide in 'The Gas-poker' and Plath's in 'Daddy' or Berryman's in *Dream Songs*. We could relate this to the idea of the 'occasional poem' discussed at the beginning—and the withheld first person of the elegies in *The Man with Night Sweats*.

Mike Kitay

If 'The Gas-poker' is a postponed elegy for his mother, returning to the deepest, earliest relationship of his life, and the portraits of 'Donald Davie in Heaven' and 'Duncan' are postponed elegies to friends and aesthetic mentors, some poems in the last section of *Boss Cupid* turn upon his rarely evoked relationship with his long term partner, Mike Kitay. It is as if Gunn, nearing the end of his life, were making peace with, or connections to, presiding figures in his life—the late equivalent of the anonymous 'sad captains' of his earlier poem.

Mike Kitay has an elusive presence in Gunn's work, unlike Peter Orlovsky for Ginsberg. In Gunn's *oeuvre*, Kitay only figures explicitly in a few poems such as 'An Inherited Estate', 'Touch' and 'The Hug'. In his life Gunn openly shared Kitay with Bill Schuessler, who had also fallen in love with Kitay and lived together with the couple and their assortments of friends and lovers for 33 years. In his poetry, however, Gunn has remained reticent about this paradox of personal intimacy and cohabitation between him and Kitay. In the last section of *Boss Cupid*, Gunn finally breaks his silence and explores this dynamics of togetherness and apartness. In 'Rapallo' (94-5) he recalls travelling to the beach in Rapallo with Kitay when they both were in their twenties, and asks 'without you as a ground, / How could it stay intact?' Seeking a sense of foundation on a sandy beach, Gunn commemorates the 'first impetus' between him and Kitay, and how it changed and remained unchanged 'in four decades':

That summer I was twenty-three,

You about twenty-one,
We hoped to live together, as we
(Not to be smug) have done.

If in four decades matter-of-factly
Coming to be resigned
To separate beds was not exactly
What we then had in mind,

Something of our first impetus,
Something of what we planned
Remains of what was given us
On the Rapallo sand.

(95)

The poem matter-of-factly captures the unresolved tension between the sense of promise and resignation across four decades, exploring the sheer excitement and achievement implied in the bracket '(Not to be smug)' and the resignation embodied in those 'separate beds'. It celebrates continuity, however rather than indulges in disappointment even while recognising toughly that such resignation was something that they never dreamt of, back on the Rapallo shore. In contrast to the warm, sunny beach of Rapallo, the poem ends with 'a mannerless wind' and 'cold rain' from the North in their house in San Francisco. Moving from the outdoor 'impetus' of their youth to the home the couple created over the years, Gunn realizes that even though 'the structure creaks' in the storm, they still 'hold together' despite 'worse weather'.

'Rapallo' is followed by 'In Trust' (96-7), another exploration of Gunn's sustained investment in the precarious dynamics of trust—being simultaneously together and apart with Kitay. The poem begins with a mechanical iambic pentameter ('You go from me / In June for months on end / To study equanimity / Among high trees alone'). The lonely, monosyllabic beat breaks at 'study equanimity', and indeed the poem seeks a studied equanimity of its own, based upon trust of the absent other. The poem's lucid narrative conceals the emotional undercurrents between the couple; the word 'banishment' used to describe Kitay's absence suggests painful separation from the homeland. The poem's acceptance of their *modus vivendi* is braced against other scarcely voiced feelings.

In contrast to 'Touch' and 'The Hug', there is no mutual conversation or physical contact between Gunn and Kitay in 'In Trust'; everything is perceived cryptically through a sense of distance. But the distance, at least for Gunn, entails intimacy and understanding rather than breakdown or separation. The couple are apart even when they are together in the same house: Gunn catches 'a glimpse of you' when Kitay comes back from his 'banishment' and starts 'writing I don't know what / Through winter, with head bent / In the

lamp's yellow spot.' This sense of the silent apartment prevails throughout the poem, working against the poem's over-eloquent rhythm and fluid shape:

To some fresh task
Some improvising skill
Your face is turned, of which I ask
Nothing except the presence:
Beneath white hair your clear eyes still
Are candid as the cat's fixed narrowing gaze
—its pale-blue incandescence
In your room nowadays.

'Nothing except the presence' underlines his partner's prolonged absence earlier in the poem, as well as his affection towards his lover's face. We realize that the mutual silence between the couple is neither a coincidence nor a cold war, but a lifelong homeliness, sharing an intimate space where nothing spectacular happens. 'White hair' suggests aging and the passing of time but Kitay's 'clear eyes' remain unchanged, as 'candid as the cat's fixed narrowing gaze'. Gunn describes Kitay's room as 'your room' instead of 'our room', recalling the resignation to 'separate beds' reported in 'Rapallo'. Throughout 'In Trust' Gunn refers to Kitay as 'you', the other, until in the penultimate stanza the couple becomes 'we'. When they leave the kitchen they find that their 'sociable cat' 'happens still to be with' them in the same room, but out of jealousy it 'firmly faced away'. Though their cat does not want 'to be left behind', Gunn knows that it will 'stray' 'all the night'. In the last stanza Gunn suggests that the precarious 'trust' between him and Kitay is cat-like:

As you began
You'll end the year with me.
We'll hug each other while we can,
Work or stray while we must.
Nothing is, or will ever be,
Mine, I suppose. No one can hold a heart,
But what we hold in trust
We do hold, even apart. (97)

The complex *abacbdcd* rhyme scheme creates a well-timed delay of 'must' and 'trust', affirming a sense of definite commitment throughout the poem. Gunn insists on the future tense, as 'will' occurs three times here: the first one tells of the rest of the year the couple will share, the second the physical intimacy in store for them, and the third the concluding realization about intimacy and ownership. 'In Trust' can be viewed as a study of equanimity, a portrait of an unconventional relationship based on trusting and straying, togetherness and apartness. The poem ends with an equanimous resolution about three kinds of holding: despite the impossibility of holding a heart, 'what we hold in trust / We do hold, even apart.' Gunn's art

of holding onto trust is also an art of holding back. He refuses to philosophize the idea of trust but insists on a personal approach to this mysterious pact between lovers.

Boss Cupid

'You make desire seem easy', Gunn tells his boss in his ode 'To Cupid' (98-9) towards the close of the book. In *Boss Cupid* as a whole, however, desire is far from easy in Cupid's global corporation. The aging man, his young admirers, hustlers, homeless immigrants, hitchhikers, Jeffrey Dahmer, Gunn and Kitay—all struggle to interpret the boss's urgent yet obscure commands. 'To Cupid' can be read as Gunn's valedictory acknowledgement of his debt to the love god throughout his entire career. Speaking as Cupid's obedient 'servant', Gunn tactfully praises his boss, hoping to put the book's erotic entanglements to a brief rest. Alluding to the *Book of Common Prayer*, Gunn announces Cupid's 'service perfect freedom to enjoy / Fresh limitations.'⁶⁰ Replacing the Christian God with the Greek god, Gunn extends the religious terms 'service' and 'perfect freedom' to mean the (homo)erotic 'fresh' (and fleshly) 'limitations'. In addition to being Cupid's servant, Gunn also serves as the god's witness, who 'watched [Cupid] in person / Wait for the light and relish the delay'. Cupid, for Gunn, is an interceptor who is addicted to 'delay' as much as desire:

How all your servants
Compose their amorous scripts—scripts of confinement,
Scripts of displacements, scripts of delay, and scripts
Of more delay.

Gunn, like all Cupid's servants, composes his own amorous scripts, and *Boss Cupid* is itself a palpable script which addresses this lifelong engagement. Most 'amorous scripts', for Gunn, consist of 'confinement', 'displacement' and 'delay'. Indeed, the poet's many poetic personae have composed similar scripts. Scripts of confinement include the Achilles-and-patient confined to his sickbed in 'The Wound', Jack Straw trapped with his nightmares in his castle, and the many terminally ill or dead friends immobilised by AIDS on hospital beds. Scripts of displacement include Odysseus, drugged by Circe, displaced into a pig's body in 'Moly'. Scripts of delay recall the secret handshake in 'Sweet Things', the way 'We know delay makes pleasure great' (328), but also 'Lament' where 'dying was a difficult enterprise'. Even though not all these can be grouped under 'amorous scripts', Gunn's diverse investment in different amorous personae and impersonations evinces his promiscuous appetite for risky,

⁶⁰ The prayer, usually used in Easter for collection for peace, reads: 'O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, who service is perfect freedom. Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies.'

unlikely poetic voices and materials, including those uneasy bedfellows Jeffrey Dahmer and Cupid.

To illustrate the triangulation of 'amorous scripts', Gunn makes Stendhal's Fabrice in *The Charterhouse of Parma* impersonate one of Cupid's servants. Imprisoned in the Farnese Tower, Stendhal's hero is obsessed with Clelia, the jailer's daughter, who comes each day to attend to her birds near the prison cell. Gunn draws on a chapter called 'From a Prison Window' in which the sexual tension between Fabrice and Clelia is played out in one of scripts mentioned earlier in the poem. Fabrice is not only confined but emotionally displaced. Disturbed by the paradox of confinement and freedom, he 'laughed like mad, and laughed till he cried',⁶¹ constantly asking himself, 'Is this really a prison? Is this what I have dreaded so intensely?'⁶² He continues:

Am I a hero without suspecting it? Can you believe it! I who was so much afraid of prison am now confined to one, and I cannot even remember to be sad. [...] I actually have to argue with myself before feeling distress at this imprisonment. [...] Perhaps this cheerful humour, independent of my will and with little rational foundation, will leave me all of a sudden. Perhaps in a single moment I shall sink back into the dark despair that I actually ought to be feeling.⁶³

Fabrice's ecstatic state of mind, according to Gunn, is due to his service to Boss Cupid. Gunn adapts Stendhal's dark humour and discursive style for the poem, addressing the hero as 'Your own Fabrice'. He focuses on the dynamics of distance in Stendhal's erotic episode, re-imagining Fabrice looking from a distance at Clelia 'at a window...among her birds'. The physical distance, for Gunn, is the key drive to Stendhal's erotic play: 'Of course they could not touch. In later life / They touched, they did touch, but in darkness only.' (98)

'To Cupid' neither explores the troubling sensuality of 'Touch' in the dark nor dwells in Fabrice's predicament. Instead Gunn transports us back to his own bedroom in San Francisco. Pitch-dark, 'dog-tired' but 'held off sleep' alone in bed, Gunn hears 'the pleasant sound of voices from next door / Through window open to the clement darkness.' Unlike Fabrice looking out of the prison window, Gunn listens attentively to the human activity in the house across the road on Cole Street:

A dinner for the couple one floor up,
Married today. I hardly had the time
Before falling away, to relish it,

⁶¹ Stendhal, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, trans. Margaret R.B. Shaw, (London: Penguin, 1958), p. 308.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 307.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 310.

The sociable human hum, easy and quiet
As the first raindrops in the yard, on bushes,
Heard similarly from bed.

Gunn, like Cupid, observes the newly wedded couple from a distance, relishing the muffled, sociable conversation among the newly wedded pair. 'The sociable human hum' extracts the intimate 'hum' from 'human', and Gunn plays out this extraction in his poetry of sociability, as the poet is not only a hummer but also a listener to the human hum. Being an outsider, Gunn experiences a kind of human sensuality and intimacy completely different from the cocoon of 'Touch' and the familial embrace in 'The Hug'. It does not seem to matter, for the poet, that the couple is gay or not, because what counts is the sense of 'friendliness' and 'conviviality':

Chatting, the sounds
Of friendliness and feeding often broken
By laughter. It's consoling, Mr Love,
That such conviviality is also
One more obedience to your behest,
The wedding bed held off by the wedding feast. (98-9)

Gunn maps out the curious liaison between conviviality and obedience, and his courteously subservient tone touches on a kind of poetic conviviality that the loosed-up verse offers. The secular title 'Mr Love' co-inhabits comfortably with the rhetorical 'behest', as if the servant were gently teasing his boss without losing self-respect. From Fabrice's delay to 'the wedding bed held off by the wedding feast', Gunn subsumes such amorous delays under Cupid's flawless design:

Good will within delay within good will.
And Cupid, devious master of our bodies,
You were the source then of my better rest.

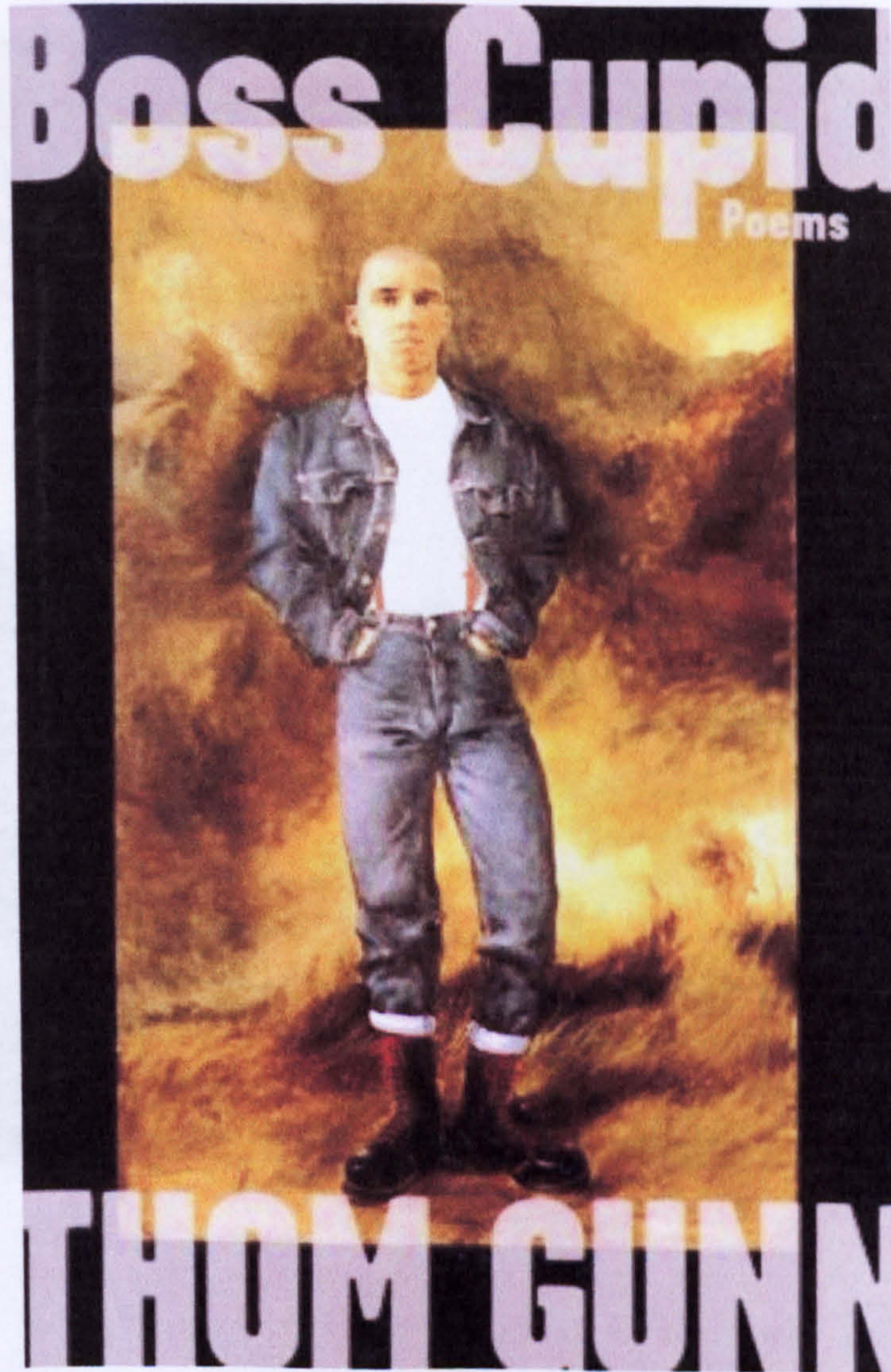
The poet's sleep too has been pleasurably delayed. Liasing 'good will' and 'delay' with the preposition 'within', Gunn creates a wonderfully vertiginous line about erotic limit and intellectual definition. It is as if Cupid speaks in his divinely devious language: the perfect symmetry of the line sounds 'good', but its meaning is delayed. This provocative end may also be an expression of one of Cupid's devious 'behests', as in great riddling Renaissance lyrics like 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' and Donne's 'The Ecstasy'. Gunn finally acknowledges Cupid as 'the source' of his 'better rest'. 'Rest' rhymes with 'behest' and 'feast', acoustically putting the sources of excitement and conviviality to 'rest', and returning to the pleasures of rhyme after the pleasures of free verse. Unlike many erotic poems in *Boss Cupid* in which the speaker is coupled with a lover, Gunn here seems to be blissfully at ease on his own, as if he will fall asleep the moment the poem rests. 'To Cupid' is a flirtatious ode to sexuality as

Gunn's ultimate Muse, whose sponsors an amorous script about confinement, displacement and delay involved in the erotic struggle for self-identification and recalls many of his earlier impersonations. Within earshot of Cupid's imperative, however, Gunn's amorous scripts also capture 'the sociable human hum' of the larger world, mapping an unlikely congruity between Gunn's long love affair with Renaissance lyric, and his immersion in the unprecedented polity of desire in contemporary San Francisco.

Borrowing Cupid's mysterious gift of desire, Gunn in *Boss Cupid* explores his own struggle as an aging poet whose life and poetry are deeply invested in the sense of risk and trust that he relishes in the erotic city of San Francisco. *Boss Cupid* is Gunn's most diverse and vocally erotic book. It acknowledges and pays debts to Gunn's literary friends, family, lovers, ghosts and impersonations. They are like Gunn's sad captains, less heroic but equally constellation-like, charged with 'each hot convulsion', and waiting from a distance like Cupid, to 'spurt / Out of the intersection' (98) where Gunn composes his amorous scripts.

PLATE 6

American book cover of *Boss Cupid* (2000) published by Farrar Strauss Giroux, New York.



Oil and gold leaf on canvas, h: 99 x w: 59.5 in / h: 251.5 x w: 151.1 cm

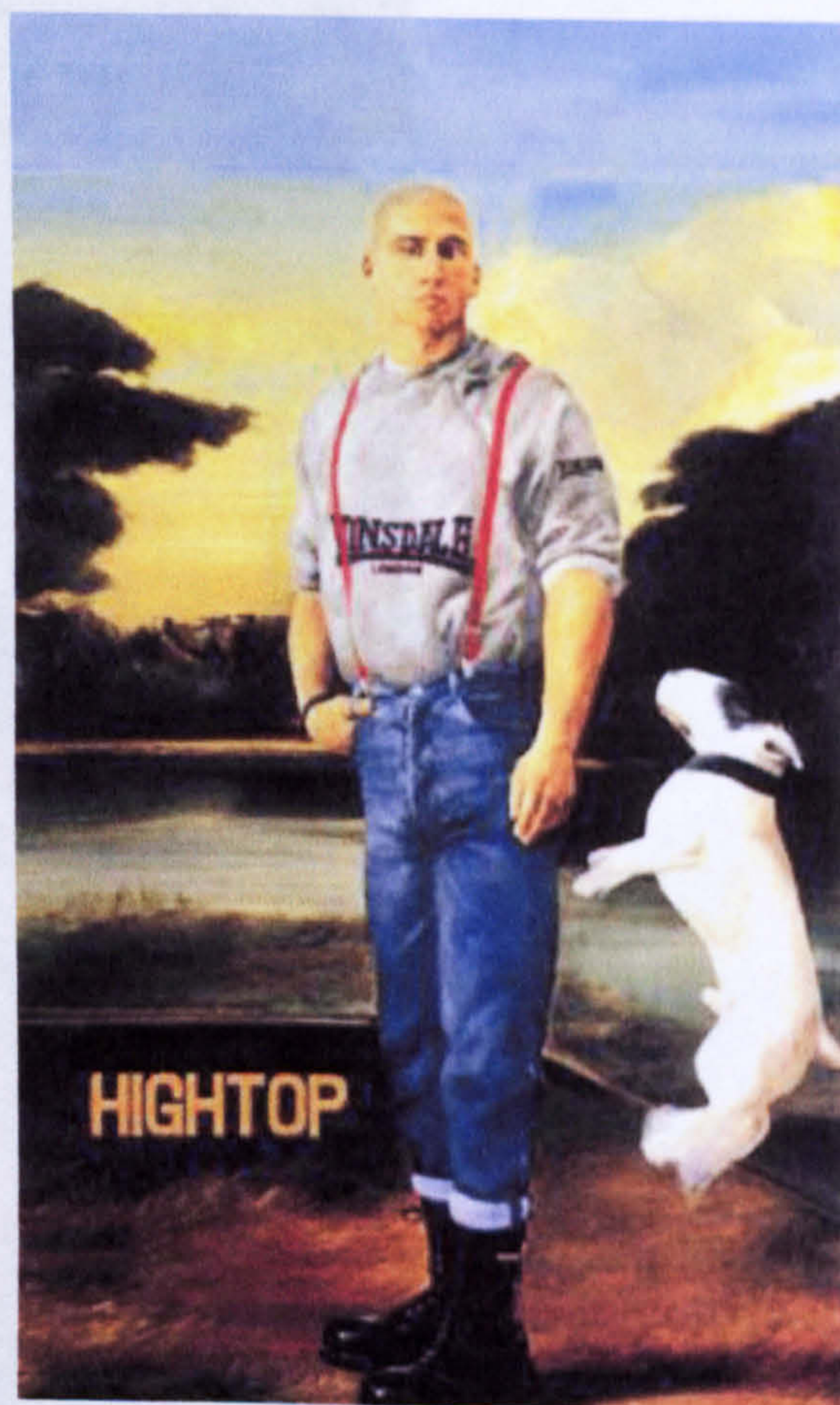
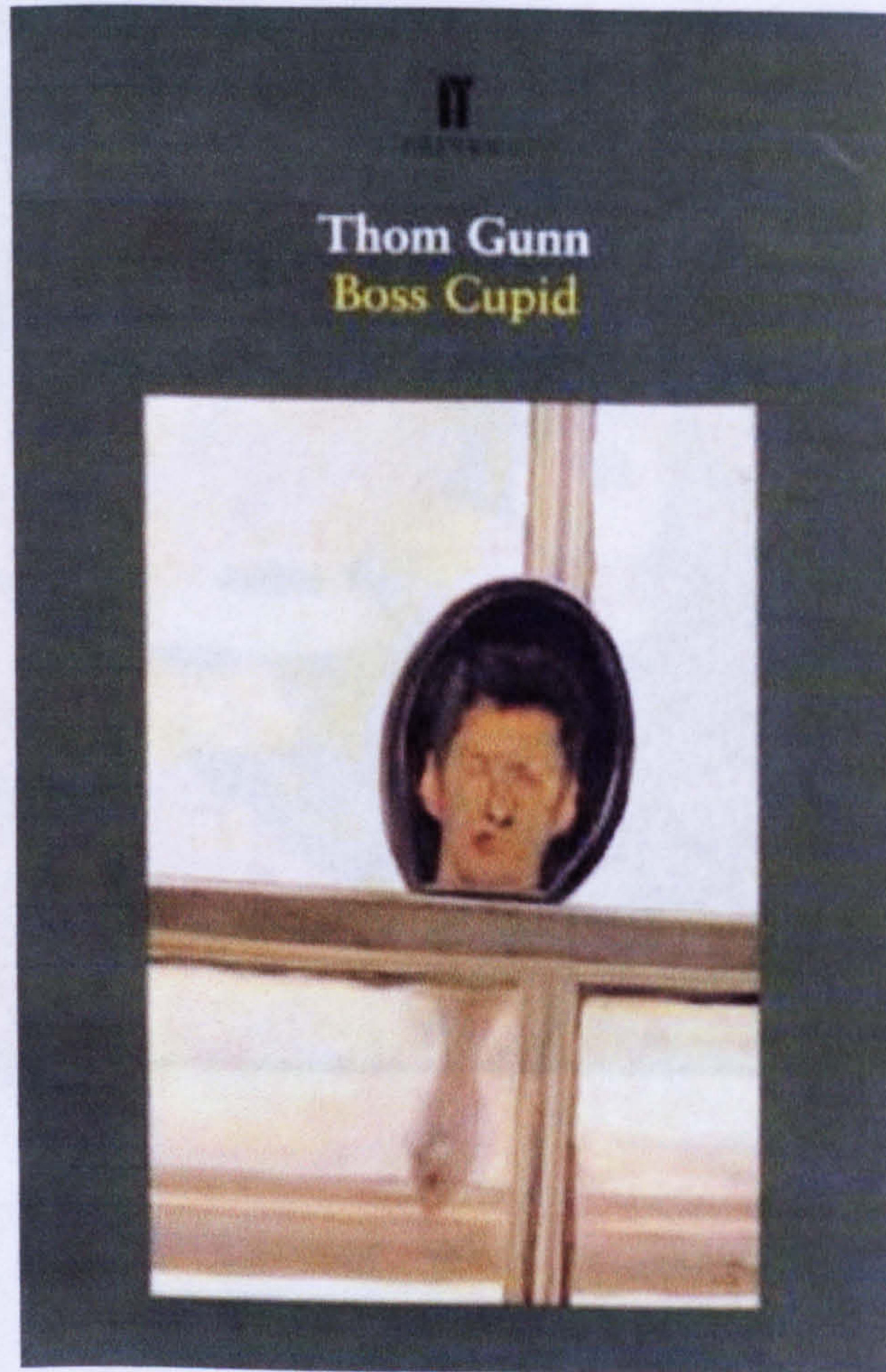


PLATE 8

Lucien Freud's *Interior with Hand Mirror* (Self-Portrait), 1967 on the British edition of *Boss Cupid*, published by Faber & Faber.





Two women drinking coffee had not originally
 In sight of a sparrow, whose graceful
 Way down

his life seem to be enclosed.
 Like the sparrow's flight above the leaving friends,
 Barely noticed—where its breast caught their light:
 Beneath the long roof, between open ends,
 Themselves the margins of unchanging night.

(32-4)

As an aviator Gunn contrived, Winsor as a 'poet of closure' against 'Duncan deliberately a poet of process'. Viewed in the light of Gunn's death in 2004, the poem 'Duncan' now looks like a pre-figuration of Gunn's own posthumousness.

As a poet, Gunn was divided to both a sense of 'process' and of 'closure', someone characteristically caught between open ends' (a phrase that paradoxically sees 'ends' as openings). The strong sense of Ted's Gunn evokes for a moment that much earlier epiphany in 'Santa Maria del Popolo' (91-4), where the poet imagined 'the large gesture of solitary man, / Resisting by embracing nothingness'. What is embraced here, however, is another person, and what is remembered is a strong arm of one person supporting another on a particular occasion. Gunn's poem about his fellow poet imagines life in the image of a 'sparrow's flight above the leaving friends'. It dwells not only on the transience of the bird's journey—as its

CONCLUSION

I want to draw my commentary to a close by dwelling on three poems from *Boss Cupid*, which embody Gunn's commitment to occasionality in his poetry. These three poems all play out the intimate relationship between art and the erotic that structure the 'conflicting trails' of Gunn's career.

The first poem of *Boss Cupid* is addressed to his fellow San Francisco poet Robert Duncan, a friend who was also one of the first contemporary American poets to write candidly of homosexuality. It recalls an incident at a poetry reading, when Duncan reports faltering on Wheeler steps, and falling 'Into the strong arms of Thom Gunn'. The poem dwells on the fact of one poet 'steadied by another poet's hand', and in its oblique way pays tribute to what he called in an interview Duncan's 'tremendously fertilizing influence'. It is ironic about his own 'strong arms' but ends with a posthumous image of the poet's life, drawn from the metaphor of flight recorded by Bede:

He was now a posthumous poet, I have said
(For since his illness he had not composed)
In sight of a conclusion, whose great dread
Was closure,

his life soon to be enclosed
Like the sparrow's flight above the feasting friends,
Briefly revealed where its breast caught their light,
Beneath the long roof, between open ends,
Themselves the margins of unchanging night.

(BC 4)

In an interview Gunn contrasted Winters as a 'poet of closure' against 'Duncan deliberately a poet of process'. Viewed in the light of Gunn's death in 2004, the poem 'Duncan' now looks like a pre-figuration of Gunn's own posthumousness.

As a poet, Gunn was devoted to both a sense of 'process' and of 'closure', someone characteristically caught between 'open ends' (a phrase that paradoxically sees 'ends' as openings). The 'strong arms of Thom Gunn' evokes for a moment that much earlier epiphany in 'Santa Maria del Popolo' (93-4), where the poet imagined 'the large gesture of solitary man, / Resisting, by embracing, nothingness'. What is embraced here, however, is another person, and what is remembered is a strong arm of one person supporting another on a particular occasion. Gunn's poem about his fellow poet imagines life in the image of a 'sparrow's flight above the feasting friends'. It dwells not only on the transience of the bird's journey—as its

'breast caught the light'—but on solidarity, friendship and sociability. This is not the poetry of 'solitary man'. In this respect, it is as true of the later Gunn as it is of Duncan, and might prompt us, after his life too had been 'enclosed', to reflect on the poet's own 'flight'.

'Duncan', with its strong closing rhyme of 'night' and 'light' which also echoes that earlier 'flight', confidently embraces traditional 'closure' as well as a dynamic sense of process and openness. In this sense, it is a well-tuned example of the 'occasional poem' he appealed to in his introduction to Ben Jonson, and it is as firmly located in memories of actual occasions in Gunn's San Francisco as it is to the examples of earlier writers such as Jonson and Bede. Later in the collection, in 'The Artist as an Old Man' (BC 61-2), he presents the painter Lucien Freud 'Vulnerable because / naked because / his own model'. Another account of the artist in old age, it shows the painter confronting and exposing the physical reality of his nude body but also celebrates 'The flat palette knife' and 'palette itself' held 'like a shield' [PLATE 10]. 'He looks into / his own eyes / or it might be yours', he says, turning the gaze on the canvas into an ambiguous challenge to painter and viewer, and by implication the reader. I have reflected at various points on Gunn's fascination with ideas of vulnerability and defence, exposure and shielding, and this 'open form' poem, though it does not use the familiar shield of rhyme, shows the artist's instruments to be simultaneously forms of attack and defence, investigation and resistance, with his gaze ultimately directed not only at catching the truth of his own expression but the expression in his reader's eyes. Locked into process, it becomes an image of achieved art.

I hope the reader, at the end of this journey through Gunn's work, might share something of this dialectical sense of openness and closure, directness and direction. Near the end of the book, Gunn places 'A Wood near Athens' (BC 102-4), drawing on one of Shakespeare's most famous stage directions from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It too evokes a sense of both a journey and artistic work, opening:

The traveler struggles through a wood. He is lost.
The traveler is at home. He never left.
He seeks his way on the conflicting trails,
Scribbled with light.

I have been this way before.

Think! the land is wooded still all over.
An oak snatched Absalom by his bright hair.
The various trails of love had led him there,
The people's love, his father's, and self-love.

(BC 102)

If the poem here seems almost too seductively to be painting an image of the poet's journey (that wood remembers not only Shakespeare but Dante and Gunn's own 'The Fair in the Woods' from *Moly*), it is also one of *Boss Cupid*'s most alluring and plural allegories of love. It suggests that the 'conflicting trails' are also 'the various trails of love'. Indeed the whole poem is a reflection, not only on Shakespeare's great Arcadian comedy about the erotic forest, but on a poetic career, driven by a vision of Eros. Though it invokes 'biological necessity', it also ponders the traditional iconography of love poetry ('Love makes the shoots leap from the blunted branches') and raises a series of questions about literary and other lovers:

But who did get it right? Ruth and Naomi,
Tearaway Romeo and Juliet,
Alyosha, Catherine Earnshaw, Jeffrey Dahmer?
They struggled through the thickets as they could. (BC 103)

Gunn's own 'troubadour' Jeffrey Dahmer is a troubling addition to these high cultural icons of love, as, in a sense, are the figures from the 'paintings of Attila Richard Lukacs' of 'Cadets and skinheads, city boys, young Spartans' who he imagines 'poised like ballet-dancers in the wings / To join the balance of the corps in dances / Passion has planned'. It was a painting by Lukacs which provided the cover-image of the U.S. edition of *Boss Cupid*, and the poem alludes to the paintings of his exhibition *The Varieties of Love* of 1991-2 [PLATE 11], which combine traditional Persian, Japanese, Greek and Christian iconography with that of contemporary gay pornography, offering all of these as what Gunn calls 'constructs' of 'longing'. Gunn's poem goes on to describe a young man being seduced by his mother's boyfriend at the age of thirteen, which he says shockingly was "the best thing that had ever happened to me". In other words, as the artist Lukacs projects modern forms of gay fantasy into the form of Japanese or Persian prints, so Gunn projects 'constructs / Of their own longing' felt by himself and other homosexual contemporaries onto that Shakespearean 'Wood near Athens'.

The poem ends with an apotheosis of the dance ('their work was dance')—an image that runs through *Boss Cupid* as a whole—constructing a scene of 'A thousand angels making festival', a modern pagan version of Dante's or Milton's angelic host, where 'Each one distinct in brightness and in function' was there to 'choreograph the universe'. It is a wonderfully unmisgiving, cosmic image of 'work as dance', a rewriting of the stellar vision of 'My Sad Captains' in the light of the later vision of *Moly*, which also incorporates the new sexually driven universe of *Boss Cupid*. Though the vision is no doubt mischievous in part, a generous travesty of Christian angelology, it is also a hymn to what he calls in its final line, 'The intellect as powerhouse of love.'

It may be that love is the powerhouse of intellect, but the poem asserts 'The intellect as powerhouse of love', demonstrating Gunn's continued fidelity to the inspiration of Donne and the metaphysical poets with whom he identified at the start of his *oeuvre*, and also to the homoerotic Shakespeare, whose sonnet 'They that have power to hurt and will do none' echoes through 'A Wood near Athens'. In a sense, Gunn at the end of his career, is as traditional a poet (in terms of cadence, stanza, line and form) as at the beginning, but he has forced traditional poetic forms to respond to contemporary conditions and modern occasions, with an intellectual suppleness and emotional candour that is almost unprecedented, even taking into consideration more overtly experimental or radical poets like Ginsberg or O'Hara. Gunn's combination of Winters-like rigour and Duncan's openness to new experience makes his 'struggle' through the wood a journey. In refusing so many of our confident labels about styles and movements and resisting the poetics and politics of 'identity', Gunn has left us a unique body of work. Curiously using an American spelling that is retained in the Faber edition, Gunn says in 'A Wood near Athens', 'The traveler is at home. He never left.' Gunn's work equates traveling and home in a way that suggests he is at home traveling, and rather than aiming for any fictional stability of identity, remaining true to what he calls in an image which suggests writing as well as travel, 'conflicting trails / Scribbled with light'.





2. Love In Waiting
a. Consulting the mirror (by the side of the river)

1992
oil on canvas, 80x146 inches



4. Love In Separation
a. Rejection

1992
oil on canvas, 134x 80 inches

APPENDIX

STATISTICS OF THE AIDS CRISIS FROM 1989 TO 2005

The following data is obtained from AVERT (www.avert.org), an international AIDS charity organisation based in the UK.

TABLE 1 UK HIV infected individuals and AIDS cases by year of diagnosis and sex

Year of diagnosis	HIV			AIDS		
	Male	Female	Total*	Male	Female	Total
1989 or earlier	12,889	1,318	14,234	3,400	155	3,553
1990	2,176	371	2,552	1,144	97	1,241
1991	2,275	448	2,723	1,254	139	1,393
1992	2,201	541	2,743	1,406	173	1,579
1993	2,097	532	2,630	1,550	238	1,788
1994	2,038	534	2,573	1,624	227	1,851
1995	2,080	571	2,651	1,487	284	1,771
1996	2,117	587	2,704	1,172	271	1,443
1997	2,121	669	2,761	861	217	1,078
1998	2,079	753	2,833	597	195	792
1999	2,150	946	3,098	564	192	756
2000	2,463	1,418	3,851	585	245	830
2001	3,090	1,952	5,043	485	243	728
2002	3,569	2,626	6,195	554	323	877
2003	4,030	3,187	7,217	505	403	908
2004	4,227	3,047	7,275	461	352	813
Until Sept. 2005	2,329	1,565	3,894	194	135	329

* Includes 41 HIV diagnoses with sex not stated on the report

TABLE 2

Deaths with or without reported AIDS in HIV infected individuals by year of death in the UK

Year	Deaths*
1988 or earlier	1,459
1989	744
1990	894
1991	1,105
1992	1,237
1993	1,563
1994	1,699
1995	1,715
1996	1,464
1997	736
1998	507
1999	466
2000	477
2001	468
2002	509
2003	539
2004	467
Until Sept. 2005	305
Unknown	244
Total	16,598

* Includes 152 AIDS cases who have been lost to follow-up and are presumed to have died

TABLE 3

AIDS diagnoses and deaths of persons with AIDS in the USA by year

Year	Cases diagnosed during the year	Deaths occurring during the year
Before 1981	100	30
1981	339	130
1982	1,201	466
1983	3,153	1,511
1984	6,368	3,526
1985	12,044	6,996
1986	19,404	12,183
1987	29,105	16,488
1988	36,126	21,244
1989	43,499	28,054
1990	49,546	31,836
1991	60,573	37,106
1992	79,657	41,849
1993	79,879	45,733
1994	73,086	50,657
1995	69,984	51,414
1996	61,124	38,074
1997	49,379	21,846
1998*	43,225	19,005
1999*	41,356	18,491
2000*	39,513	17,139
2001*	39,206	17,611
2002*	40,267	17,544
2003*	41,831	17,849
2004*	42,514	15,798
Total**	944,306	529,113

* All figures starting from 1998 are estimates

** Estimated cumulative total

Notes

The latest statistics on AIDS & HIV in the USA were published in November 2005 by the US Department of Health and Human Services CDC. The next data are due November 2006.

These statistics include all 50 states of the USA, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the US Pacific Islands and the US Virgin Islands.

The above table is intended to communicate the scale of the AIDS epidemic in the USA and to illustrate trends. It should be noted that up until 1998 the table shows reported cases and deaths, whereas the recent data are estimates.

Estimated figures are predictions of how many reports will eventually be received for each year. They are calculated by adjusting the number of reports already received to cancel out the effect of reporting delays, because some cases take months or even years to process. No adjustment is made for incomplete reporting.

The CDC recommends the use of these estimates for interpreting trends. It may be assumed that almost all cases prior to 1998 have been reported, so no adjustment is required for those years.

The cumulative totals given in the table are estimates that have been adjusted for reporting delays.

As of December 2004, a total of 918,286 diagnoses of AIDS have been reported in the

USA (unadjusted). There have been 519,416 reported deaths of persons with AIDS through December 2004 (unadjusted).

TABLE 4

World estimates of the HIV & AIDS epidemics at the end of 2005

Number of people living with HIV/AIDS in 2005		Estimate*	Range*
	Total	40.3	36.7-45.3
Adults	38.0	34.5-42.6	
Women	17.5	16.2-19.3	
Children	2.3	2.1-2.8	
People newly infected with HIV in 2005		Estimate*	Range*
	Total	4.9	4.3-6.6
Adults	4.2	3.6-5.8	
Children	0.70	0.63-0.82	
AIDS deaths in 2005		Estimate*	Range*
	Total	3.1	2.8-3.6
Adults	2.6	2.3-2.9	

* millions

More than **25 million** people have died of AIDS since 1981.

Africa has **12 million** AIDS orphans.

By December 2005 women accounted for **46%** of all adults living with HIV worldwide, and for **57%** in sub-Saharan Africa.

Young people (15-24 years old) account for **half** of all new HIV infections worldwide - more than **6,000** become infected with HIV every day.

Of the **6.5 million** people in developing and transitional countries who need life-saving AIDS drugs, only **1 million** are receiving them.

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(List of Works Consulted)

This bibliography lists all primary and secondary materials consulted in the preparation of the thesis.

Part 1 chronologically lists all Gunn's published works:

- (a) all books, broadsides and pamphlets;
- (b) collected essays;
- (c) articles, reviews and letters consulted
- (d) all editions by Gunn of work by other poets.

Part 2 alphabetically lists the primary sources including books, theses and dissertations consulted in the thesis.

Part 3 alphabetically lists the secondary sources including books, theses and dissertations consulted in the thesis.

Part 4 lists the periodicals referred to:

- (a) reviews cited in the thesis of Gunn's poetry, listed alphabetically;
- (b) interviews with Gunn consulted;
- (c) other essays, reviews and articles in alphabetical order.

Part 5 details all other sources referred to:

- (a) sources from the Internet;
- (b) recordings;
- (c) archives.

Part 1

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For a complete list of the appearances of all Gunn's poems, reviews and articles in periodicals up to 2000 refer to 'Bibliography' in James Campbell, *Thom Gunn in Conversation with James Campbell* (UK: Between the Lines, 2000).

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(b) Recordings

Thom Gunn and Craig Raine (A Faber Poetry Cassette). London: Faber, 1983.

(c) Archives

Gunn's manuscripts referred to in this thesis are held in the following collection:

Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

The archive at Berkeley is unprocessed. It contains material from 1952-1984. It comprises of three categories:

I. Manuscripts of Poems, 1952-1984

The majority of these handwritten and typescript drafts and proofs relate to poems published in *Moly* and *Jack Straw's Castle*.

II. Notebooks, 1968-1973 (8 lin. Ft.)

Fourteen volumes, contained in two boxes, include drafts, revisions, notes and journal entries. Inserts of loose manuscripts and typescripts remain in these notebooks.

III. Letters, 1968-1969 (1 portfolio)

Including correspondence between Gunn and Richard Gilbertson.