

Theses of the Ph.D. Dissertation

**Stretching Sympathies:
Trajectories of Spatiality, Visuality and Interpersonality
in Thom Gunn's Poetry**

Imre Horváth

Advisor: Dr. István Rác



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

Debrecen, 2024

1. Topic and Thesis Statement

This dissertation sets out to explore Thom Gunn's (1929-2004) development as a gay poet by contrasting similar poems from his entire oeuvre. Gunn was an Anglo-American poet known for his eclectic approach to poetry, combining traditional English forms with contemporary American topics. He drew significant inspiration from Elizabethan and Metaphysical poets like John Donne and William Shakespeare, which influenced his early work characterised by tight formal control and literary references. Over time, Gunn's poetry evolved to incorporate free verse and explore more personal and contemporary subjects, particularly after his move to America. His later poetry, especially during the AIDS crisis, became socially engaged, focusing on the joys and troubles of gay experience. Despite his experimentation and diverse influences, Gunn consistently valued the authenticity derived from lived experience in his writing. He conceived of writing poetry as a learning process, which in practice meant that he returned time and again to his old subject matters and preferred genres. This not only makes his work coherent and organised but also motivates a comparative reading of the poems. Doing so sheds light on how he developed his ideas slowly and gradually, repeatedly renegotiating them collection by collection.

My contention is that Gunn's poetry reflects a self-creation process that entails a gradual shift from self-defeat, isolation, and posturing towards self-acceptance, social integration, and authenticity. I emphasise the word social: the changes towards gentleness and humaneness occur by acknowledging the agency of the Other within the space of the poems. This applies to the three topics I examine in my three chapters. Gunn's treatment of space, visual imagery, and character change gradually, and in very similar trajectories, in tandem with his coming out process and becoming an accomplished openly gay poet, towards sociability. His recurring theme of spatial divisions in relation to a fractured psyche, which I identify with the closet, is gradually transformed into a social setting, including crowds of people experiencing sexual and political freedom. His writing about works of art and/or strongly visual experiences undergoes a similar shift: the image, counterpointed and controlled by words in his early work and greatly empowered in his later work, raises questions about the self and the Other. Ekphrasis is thus a way for the poet to make his poetry more sociable and teach himself sympathy toward his fellow men. The representation of characters develops in a more ambiguous way. In the first half of Gunn's career, he moves gradually from isolated characters toward representing characters that are integrated into their social and natural environment. From the seventies on, however, some characters are treated

gently and respectfully, while others are admittedly and openly violated by a cannibalistic self. From another perspective, Gunn's poetry was always social, if not in its themes, in its eclecticism and diverse range of influences. His poetry develops in sociability partly through his engagement with psychedelics (especially LSD), free love, and the community spirit of the hippie movement. Therefore, I place special emphasis on the middle of his career, the seventies.

2. Chapter Description

The first chapter examines key poems, chronologically mapping Ruth E. Fassinger's model of gay and lesbian identity development onto them. Gunn's poetry gradually changed in terms of how he addressed his homosexuality: whereas in his early work his sexual orientation was concealed, later it became increasingly visible, to the point of unambiguously referring to himself as "queer" in a poem from the 1980s. The poems discussed in this chapter—"The Wound" (1954), "The Secret Sharer" (1954), "The Corridor" (1957), "The Monster" (1961), "Bravery" (1967), "Behind the Mirror" (1976), "The Geysers" (1976), and "Jack Straw's Castle" (1976)—address the split self of the speaker accompanied by spatial division. The poems with this leitmotif form a corpus characterized by a gradual change in terms of the rigidity of the division. Identifying the spatial division as the closet and the split self as the closeted subject, the chapter argues that Gunn's coming out of the closet is a recurring motif deliberately developed throughout his oeuvre, which demonstrates his growth as a gay poet. The closet and the divided consciousness within are being reimagined and transformed in each poem. After Gunn comes out in "Jack Straw's Castle", homosexual desire is openly and unambiguously admitted. In "The Menace" (1982), "At the Barriers" (1997) "Saturday Night" (2000), the disconnection of the selves is gone, but some of the old motifs (the sharp contrast between inside and outside, the labyrinth motif) are repurposed for a discussion of a fully developed LGBT minority identity.

The poems discussed in the second chapter—"Before the Carnival" (1957), "On the Move" (1957) and "Merlin in the Cave" (1957), "Santa Maria del Popolo" (1961), untitled poems from *Positives* (1966), "Words" (1971), "From the Wave" (1971), "At the Centre" (1971), "The Colour Machine" (1971), "Thomas Bewick" (1976) "Expression" (1982), "Selves" (1982), "Song of a Camera" (1982), "Her Pet" (1992), "Painting by Vuillard" (2000) and "The Artist as an Old Man" (2000)—are ekphrases: poems describing visual art. Considered together, they stand witness to evolving dynamics between words and images.

Initially marked by the dominance of the verbal over the visual, Gunn's poetry underwent a gradual transformation. The poems written in the middle of his career, especially in the 1970s and 80s, question the supremacy of language and attribute considerable power to the image. In his last two collections, the reconciliation between word and image becomes apparent. This gradual transformation of Gunn's ekphrastic work parallels the development of his gay self-creation, culminating in a mature treatment of images that mirrors the full expression of his identity in his later career.

The third chapter explores Gunn's character sketches. Key poems from his early work—"Lofty in the Palais de Danse" (1954) "Round and Round" (1954), "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death" (1957) and "The Allegory of the Wolf Boy" (1957), "Black Jackets", "The Byrnies" (1961), Claus von Stauffenberg (1961), "Epitaph for Anton Schmidt" (1967), "Elegy on the Dust" (1967), "Three" (1971), "Thom Dobbin" (1971)—centre on interpersonal dynamics, exploring the success or failure of male characters integrating into their environment. In the 1950s, the verses depict isolated protagonists grappling with the inability to conform to societal expectations. Their struggles manifest as suppressed doubt and grief, countered by an attempt to maintain dignity through aggressive masculinity. Moving into the 1960s, the poems shift to men in collective settings, finding identity in their uniformity. The 1970s poems portray characters reclaiming innocence by fully immersing themselves in their natural surroundings, ironically relinquishing their characterhood.

This inherent ambivalence persists throughout the rest of Gunn's career, where he grapples with the paradox of describing characters while simultaneously erasing them. Some poems—"The Release" (1976), "The Idea of Trust" (1976), "Elegy" (1982), "Donahue's Sister" (1982), "At an Intersection" (1982), "Old Meg" (1992), and "The Problem" (Boss Cupid, 2000)—conjure characters only to reveal the Other as self-contained and ultimately unknowable. Conversely, a number of other poems tackle the challenge of description-as-erasure by portraying the self as a devourer (such as a vampire, cannibal, or parasite) feeding on the Other, particularly attractive young men. In these instances—"Sweet Things" (1982), "San Francisco Streets" (1982), "Venetian Blind" (1994), "Meat" (1992), "Cafeteria in Boston" (1992), "The J Car" (1992), "Front Door Man" (2000), "In the Post Office" (2000), "Troubadour" (2000), and "The Gas-Poker" (2000)—the hunger is often displaced onto the gaze, as the Other remains unattainable and is supplemented by the poem itself.

3. Results

The novelty of the dissertation lies in its structure: it contrasts poems from all of Gunn's volumes in the individual chapters of the dissertation, which allows for a meticulous exploration of specific recurring ideas in his poetry. My work extends on what has already been written about his closetedness and coming out, my additions being, above all, the discussion of closetedness organizing the ordering of poems within a specific volume, and the way the split space motif is repurposed after Gunn came out. I write extensively about riddles and cannibalism, recurring topics in the poems that have not been considered together with Gunn's treatment of character in general. Most importantly, there has been no comparative research before that would have studied his ekphrastic work as a whole, despite of the fact that it includes Gunn's most celebrated poems.

The treatment of gay topics in Gunn's poetry follows a chronology akin to Fassinger's phases of awareness (inasmuch as secrecy, concealment and a nondescript "grief" are addressed), exploration (gay topics such as closetedness and homosexual desire are addressed in a highly encoded way), deepening/commitment (the poet comes out in a poem), and internalization/synthesis (gay topics are made relevant to a straight audience). My analysis, furthermore, shows that the terms "gay content" and "gay topic" are elusive categories: Gunn's gay identity development shows itself even in areas that appear unrelated, notably in his treatment of spaces, images and character: his visibility affects his way of seeing. The closetedness that characterizes the early poetry reveals itself in the disassociation of private and public spaces (as in "The Secret Sharer"), which correlates to the desire to master the spectacle in fear of being mastered (as in "The Corridor"), and the depiction of isolated characters ("Lofty in the Palais de Danse"). As the closet becomes somewhat more permeable, the split self motif is retained but narcissistic self-recognition becomes part of it ("The Monster"), self and image alter and complement each other ("Words"), self-identity gives way to group identity ("Black Jackets"). As Gunn becomes an openly gay poet, the monstrous other self congeals into a real male lover in a real-life setting ("Jack Straw's Castle"), special autonomy is provided to the Other ("The Release"), the words adopting a secondary role to images ("Expression"). Gunn's late poetry retains the duplicities of the earlier work but repurposes them so the poems manage to address openly gay-specific and universal topics at the same time: "At the Barriers" addresses the controversies of a crowd consisting of straight and openly gay people, "Her Pet" reflects on death and desire in a way

that goes beyond the context of AIDS, “The Problem” discusses a gay lover’s general problem of unknowability, etc.

In what follows, I will provide a new chronology of Gunn’s artistic development based on my findings. The first period of Gunn’s poetry, which consists of his first two volumes *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957), is marked by an acute awareness of personal difference. This reveals itself in the intellectual and sexual concerns of the poems. They address homosexual topics indirectly, as the poet was still closeted. The sexual content of the poems is framed in wider concerns or universal (especially existential) themes, yet our knowledge of the poet’s sexual orientation unveils a more tangible dimension to these issues. The subjects of the poems often adopt a voyeuristic stance, describing scenes from a spying perspective without direct engagement with what they see, enabling them to maintain mastery and concealment. The dramatic monologue is a favoured genre in this period. The hypermasculine speakers featured in them are isolated heroes and allegorical figures, who are typically torn between conflicting impulses, akin to Shakespeare’s Hamlet. These men hesitate without engaging in action that would result in lived experience. Similarly, the early ekphrastic poems explore the juxtaposition of stasis and dynamism. The depicted spaces are frequently fictitious mental landscapes often within historical settings. They are organized around dualities such as action and inaction, intellect and experience, and mastery and subjugation. The poems, correspondingly, adhere to strict metric form and an impersonal style, which allows for reflection and with it, a safe distance between the poet and his subject matter. The lines are organized in neat iambic stanzas. The repetitive, looping lines in rondeau-like structures suggest circularity and obsessive pondering.

During the second period, spanning from *My Sad Captains* (1961) to *Touch* (1967), existentialist themes persist but the poems also explore personal experience. Although direct discussions of homosexual feelings are absent, the men depicted are less and less isolated and more likely to be situated in groups. The poems celebrate community and human connection, fostering a new communal ethos. Notably, *Touch* exemplifies this shift with the *Misanthropos* sequence, portraying a lone war survivor’s reintegration into civilization. The collaborative effort *Positives* (1966), involving Gunn and his brother Ander, further underscores the emerging communal spirit by depicting individuals from various walks of life. This period introduces a heightened emphasis on context, especially the city, and communal life that takes place there. The recurring use of sunshine and light symbolism, which is even more prominent in the 1971 volume *Moly*, signifies the growing willingness to embrace the

increased visibility of the self as a desired risk. Some poems subtly suggest gay self-recognition, as the speaker gazes into the mirror and acknowledges his (nondescript) identity. Conversely, individuals are often portrayed without specific attributes, reflecting a yearning for freedom from subjectivity. The poems in this period adopt a looser structure, favouring syllabic free verse over rigid iambic metre.

The third period is characterized by a commitment to authenticity. The poems depict the poet's own hedonistic lifestyle, including drug use and gay experiences, as well as the particularities of city life—all without adopting a central personality or a confessional mode of writing. The three volumes *Moly* (1971), *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), and *The Passages of Joy* (1982) are written in the same impersonal and disinterested manner. Certain key poems even address self-effacement and self-subjugation. In drug-induced trips, dreamlike experiences in nature, and nightmare visions, the subjects lose themselves and are altered by their environment, where intellect surrenders territory to impulse and instinct. Surrendering oneself, submitting to a greater power, and accepting the agency of the Other are recurring topics. While Gunn continues to write in metre, there is a strong shift toward a looser style of metric verse, and more importantly, free verse in *Jack Straw's Castle* and *The Passages of Joy*, creating the effect that the depicted characters are less reflected upon and more autonomous compared to his earlier work. They are emphasised to be real, and their tangible, everyday reality is a value in itself. Despite the recurring theme of paranoia, this period includes the most celebratory, light-hearted, and playful poems by Gunn. He even tries his hand at parody and light verse, and several poems address casual sex.

The fourth and last period of Gunn's poetry accomplishes what he does not fully achieve in his earlier volumes: he brings together his socially aware, humane, communal and compassionate side, and his ability to write intellectual, dispassionate, tightly controlled verse, in a way that these contradictory aspects reinforce each other. Poems in metre and free verse continue to be featured indiscriminately, foiling each other. In *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992), several free verse poems address sexual play, which creates tension as they precede the tragic laments (written in metre) of the fourth section of the volume. The first and third sections of *Boss Cupid* (2000) are mostly in metre, in Gunn's recognizable style, yet the middle section titled *Gossip* is entirely in a very loose kind of free verse, consisting of short, unpatterned lines written in a light-hearted tone. The *Gossip* section, previously published as a stand-alone chapbook, also acts as a foil to the more ordered and serious metric poems. Thom Gunn's poetry has long been conceptualised as a union of opposites.

The last two volumes make the most of the tensions that already existed in Gunn's earlier work, at the same time, they are remarkably coherent in theme. Yet the theme of sexual desire in light of death (and vice versa) is a contradiction in itself. It invites, furthermore, the dichotomy discussed in Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet*, the minoritizing and universalizing views of sexual orientation, the incoherence around which the modern concept of homosexuality has been structured around. *The Man with Night Sweats* and *Boss Cupid* succeed at least partly because they discuss AIDS-related deaths in a way that sex and death remain universal concerns. It fosters empathy towards the gay community that everyone understands what being in mourning entails, and that those privileged enough experience sexual desire in old age. The fact that the books are not formally coherent is advantageous in this regard: gay experience is revealed to be both traditional and new, and relevant to a larger audience.

Considering Bruce Woodcock's idea of Gunn's mature poetry being "not so much a record of gayness, as an exploration of unmapped territory, part of a process of gay self-creation, the charting of the imaginable potential in gay relationships", I find it remarkable how Gunn's career offers itself as a model. His career starts with the full knowledge of sexual difference, he makes sexual desire one of the major concerns of his poetry, and ends his career with reconciling the extremities that surround it. The careers of gay poets in twentieth century America took different trajectories: Allen Ginsberg's obscenity trial and political activism, Hart Crane's obscure language and suicide, John Ashbery's postmodernism and success produced careers different from Gunn's. What makes gay poetry is that the poet (any gay poet) has to deal with such controversies and extremities in the first place: beyond the pressures to hide and to reveal his sexual orientation, he learns that he is at odds with the seemingly neutral terms of literary tradition, poetic form, and criticism. Gunn's poetry is exemplary because it shows the development of his gay identity and the development of his literary ideas in tandem and as a gradual process. His poetry is both traditional and committed to depict life as it was, even though his career suffered for it in the seventies and eighties. From early success to failures and redemption at the end of his career, his poetry shows remarkable consistency and commitment to authenticity. Thom Gunn's artistic development is illuminating, and his long and happy life is a virtue in itself.

4. Conference Papers:

- 2014 December: ZOOM-2: Tér, hatalom és identitás viszonyai a magyar filmekben (Debrecen): „Mindenki gettóstár”: *Tér, hatalom és identitás alakzatai a Nyócker! c. animációs filmben*
- 2015 April: XXXII. OTDK konferencia (Budapest): *A maszkulinitás szerepjátékai A Pál utcai fiúkban*
- 2016 February: Gender, Translocality and the City, (Debrecen): “[W]here the tyres press”: *Space and Masculinity in Thom Gunn's Biker Poems* (Gender, Translocality and the City, Debrecen)
- 2016 June: Popular Music in Eastern Europe (Debrecen): *Roma Youth on the Track: Fekete vonat and Identity Politics*
- 2017 May: Gendering the Urban Imaginary: Fantasy, Affect, Transgression, Debrecen): “*Endless potentiality*” and the Transgression of Selfhood in Thom Gunn’s 60s verse
- 2018 May: British and American Studies Conference (Timisoara): *Women and Femininity in Thom Gunn’s Poetry*
- 2020 January: First Debrecen Postgraduate Symposium and Workshop in English and American Studies (Debrecen): *Queering the Oedipal Triangle: Thom Gunn’s Rape Poems*
- 2023 October: Games and Language Conference (Debrecen): *Ludopoetic Interplay in Baba is You (Hempuli, 2017)*



Registry number: DEENK/574/2024.PL
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Imre Horváth

Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

MTMT ID: 10068756

List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

1. **Horváth, I.:** "He / looks into / his own eyes": Thom Gunn's Ekphrastic Poems.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 28 (2), 289-316, 2022. ISSN: 1218-7364.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2022/28/2/3>
2. **Horváth, I.:** Critical Wounds, Sutured.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 27 (2), 316-320, 2021. ISSN: 1218-7364.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2021/27/2/19>
3. **Horváth, I.:** A Heart's Pledge in Metaerotopoeics.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 25 (2), 462-465, 2019. ISSN: 1218-7364.
4. **Horváth, I.:** From Achilles's Tent to a San Francisco Restaurant: Imaginations of the Closet in Thom Gunn's Poetry.
Hung. j. Eng. Am. stud. 25 (1), 85-106, 2019. ISSN: 1218-7364.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2021/27/2/19>

List of other publications

Hungarian book chapters (1)

5. **Horváth, I.:** "Mindenki gettóstár": tér, hatalom és identitás a Nyócker! című animációs filmben.
In: Tér, hatalom és identitás viszonyai a magyar filmben. Szerk.: Győri Zsolt, Kalmár György,
Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 244-251, 2015, (ZOOM, ISSN 2063-8450 ; 4.) ISBN:
9789633185513

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

6. **Horváth, I.:** Az eunuch visszaherélése.
Stud. litt. 63 (1-2), 176-191, 2024. ISSN: 0562-2867.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.37415/studia/2024/63/14478>





**UNIVERSITY of
DEBRECEN**

**UNIVERSITY AND NATIONAL LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN**

H-4002 Egyetem tér 1, Debrecen
Phone: +3652/410-443, email: publikaciok@lib.unideb.hu

7. **Horváth, I.:** A maszkulinitás szerepjátékai a Pál utcai fiúkban.

Alföld. 67 (9), 70-82, 2016. ISSN: 0401-3174.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

22 November, 2024

