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

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Én, Horváth Imre teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés önálló munka, a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült, a benne található irodalmi hivatkozások egyértelműek és teljesek. Nem állok doktori fokozat visszavonására irányuló eljárás alatt, illetve 5 éven belül nem vontak vissza tőlem odaítélt doktori fokozatot. Jelen értekezést korábban más intézményben nem nyújtottam be és azt nem utasították el.

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Introduction

Thom Gunn (Kent, 1929 – San Francisco, 2004) lived a long life and published poetry for almost fifty years. In a 1989 interview with Jim Powell, as they were discussing metric, syllabic and free verse, Gunn said "I've always counted on having a modern life span—unlike people who died in their twenties or thirties in Elizabethan times […] I counted on learning things as I went along. I always figured that there was going to be time for everything, that I had time to try something like syllabics even though it might turn out to be a dead end, because I might still learn things from it" (*Shelf Life* 220).

The above statement must have struck the contemporary American reader as odd, but it is signature Gunn. To start with, it must have felt rather anachronistic how the poetry of the Elizabethans, from which he drew a lot of inspiration, served as a reference point[1] not only at the beginning of his career but even in the late 1980s. Although the New Formalists to a degree did popularise traditional forms in America, Gunn talks about publishing free verse in Britain, where it was not popular, "just to irritate them" (*Shelf Life* 220). He wrote both in metre and free verse (which ensured that somebody was irritated by his out-of-placeness), the latter which he taught himself to write by experimenting with syllabics (a poetic form in which the amount of syllables in each line is fixed, but the number of stresses are not. It is typical of syllable-timed languages like French but not in the Anglophone world). This spatial and temporal eclecticism went hand in hand with his idea of writing poetry as a learning process. And even though Powell and Gunn were discussing literary experimentation, he did learn other things as he went along: his life and poetry were both experimental in connecting ways.

His journey took him from reading Elizabethan poets at Cambridge in the 50s to winning the Triangle Award for Gay Poetry, which, after he died, was renamed the Thom Gunn Award in 2001. What did he learn along the way? What is the connection between his early influences and his final achievement? In his autobiography, he explains that the Elizabethans "were writers I could see as *bearing upon* the present, upon my own activities. Donne and Shakespeare spoke living language to me, and it was one I tried to turn to my own uses" (*Occasions* 173). While Gunn never fully explained what attracted him to the English Renaissance, Clive Wilmer argues, "Shakespeare and the classical heroes associated with him become […] paradigms for a certain way of life: masculine, courageous, resilient, without self-regard or self-pity, with even a touch of asceticism. The further characteristic one now assumes, unstated in those more inhibited times, is homosexual desire—a secret desire for the hardness that in moral and aesthetic terms is openly admired" (Wilmer 63). How did moral and aesthetic ideas turn into

[1] More than that, as Tyler Hoffman suggests, Gunn has likely adopted the Renaissance idea of shaping a career (26).

lived reality for Gunn? How is this process reflected in his poetry? How did his poetry change in America at a time when new opportunities had opened up for gay relationships, and a new homosexual identity was in the making? And what new influences entered into his work?

Having finished military service and his Cambridge education, Gunn published *Fighting Terms* (1954), a volume that gained him considerable attention from readers and critics alike. This is in part due to a sensational article in *The Spectator* that identified him as a major figure of what was said to be The Movement, along with names like Donald Davie, Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin. He did not stay in England to enjoy his early fame, however: he relocated to the US after the book was out to follow his lifelong partner Mike Kitay. They moved around the country before finally settling in San Francisco. During these years Gunn started addressing his American experiences in his poetry and experimented with looser forms, which resulted in a remarkable growth as an artist and increasingly mixed reviews. (Kleinzahler 80) He started out as a "literary" poet, who frequently alluded to Shakespeare, Marlowe and other Elizabethans, exercised tight formal control over his poetry and avoided creating a central personality in his work (this did not change later). *My Sad Captains* (1961), however, marked a change: the second half of the volume was entirely in syllabics (and clearly about personal experience), much to the dismay of some critics and his mentor Yvor Winters. The collaborative *Positives* (photographs by Ander Gunn, 1966) and *Touch* (1967) continued the same path: many of the poems address city life in a more humanly compassionate tone, and although they varied in success, experimentation seemed to pay off as his poetry matured.

His career took a downward turn with his 1971 volume *Moly*, in which he explored his experiences with LSD. Most of the poems are in metre, but the tone is gentle, relaxed, and much of his hypermasculine guardedness that characterised his early volumes is gone. Critics were not in favour: in fact, the book was so very poorly received that it practically finished off Gunn's early fame (Kleinzahler 73). The general consensus was that he became lost in America, and the personal changes (his abandoning his career as a university instructor, his drug use and sexual pursuits) seemed to support the very same claim. But Gunn did not stop writing, and in 1976, he published *Jack Straw's Castle*, a volume in which he unambiguously identifies himself as a gay man. His reputation in literary circles might have suffered for it, but he did get to publish in gay magazines and gained gay readers. (These publications likely reached more readers, especially in America, compared to literary magazines in Britain, so the decline of his critical fame and the shift to more popular channels are not a clear loss.) *The Passages of Joy* (1982) triumphantly celebrates gay life in the urban underbelly, but it is often read as happier than it actually is. The joys of the sixties and seventies did not last: people die in *The Passages of Joy*, including some of Gunn's friends. Death is the central theme of *The Man with Night*

Sweats (1992) and *Boss Cupid* (2000). The former is a direct response to the AIDS crisis, as it includes elegies written to friends who fell victim to the disease.

These books represent the amalgamation of everything Gunn learned: immediate, honest feeling and dignified artifice are combined to astonishing effect. They granted him some fame once again (primarily because of their subject matter)—but Gunn's work is still underresearched. Only two books discuss his career as a whole, and these were published in 2009, five years after his death. Stefania Michelucci's *The Poetry of Thom Gunn: A Critical Study*, which was translated from the Italian original (published in 2006) I quote extensively, as well as *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, a critical anthology edited by Clive Wilmer. He edited two volumes of selected poems by Gunn too, and the introductions he added to them also proved valuable. Besides these, there are various articles from periodicals I rely on, notably by Wilmer, Joshua Weiner and Bruce Woodcock. I also refer to interviews with Gunn by David Gewanter, James Campbell, and Alan Sinfield. Reviews written by and written on Gunn are available from the digitalised numbers of *The Threepenny Review*, a Berkeley magazine to which he contributed a great deal. Gunn is also often discussed in books and articles about The Movement and AIDS literature. This gives the impression that he had two careers: that of a Movement poet and that of a gay elegist.

The Movement may have been a critical construct, and not a movement proper (Gunn never met Philip Larkin, for example) but his inclusion was not completely unfounded. The 1954 article in *The Spectator*, later attributed to J. D. Scott, identifies university education as a characteristic shared by the members of the Movement, as well as "admiration for people whom the Thirties by-passed, Orwell above all (and, for another example, Mr. Robert Graves) […]. It is bored by the despair of the Forties, not much interested in suffering [… .] as well as being anti-phoney, [the Movement] is anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic" (Scott 400). Yes and no: while Gunn did not write like Dylan Thomas, he said he appreciated his work (Campbell 24). The author also seems to deliberately ignore W. H. Auden's and William Butler Yeats's influence on Gunn's early poetry. Still, the adjectives "anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic" do apply, if not the anti-romanticism suggested by the article. About Philip Larkin, Gunn said "He was a wonderful poet, but a bad influence. He made people less *romantic*, less ready to dare, more timid. He writes so delightfully of the suburban, and of failure, and things like that, that they feel that's enough. I would like to have seen [English poets] influenced by Basil Bunting or W. S. Graham" (emphasis mine, Campbell 24). Regardless, "A preference for traditional form and meter, for syntax that allows for orderly or "logical" exposition, and the idea that poetry should incorporate propositions (Gunn's word in the 1950s was "statements") about the world—most Movement poets share that much at least" (Tuma 94). Gunn protested his

inclusion, dismissing the shared characteristics as applying to a larger group: "When I started publishing I found myself identified with some people who eventually became classed as the Movement. However, my contention is that the Movement didn't really exist: what we had in common was a period style" (*Shelf Life* 219). Yet he admits to have benefited from his inclusion, it being good for publicity (Campbell 25). Some of his poems were indeed published in anthologies that featured the Movement: *New Lines* (1955) and *The New Poetry* (1966).

To categorize Gunn as an English Antimodernist and a gay elegist also ignores at least half of his output. He does not fit neatly into either of these categories. Perhaps a dozen and a half of his late poems are indeed elegies. Furthermore, even Gunn's earliest volumes exhibit traits that can be characterized as Modernist and even Postmodernist. While his indebtedness to Modernists like Yeats and Elliot is apparent, and he does use traditional forms and irony like his fellow poets in the Movement, his poetry is strikingly eclectic. In terms of subject matter, dance hall and war-torn landscape are depicted as similar grounds, leather-clad bikers and knights in shining armour (as well as Elvis Presley, Merlin, Puss in Boots, Lazarus etc.) are represented as similar characters, they are featured indiscriminately in the volumes. This shows not only an unwillingness to differentiate between high culture and pop culture, but also an eclectic, Postmodern temporality. This is also apparent in the form and style of the poems: the diction is modern but the stanzaic forms are borrowed from Elizabethan poetry. As Gunn writes in his autobiography,

> I am however a rather derivative poet. I learn what I can from whom I can, mostly consciously. I borrow heavily from my reading because I take my reading seriously: it is part of my total experience and I base most of my poetry on my experience. I do not apologize for being derivative because I think a lot of other poets work in this way. I wonder if the real difference between the 'plagiarist' and the Ben Jonson who 'rearranges' Philostratus into 'Drink to me only with thine eyes' is more between degrees of talent than between degrees of borrowing. Specifically, I have found usable modes in the work of other poets, and I have tried to invent some myself. Moreover, it has not been of primary interest to develop a unique poetic personality, and I rejoice in Eliot's lovely remark that art is an escape from personality. (*The Occasions of Poetry* 186).

Some of Gunn's poems are more direct imitations of, among others, Fulke Greville and Ben Jonson. He reflects on his pastiche technique in a later poem, "Patch Work": "The mockingbird / […] appears to us / Perched on the post that ends a washing-line / To sing there, as in flight, / A repertoire of songs that it has heard / – From other birds, and others of its kind – / Which it has recombined" (*Collected Poems* 427).

Gunn's dismissive attitude toward "a unique poetic personality" and his patch work concept of identity can be considered a Modernist or Postmodernist trait. He disliked the readerly interest in the personality of authors, which he connects to his involvement in New Criticism in at least two of his letters (*The Letters of Thom Gunn*, 532, 675). This movement in mid-twentieth century literary theory emphasised the self-contained nature of literary texts, which correlates with Gunn's poetics: "I want to be an Elizabethan poet. I want to write with the same anonymity that you get in the Elizabethans" (qtd. in Kleinzahler, *Thom Gunn*, xv.). Besides anonymity, he was also interested in the fragmentation of the self, a recurring Modernist theme. The very first Thom Gunn poem that circulated nationally, not published as such but broadcast by the BBC, was "The Secret Sharer" (*Fighting Terms*, 1954), which features a fragmented self. This topic recurs in most of Gunn's volumes. In some later poems, fragmentation is accompanied by a sense of paranoia that could be described as Postmodern. According to Barry Lewis, "Postmodernist writing reflects paranoid anxieties in many ways, including: the distrust of fixity, of being circumscribed to any one particular place or identity, the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual, and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others" (Lewis 130). The nightmare worlds of long poems "Jack Straw's Castle" (1976) and "The Menace" (1982) fit the description well because in them, the fragmented self is threatened by authoritative figures that seek to petrify and castrate him. The way these figures are resisted, however, is by insisting on the objective reality of real human relationships that dissipates the paranoia.

Gunn's poetry is socially engaged in the sense that it is interested in human connection. Simply put, most of the poems are about people. In the 50s, these are existential heroes isolated from society. In Gunn's 1967 volume *Touch*, however, the necessity for human connection becomes something of a programme, most notably in the seventeen-part sequence "Misanthropos", which makes up the bulk of *Touch*. While "Misanthropos" tells the story of a fictional war survivor finding his way back to society, the volumes *Moly* (1971), *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) and especially *The Passages of Joy* (1982) are concerned less with allegorical characters and more with everyday people in the city. These books also stand witness to the cultural impact of the hippie movement. An outstanding example of this is the long poem "The Geysers" in *Jack Straw's Castle*, which discusses a holiday retreat where gay and straight orgies take place simultaneously. As Gunn writes in his autobiographical essay "My Life Up to Now", "there was an attitude of benevolence and understanding on all sides that could be extended, I thought, into the rest of the world" (*The Occasions of Poetry* 184). From this "communal

embrace" (184), friendship in a time of crisis[2], a major theme of *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992), developed. As Stefania Michelucci writes of the poem "The Missing", "From this poem emerges the sense of belonging to a community, a group connected not only by love and passion, but also by friendship and mutual support, that becomes a place of belonging, a family" (142).

The combination of impersonality and social engagement in Gunn's poetry is related to him being Anglo-American. Stefania Michelucci contends that "Gunn disliked the notion that art should aim at universals, insisting, on the contrary, that artists are moved by particulars. At the same time, he eschewed the Confessional poet's obsession with mere personality. What makes Gunn, for me, the poet of the future is his capacity to make myths or masks of his own very particular self" (3). Paul Giles attributes Gunn's preference for particulars to his engagement with the American tradition, notably Ralph Waldo Emerson and his concept of the Oversoul (Giles 94). On the other hand, Gunn indeed had a distaste for the Confessional School of poetry[3], an American phenomenon, and opted for a more indirect representation of his self. A particularly vivid example of Anglo-Americanness is "At the Barriers" (*Collected Poems* 399). The poem discusses a San Francisco street fair that caters primarily for leather fetishists. The subject matter is undoubtedly American, but the central metaphor of the barriers (which refers to both crowd control barriers and barriers used in jousting) is borrowed from Ben Johnson's masques. "At the Barriers" thus expresses Elizabethan urbanity in the American city. "Street Song" (*Moly*, 1971) recasts the beggar speaker in Renaissance composer John Dowland's "Fine Knacks for Ladies" as a young drug dealer selling, among other things, Mexican weed. Much of the poem's intensity comes from the tension between traditional stanzaic form and the contemporary American subject matter. In other examples, such as "Talbot Road" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) British experiences are addressed in free verse, a form of poetry he adopted in America.

Formal experimentation is certainly related to nationality in Gunn's poetry, but discriminating between British metre and American free verse is to oversimplify. As Keith

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[2] As Colin Gillis points out, "Gunn pointedly presents the suffering caused by AIDS as part of this community's collective experience. This wider perspective is possible because *The Man with Night Sweats* celebrates a style of sexuality based on the reciprocal interaction between bodies that ultimately leads to a radical alteration of the lyric subject. In the process of rethinking sex after AIDS, Gunn discards a model for lyric poetry in which the speaker contemplates his sexual prowess as an individual and replaces it with a model in which the speaker gives voice to a community of individuals, gay or straight (and, indeed, human or animal), defined and empowered by a willingness to enjoy sex in the face of illness and death." (158-9)

[3] It should be noted, however, that "Confessional poetry is associated with a kind of undoing or loosening of form, beginning with Lowell's relaxed style in *Life Studies*" (Scheffler 39), and other American movements, such as the Black Mountain School, the New York Poets, and the Beat Generation are even more form-breaking than the Confessionalists.

Tuma contends, "To be an Anglo-American poet […] is also to exist *between* English and American poetry, belonging somewhat to both but comfortably to neither. The same poetry that will seem to some American readers too stiffly formal in its idioms and rhythms, even when it is written in free verse, is viewed as experimental and "Americanized" in England because of its prosody or arrangement on the page—or sometimes because of its subject matter" (Tuma 86). In other words, poems may be received differently in England and America, but this is not only a question of form. In the same article, Tuma notes that "Gunn's diction, for instance, never honours the particular at the expense of the abstract" (86), and that American readers find Gunn's later poetry "more humane[4] and less literary" because he "turns his attention to a more intimate rendering of character" (87). Gunn acknowledges the difference in reception but suggests that it is a matter of individual achievement: "very few English people have written decent free verse" (*Shelf Life*, 218). In an interview with David Gewanter, Gunn said "Free verse deals with the impromptu and improvised–it lets its subjects be themselves. I went back to meter when I was writing *Moly*, a book of poems largely about drugs, because I felt that it was the only way I could define a kind of experience which prided itself on not being very defined" (290-1). According to Gunn, the elegies in *The Man with Night Sweats* are written in metre for a similar reason: "I suppose I was trying to do justice to my subject, to be as artificial as I could, to bring as much artifice as I could [... .] I was trying to build little monuments" (292). Gunn's choice of form, whether it is free verse or metre, is informed by his subject matter.

Gunn's essays in criticism collected in *The Occasions of Poetry* (1982) and *Shelf Life* (1993) point to a common feature that he appreciated in the work of different poets: authenticity, that is, the energy that comes from staying true to the specificities of life and lived experience in writing. He was attracted to the plain style of Elizabethans like George Gascoigne, in whose poetry "the straightforwardness of language and device is the very medium through which energy of thought and feeling emerges", as it serves "to make clearer the complexity of Gascoigne's attitude to his experience" (*Occasions* 51-2). In an essay on Ben Jonson, he laments that Jonson's poetry was neglected because "so much of it can be damned as 'occasional'", the term that often indicates "trivial or insincere writing" (106). He argues, however, that "all poetry is 'occasional'" (106). "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" (106-7). Authenticity

[4] Langdon Hammer argues that Gunn's wide range of influences "are united by a general quality-'humaneness'-that transcends national contexts", after all, Gunn's critical writings show that this is something that plain style Thomas Hardy-ballads and the poems of William Carlos Williams share. (652)

and poetic craft are not opposites, however. In the early poem "To Yvor Winters, 1955", he praises his creative writing teacher, the American poet and critic Yvor Winters for making use of this duplicity: "You keep both Rule and Energy in view, / Much power in each, most in the balanced two" (*Collected Poems* 70), and he similarly finds in Fulke Greville "the tension that must exist between the truth of experience and the artifice of art" (*Occasions* 13).

Gunn developed his concept of authenticity through his engagement with existentialist philosophy. His early work, especially his second volume *The Sense of Movement* (1957), as Gunn admits, was greatly inspired by philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre (*Occasions* 177). According to Sartre, "If it is agreed that man may be defined as a being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as *authentic* or *inauthentic* according to the choices made in the situation. Authenticity […] consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibility and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror" (90). Alfred Corn contends that young Gunn's celebration of human will, which becomes "associated with toughness, with hardness, with assertive self-definition, with combativeness, with satisfying sexual encounters, with the development of a personal and a literary style" (41) in *The Sense of Movement*, is closely related to his sexuality: "Like Camus's Sisyphus, Gunn decides to affirm his situation rather than lament it […]. If he wills and chooses his sexuality, he transforms an innate psychic propensity into an expression of freedom" (40). In his second book, Gunn gave philosophical justification to what became a reality in his later work: he became an openly gay poet regardless of the risks it involved.

As his poetry developed in America, and it having incorporated looser forms, he deliberately erred more on the side of authenticity. This made him fall out of Winters's favour, who had "an increasing distaste for the particulars of existence" (*Occasions* 176). After his old teacher's death, Gunn writes the following of him: "in his criticism of me he pinpointed a certain irresponsibility, a looseness, a lack of principle–a promiscuous love of experience, perhaps–which I know I need to keep going, lacking his theoretical firmness" (*Shelf Life* 210). The particularities of existence and experience (I would hazard that for Gunn, the two are practically synonyms) is what Gunn adored in, among others, William Carlos Williams's poetry, another poet about whom Winters had changed his mind. (Earlier, it was Winters who introduced Gunn to Williams's poetry.) As Gunn writes, Williams "was in love with the bare fact of the external world, its thinginess; and the love mastered him for a lifetime" (*Occasions* 22). He identifies August Kleinzahler as Williams's follower when in one of his poems, a street is depicted "physically and concisely, with great sensory force" (*Shelf Life* 28). Elsewhere, discussing certain "not positively euphonious" nor "elegant-sounding" images in Thomas Hardy's poems,

he asks "But why should we care? They present things with immediate authority" as the awkwardness "comes from a concern for authenticity" (*Occasions* 98).

"At the Barriers" makes a direct reference to Robert Duncan, an American poet who influenced Gunn immensely. He adopted several of Duncan's ideas about poetry as it is apparent from his essay "The High Road" (*Shelf Life*, 1993). In this essay, Gunn states that Duncan "was proud to proclaim himself a 'derivative' poet, refusing to see the word as pejorative" (131). Gunn adopts not only the idea but the word itself. About experimentation, Gunn says that Duncan "was admired for the range of risks he took" (130), the passive including himself, of course. Throughout his career, Gunn made a number of experimental risks, including writing under the influence of drugs, addressing his homosexuality, and formal experimentation. Duncan's theory of open form also made an impact: "The poem written in open form is meant to be viewed less as an artifact than as part of a *process* (a word Duncan uses repeatedly in his criticism), which may take directions unanticipated in the original conception, depending on accident more than on predetermined design" (132). While Gunn's own poems do not give the same impression, he certainly taught himself spontaneity and improvisation by writing free verse. Duncan was also an example of an openly gay poet who publicly identified himself as such, in a 1944 article in the journal *Politics*. In an earlier piece of criticism titled "Homosexuality in Robert Duncan's poetry", Gunn observes that "It is due to more to Duncan than any other single poet that Modern American poetry, in all its inclusiveness, can deal with overtly homosexual material so much as a matter of course—not as something perverse or eccentric or morbid, but as evidence of the many available ways in which people live their lives" (*The Occasions of Poetry* 134).

Returning to my point about the impression that Gunn had two careers, the second one being that of a gay poet, it should be noted that the category is no more self-explanatory than the term "Movement poet". In an interview with Alan Sinfield, when asked "are you a gay poet or a poet who's gay?", Gunn answers, "I'm both, aren't I? At times I do think of myself as writing for a gay audience. 'At the Barriers', for example, I had printed in a gay paper [the San Francisco Sentinel; to be published in the European Gay Review]. I wanted to reach a gay audience quite consciously there. But much of the time I want to write for other people as well. I don't want to disown a gay audience, but I don't want to limit myself to that" (225). It does not follow, however, that he addressed gay topics only in poems written for a gay audience. "One thing I'm trying to do, implicitly, is to show that being gay is as normal as anything else; so when I write about my life as a gay man, or with a gay emphasis, I am implicitly saying that I don't have to put on a special voice to speak about such matters" (225). Yes and no: while Gunn's later poetry often handles gay topics (notably casual sex and AIDS-related deaths) as a

matter of fact, I believe that it is hard for straight readers to conceive of a gay-themed poem as it not having "a special voice". The AIDS elegies are careful not to mention the name of the disease directly, and they refer to lovers as "friend". This, and the conventional form of these poems do indeed make them more palatable for a straight audience.

Critics attribute a plethora of meanings to the formal features of Gunn's poetry, and relate these to his sexuality in various, often contradictory ways. Generally speaking, the strict use of metric form "has come to bear ideologies of a majority (homophobic) culture" (Hoffman 14). Considering that Gunn studied under the archformalist (and self-admitted homophobe) Yvor Winters and then broke with his principles by experimenting with loose forms, the connection between homophobia and strict formalism is more apparent (Teare 65). Closetedness can be associated with formalism in turn because the young poet "asserted [self-control] by his own artistry" (Giles 89), which was "a grim end in itself: allegories of exiles and prisoners, in stiff, boxy stanzas with end words like pistons, spelled out Gunn's early dogmas" (Burt 395). Yet the topics of the poems provide a counterpoint to the claustrophobic form, suggesting an ongoing internal conflict: "The traditionalist bent of Gunn's first book, *Fighting Terms* (1954), tugs in opposition to his rebellious themes. The poet most often invokes a soldier persona, an existential warrior in the act of self-definition" (Parini 135).

Gunn's use of metre undoubtedly marks him as a traditionalist, yet it is much less unambiguous what this traditionalism entails in the context of homosexuality. The disinterested style he inherited from the Elizabethans masks the closetedness in his early poetry: "Gunn attributed [… his] impersonality to his neoclassical inclinations, his willingness to be as 'derivative' as Ben Jonson and to 'borrow' from all kinds of different sources" (Giles 93). He exploits, however, the centrality of poets with homosexual inclinations, such as Marlowe and Shakespeare, to the Elizabethan mainstream tradition (Hoffman 15), and by addressing gay topics in old forms in his later poetry, he shows that the values of the gay community and literary tradition are compatible with each other (Hoffman 16). Gunn's use of certain fixed forms, such as verse paragraphs consisting of heroic couplets (as seen in Alexander Pope's poetry) create "midsized poetic interiors" for queer intimacy (Stewart 1116). In his late elegies, Gunn "utilizes the decorousness of traditional verse in an attempt to order and to frame the irrational and incomprehensible process of AIDS infection" (Piggford 187), which is analogous to way he used strict metre to describe his LSD trips in *Moly* (1971). Gunn learns from Renaissance poet Thomas Wyatt that metric form allows the poet to intellectually reflect on his grief in the grieving process (Hoffman 15). This way, the elegies "are capable of remythologizing gay life, moving those affected by the disease of AIDS from the margins to the cultural center" (Hoffman 14).

The loosening of the strict metre in Gunn's poetry, unlike his adherence to it, is free from associations of homophobia. On the contrary: carefully crafted irregularities in several stanzaic poems bring in happy, vital, energetic playfulness that counteracts formal enclosures (Scheffler 116). By using deliberate irregularities, such as faulty rhymes in the elegies, "Gunn enacts a partial, symbolic sacrifice of formal mastery, in sympathy with the speaker's suffering" (Hammer 655). Formal loosening and a gentler treatment of Gunn's subject matter go hand in hand: "As tough or highly conscious self-assertion yields gradually to a touch of gentleness in these poems, their prosody also yields some of its stipulated regularity" (Miller 71), so much so that "free verse [can be] equated with the poet's psychological abandonment of the paraphernalia of violence" (Giles 89). Free verse, however, does not result in abandoning British metric tradition but bringing in the American free verse tradition, and its (at least) bisexual forefather Walt Whitman, into play. Allying himself with American tradition also entailed "the journey away from ideas towards the specificity of concrete objects [which] is reminiscent of Pound and William Carlos Williams" (Giles 89), which allowed his descriptions of gay life and characters to be less mediated. On that note, Gunn was also inspired by prose, and opted for a social kind of poetry that captures human character as effectively as novels do (Scheffler 37).

Unless it is a sequence of smaller units, Gunn does never mix metre and free verse within a single poem. But within individual collections, the two traditions "cross-fertilize": the "affable" free verse poems "provide necessary background for the better performances in rhyme and metre" (Quinn 228). Gunn's free verse, in turn, "invariably contains a latent dialectic whereby the new, freer idiom is implicitly arguing with the old standards of formal restraint" (Giles 89), as the poet actively plays the two traditions against each other. In doing so, their similarities become tangible. First of all, both are suitable for addressing gay topics. I have already touched upon the sociability of looser forms, yet it should be noted that "the open admission of ancestors" in Elizabethan forms also "undermines any possibility of the (illusory) withdrawal of poetry into a hermetically sealed, self-sufficient world" (Giles 93). Thirdly, free verse allows for energetic playfulness, but metre does too: "Gunn likes the purpose-built stanzaic forms of the seventeenth century, partly because their lengths and breaks can replicate walking, or reaching, or jumping and falling" (Burt 387). That is to say, Gunn did not break with either tradition because "he did not invest either prosody with intrinsic values", more specifically, "He understood free verse as a specific mode of poetic form, not an escape from it" (Hammer 650). In an interview with David Gewanter, Gunn explained that even though traditional "forms were created for a completely different type of audience and purpose", "any decent form can be adapted to other purposes" in order to explore "the subject itself, your

reactions to it, to explore language" by the constrictions imposed upon the poet by the form (Gewanter 289-90).

As Tylef Hoffman notes, "Gunn's gay formalism is not anomalous in the modern period, as he stands in the company of such other poets as W.H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, and Marilyn Hacker (16). Yet at the beginning of Gunn's career, in the 1950s, writing openly gay poetry had very little tradition in the Anglo-Saxon world, so he had to find a way of doing so. As Gunn writes in "Homosexuality in Robert Duncan's Poetry," "Homosexuality was held in peculiar horror even by liberals who would not have dreamt of attacking minorities. In the mid-fifties, when I asked my teacher and friend Yvor Winters why he did not like Whitman's poem about the twenty-eight young man bathing (*Song of Myself*, 11), he replied that the homosexual feeling of the poem was such he could not get beyond it" (*Occasions* 119). With the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the gay liberation movement, popular attitudes shifted toward acceptance, which made addressing gay topics in poetry easier. According to Bruce Woodcock, "Gunn's work since his first poems about gay experience appeared in *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) has been 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" (309). His entire work can be read through the same lens: before the seventies, he concealed his sexual orientation, but the creation of the self and exploring unmapped territories of life were already central to his verse.

To articulate anything that relates to his experience as a gay man, Gunn had to consider an array of things in his literary and civilian life: finding predecessors to learn from, understanding his relationship with criticism, finding ways of recording experience in his writing, ideologizing possibilities of human connection, engaging with the historical immediacy of gay life, recognising the source of his erotic and poetic energies, etc. The connection between these considerations is not always conscious or obvious, nor should they be thought in terms of cause and effect. The intricacies of the self-creation process, however, can be mapped out by reading Gunn's poems together. In practice, his idea of writing poetry as a learning process means that he returns time and again to his old subject matters and preferred genres. This not only makes his work coherent and organised, but motivates a comparative reading of the poems. Doing so sheds light on the way he developed his ideas slowly and gradually, repeatedly renegotiating them collection by collection. Reading his 1994 *Collected Poems* linearly is an astonishing experience: the poetry remains well-written but changes in sensibility: dissatisfaction and isolation turn slowly into cordiality and compassion.

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 happen 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 image, and character changes 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 towards 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 the psychedelics (especially LSD), free love and community spirit of the hippie movement. Therefore, I put special emphasis on the middle of his career, the seventies.

In the first chapter, "From Achilles's Tent to the Barracks: Imaginations of the Closet in Thom Gunn's Poetry," I consider poems from across Gunn's oeuvre in chronological order and investigate the evolving expressions of homosexuality in his poetry, while applying Ruth E. Fassinger's model of homosexual and lesbian identity development to the poems. Gunn's homosexuality was initially hidden in his early writings, it eventually grew more apparent, to the point where he came out in the "Jack Straw's Castle" (1976) sequence. I analyse how Gunn makes and negotiates space for the self in his poetry–for a self who is trying to come out, is coming out, or has come out of the closet. The poems in this chapter share the motif of the speaker's divided identity accompanied by divisions of space. This division becomes less and less rigid in each subsequent poem, as the closet and the fragmented psyche within are reimagined and changed. This motif is purposefully developed throughout his work, and reflects his progress as a gay poet.

The second chapter, "'he / looks into / his own eyes': Thom Gunn's Ekphrastic Poems" analyses several poems that describe pieces of visual arts. I examine the power relations between the observer and the observed, arguing that many of Gunn's ekphrastic poems

articulate his own struggling with the formation of his identity. These texts raise questions about the self and the Other, both in the philosophical and the psychological sense of these entities existing in the specific sociological and cultural scenes and changes of the second half of the twentieth century. At first, the poems employ an objectifying, voyeuristic gaze through which the artwork is seen, but this is changed with the experimental volume *Positives*, where words take on a more supportive role. The ekphrastic poems he published in the 1970s and 1980s empower the image and make it a source of threat, while those in the final two collections offer reconciliation between word and image to reveal the constructedness of the self. As Gunn's gay self-creation developed, his ekphrastic work changed gradually, leading to a mature treatment of images, which reflect the open expression of his identity in his later career.

The third chapter, "'pretending he is legible': Self and Other in Thom Gunn's Poetry," discusses Gunn's career-long focus on characters, beginning with how themes of isolation and existential struggle are explored in his earliest character sketches. I compare these to poems from the 60s and 70s in which characters find their identity in groups or in nature. As these characters totally immerse themselves in their surroundings and restore their innocence, they lose their individuality. For the remainder of Gunn's career, the ambivalence of character description as character erasure remains a problem. Gunn deals with it in two different ways. On the one hand, he insists on the self-contained, independent aspect of the character: their description is attempted just to be dismissed by the speaker. In most of the late poems that describe character, however, Gunn addresses the problem of description-as-erasure by positioning the speaker as a cannibal that eats or wants to eat young men. In many cases, the Other is unattainable and is supplemented by the poem itself, and the hunger is frequently transferred onto the gaze.

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.

Since I consider Gunn's sexual orientation integral to his poetry, my approach is interdisciplinary from the start. I make sure, however, not to limit the poems' scope with a

biographical reading and by treating lyric as self-expression. My method is mainly comparative close reading, and I add context where it is necessary for my interpretation. I rely on theories of queerness, mainly Michel Foucault's historicist concept of sexual orientation, Ruth E. Fassinger's theory of sexual minority formation and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the closet. I also support my arguments with psychoanalytic theory, such as Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, Sigmund Freud's concepts of castration complex, scopophilia, oral stage (with Melanie Klein's additions) and melancholia; as well as theories of ekphrasis by James A. W. Haffernan, Brian Glavey, David Kennedy and W. J. Thomas Mitchell.

Chapter 1

From Achilles's Tent to the Barracks: Imaginations of the Closet in Thom Gunn's Poetry

Thom Gunn's poetry went through a gradual transformation in terms of how he addressed topics related to his homosexuality. Whereas in his early work, his sexual orientation was discussed in a highly encoded way as in "The Wound" (1954), it became increasingly visible, and in "Jack Straw's Castle" (1976) he came out. Identifying and analysing some key poems on the basis of this encodedness from across Gunn's collections in chronological order thus yields a narrative that documents his coming out process and his welcoming the progressive changes in gay men's lives in the USA in the second half of the twentieth century. In Gunn's poetry, however, this slow transformation is not only a biographical matter but one of the fundamental forces that organizes his work. After all, he took great care not only to order poems within individual collections but also made sure that poems from different collections spoke to one another. Gunn's coming out of the closet is a recurring motif that was deliberately developed throughout his oeuvre and also stands as witness to his artistic growth.

The motif in question is the split self, which is always accompanied by spatial division. The poems that make use of this form a corpus characterized by a gradual change in terms of the rigidity of the division. Such poems include, among others, "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). In these works, creating and negotiating space is probably the most important source of meaning. In what follows, I identify spatial division as the closet and the split self as the closeted subject. I use the term "coming out of the closet" as a spatial metaphor that refers to (the renegotiation of) one's identity. The closet is typically understood as the private sphere to which homosexuals withdraw from the public sphere, the outside of the closet. The act of coming out, therefore, involves dynamism and the liberation of homosexuality from the confines of the private sphere.

In addition to identifying and interpreting the closet poems from across Gunn's collections, I also regard them as possible sources to understand Ruth E. Fassinger's model of gay and lesbian identity development. There appears to be a strong correlation between the phases Fassinger identifies in the process—awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, internalization/synthesis (McCarn and Fassinger)— and the poem's subjects. To avoid confusion, I will make a distinction between subjectivity and identity. I use the term subjectivity in the Foucauldian sense, as something caught up in power relations: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in

which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (*Discipline* 202-03). The subjects of the poems and their spatial arrangements are products of heteronormative power. The operation of power in Foucault's and De Certeau's writings (as in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Practice of Everyday Life*) typically connect to the division, organization, surveillance, and visibility of spaces, as well as to the identities created in those spaces. Power, spaces and the identities that operate in relation to them are thus inseparable, as in the closet. Identity refers to a selfhood the individual himself develops and freely chooses. In my analysis, thus, the word "subject" refers to the speakers of the individual closet poems, whereas identity refers to the poet's overarching design of them. In my narrative of Thom Gunn's closet poems, I suggest a process through which the subjects, by emerging as gay, gradually transforms the closet.

Mental spaces: "The Wound," "The Secret Sharer," and "The Corridor"

Gunn's poem "The Wound," from his debut volume *Fighting Terms* (1954), describes a conflict between private self and public self. The poem draws on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, as Neil Powell claims, rather than on the Iliad, since both the poem and the play refer to a psychological "injury that afflicts both [Achilles's] public reputation and his self-esteem, resulting from a dislocation between inner and outer man that prevents either from functioning properly" (22). Moreover, as Clive Wilmer claims, "Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*, it will be recalled, is refusing to participate in the war and devotes his languorously vacant days to play with his friend Patroclus. It is in the presence of Patroclus that Ulysses strikes a blow at Achilles' pride. He reminds him of how a heroic reputation, if not renewed in action, can evaporate" ("Gunn, Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans" 58). This situation is based on a set of dichotomies. Instead of being active, Achilles is inactive. Instead of being a proper hero, a man with proper behaviour, he behaves improperly. Instead of being masculine, he is effeminate, while instead of being visible, he is hidden. These dichotomies are organized by the division of space in the soldier's camp: the private space of the tent and the public space outside. There are hints that Achilles and Patroclus are lovers (Powell 22). Although Ulysses scorns Achilles for his inaction and not for loving a man, the hero's improper behaviour seems to stem from his homosexual relationship: Achilles should be outside, not inside: he should be taking up the public responsibilities of a soldier; he should be killing a man instead of loving one. [5] Achilles's homosexual behaviour seems to threaten his public status in an almost modern manner: he risks effeminacy. His being a hero is questioned as a result of his relationship.

[5] I use the term homosexual here to describe Achilles's behavior and not his sexual orientation or identity. Doing so would be, perhaps, anachronistic, as the term was coined in the nineteenth century.

The speaker in Gunn's poem is difficult to identify. There is no reference to Achilles in the first stanza:

> The huge wound in my head began to heal
> About the beginning of the seventh week.
> In valleys darkened, its villages became still:
> For joy I did not move and dared not speak;
> Not doctors would cure it, but time, its patient skill. (*Collected Poems* 3)

At this point, the nameless speaker's wound is introduced. The third line describes his location, but since the wound is in the head, it is unclear whether the "valleys" and "villages" are literal places or parts of a mental landscape. The placement of this line certainly opens up an allegorical reading of the speaker's location. The wound itself seems allegorical in this situation, especially since "[n]o doctors would cure it." In other words, the "wound" that renders the speaker immobile might be a mental or emotional condition. In the second stanza, the speaker is associated with Achilles: "And constantly my mind returned to Troy. / After I sailed the seas I fought in turn / On both sides." This prosopopoeia seems to result from the head wound: it appears to be a dissociative psychological event. In stanza three, the duality of the speaker/Achilles is articulated more clearly: "Finally my bed / Became Achilles' tent." The speaker, who is himself divided into possibly the poet and the hero, is situated in the tent that divides space into an inside and an outside. In the poem, there is no reference to Patroclus being inside the tent. He is outside, or at least his corpse is, and reaching him is impossible: according to the last stanza, the wound opens up when Achilles rises. Patroclus is an object of desire in both Shakespeare and Gunn. Powell refers to the play's Achilles and Patroclus as "the most solidly realized gay relationship in Shakespeare," and he claims that it "is clearly to Gunn's purpose" (22). Before the nineteenth century, however, the idea of men loving men was generally conceptualized as behaviour, not as identity. As Michel Foucault argues:

> We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized— Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth— less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (*History* 43)

However, in Gunn's time, the word "homosexuality" already existed, and being gay was understood as a marker of one's identity. As R. W. Connell contends, "Patriarchal culture has a

simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity […]. The interpretation is obviously linked to the assumption our culture generally makes about the mystery of sexuality, that opposites attract. If someone is attracted to the masculine, then that person must be feminine—if not in the body, then somehow in the mind" (143). Gunn's Achilles is not inactive by choice: he lacks the strength to leave his tent. His inaction is not a deliberate display of behaviour but a part of what he is like. Taking Gunn's own homosexuality into account, the allegorical entrapment in "The Wound" can easily be identified as a state of being closeted.

Similar to "The Wound," "The Secret Sharer," also in Gunn's debut volume, is set in mental space: The first line, "Over the ankles in snow and numb past pain" (*Collected Poems* 13), implies that the terrain is an emotional one: the speaker comes into contact with both "snow" and "pain." Either an adjective or a preposition, "past" could suggest several things: the "pain" could be beyond in time, beyond in position or beyond measure. Nevertheless, there is a certain numbness that characterizes the speaker in the poem. This enables him to transcend consciousness: he is calling to himself below his window. He is both outside on the street and in the room. The syntax and the vocabulary of the fourth line ("I patiently called my name again and again") makes the phenomenon sound rather matter-of-fact. The speaker is patient, likely because of his numbness. He does not panic, although "past pain" could suggest that perhaps he had previously done so. In other words, the disconnectedness of the two selves may have been a lasting condition.

Gunn's long-lasting preoccupation with doubles was already discussed in the seventies, without its queer implications. In a comprehensive piece of criticism focusing on the first half of Gunn's work, Patrick Swinden writes,

> During the 1950s Gunn was preoccupied with the contrivances erected by the poet's will and intelligence to cope with what would otherwise have been the intolerable pressures of self-consciousness. Perhaps 'contrivances' is not the best word, since these gestures, which I have described as functions of the will, are often difficult to distinguish from a sort of psychological reflex action, tricks played by consciousness to keep the reality that underlies it at bay. […] The issue is complicated in Gunn's work where the poet himself is the other, a secret sharer in his own psychological and emotional strategies (44).

While it is unsure what "the reality" that needed to be kept at bay with the poet's intelligence was, the spatial arrangement of "The Secret Sharer," and the other doppelgänger poems Swinden touches upon ("The Secret Sharer" [1954], "The Corridor" [1957], "The Monster" [1961], and he even includes "The Geysers" [1976]—poems I analyse in this chapter) is significant. In "The Secret Sharer," although it is made clear that they belong to the same

speaker (both are referred to by "I"), there are noticeable differences between the inside self and the outside self. The outside self is encompassed by numbness and darkness, but there is light inside. The curtains are "lit by doubt," which suggests that the room is a mental space like the street, but is also a higher level of consciousness. Whereas the outside self is shouting in the dark, the inside self is "uncertain" and becomes more certain later on in the "reassuring" light of the fire. The more unconscious outside self seems to be haunting the more conscious inside self.

Although the street is a public place, it is "unconcerned as a dead eye": no interpersonal exchange can happen in the mental space of the poem. Thus, the outside self belongs to the public sphere, but it is not an actualized public self. It is elusive and disappears when "the wind turns in its groove," which also introduces a change of perspective. The two selves prompt not two voices but two perspectives. The poem gains considerable tension because these perspectives cannot meet. The outside self is fixed in his "socket of thought," and is being synecdochally reduced to an eye. He is afraid that the "strange head" will "peer out" and see him. The two selves are basically two (sets of) eyes. They are both afraid to meet and to not meet, yet there is no explanation of the dangers of either scenario. The danger is visibility itself.

Visibility is the main concern of another poem in Gunn's second volume, *The Sense of Movement* (1957), titled "The Corridor." The first line, "A separate place between the thought and felt" (*Collected Poems* 85) sets the poem in a mental space, similarly to "The Secret Sharer." The corridor is the place between emotion and intellect, which implies that it connects the two: whatever happens here is both emotional and intellectual. For example, the man who kneels in front of a keyhole watching a couple make love is interested in more than voyeuristic pleasure: the keyhole is a "meaning spark." Stanza three explains why the man does not participate, why he rejects visibility. He is concerned about his looks (he is too "ugly"), and thinks that whatever happens beyond the door could be a "sin." Stanza four gives a rather intellectual explanation: "If once he acted as participant / he would be mastered." Since "sin" is connected to subjectivity and the couple is not gendered, furthermore, given Gunn's sexual orientation, gay sex may well be performed beyond the door (although this is not apparent from the poem itself).

As the man moves to "get a better look," he notices his mirror image reflected in a pier glass at the corridor's "much lighter end." What strikes me is that he does not seem to realize that he is watching himself. According to Jacques Lacan, "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (442). I believe that Gunn's poem is aligned with Lacan's concept, although the man's voyeuristic act precedes this

apperception: he does not seem to be a subject yet. Locking eyes with his mirror image induces peripeteia: the change of the perspective is a turning point, a change of circumstances. The master is being mastered; as a consequence, he loses his mastery and becomes a subject. In the seventh stanza, the situation is raised to an existential level: "Who can master, free of others; who / Can look around and say he is alone?" Everyone must be a subject, as we are all seen. In this poem, the danger of being seen and becoming a subject is misrecognition and misunderstanding: "who can know that what he sees / Is not distorted, that he is not seen / Distorted by a pierglass, curved and lean?" The last stanza suggests that the only way of dealing with this problem is to attempt to meet the other as "equal," as a "friend." Since this other here is the man himself, the poem ends with the image of the man holding a hand out[6] towards himself, as a gesture of self-acceptance. What connects the man with his mirror image is the couple: "Those curious eyes, through him, were linked to these– // These lovers in the cornea's bend." This implies that the subjectivity suggested by the poem is sexualized. Becoming a subject in this poem thus equals to assuming a gay subjectivity.

Although both poems make use of the double as a central motif, they differ in terms of how it is addressed. Whereas in "The Corridor," for example, sex is both present and plays a significant role, it is absent from "The Secret Sharer." The only connection to sex might be the intimate space of the bedroom, which is being haunted from the outside, similar to how the man in "The Corridor" peeps in through the keyhole. Secondly, in "The Secret Sharer," the outside self is not visible to his inside self. Seeing him would be like looking in the mirror, therefore the speaker of the poem is describing a time prior to the development of a gay subjectivity: "The wind turns its groove: I am still there" (13). Both poems express a desire to reconnect the split self, but in "The Secret Sharer," the possibility of visibility fills the speaker with fear. In comparison, the man in "The Corridor" watches his mirror image with "a fascinated face," and, moreover, he makes an attempt to assume his gay subjectivity. It is important to emphasize, however, that neither of these conflicts are interpersonal but take place in the mind.

Compared to "The Secret Sharer," "The Corridor" seems like a step forward in more than one sense of the word.[7] In terms of the emerging gay subjectivity, it certainly represents progress. The power relations that surround, and, in a way, create, these two poems are clearly different. Gunn grew up in England, where homosexuality was a crime punishable by imprisonment. After publishing *Fighting Terms*, which included "The Secret Sharer," Gunn

[6] Stephen Burt contends that in Gunn's poetry, sight is "less trustworthy than touch […] Sight works from far off, and treats people just as it treats things; it also sets up an asymmetry between looker and looked-at. […] Touch (we feel) distinguishes people from things" (391). The handshake suggested by a poem would thus imply an encounter between equals.

[7] I do not claim that it is better written, as aesthetic judgment is not the aim of this paper.

relocated to California. In legal terms, homosexuality was just as much a criminal act there, yet he must have been fascinated by the existence and visibility of the San Francisco gay culture. The second poem was published in *The Sense of Movement*, a volume that addressed American topics. Living in a place with different power relations left its mark on Gunn's poetry. As for the creative aspect of power, the two poems are different imaginations of the closet. "The Secret Sharer" is ultimately prohibitive, as the spatial boundary between the two selves cannot be crossed, and the speaker cannot see himself. His coming out is not possible even on the psychological level. In contrast, "The Corridor" is more permissive and although the object of desire remains unreachable, the self makes an attempt at identification with himself. That is to say, "The Secret Sharer" and "The Corridor" present the first two steps in a coming-out narrative. These two closet constructions bear upon two stages of McCarn and Fassinger's individual sexual identity development, namely, Awareness and Exploration:

> The dawning of a minority sexuality is likely to begin with awareness of a difference, a general feeling of being different or awareness of feelings or desires that are different from the heterosexual norm and therefore from the predicted self. Nonconscious ideologies become conscious; the previously held assumption that all persons, including the self, are heterosexual is called into question. Same-sex thoughts and feelings, however, do not imply self-labeling […]. The second phase involves active examination of questions arising in the first phase. For women[8], it is explicitly hypothesized that this phase involves strong relationships with or feelings about other women or another woman in particular. This phase will involve exploration of sexual feelings but will not necessarily involve exploration of sexual behaviors or a variety of partners. (522)

"The Secret Sharer" obviously describes an "awareness of a difference" from the norm, as the situation of the speaker is described as pathological. It could easily be identified as an out-of-body experience or at least a disturbance of body ownership, as is the case in certain mental illnesses.[9] In contrast, the man's double in "The Corridor" is precisely identified as his mirror image, and, although not recognizing it as a reflection of the self is somewhat infantile, it certainly does not sound like illness or mental disorder. The poem, furthermore, involves an "exploration of sexual feelings" (although not an "exploration of sexual behaviors"), which suggests that the stigma of homosexuality as represented in "The Secret Sharer" is done away with, at least to a degree, in "The Corridor."

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[8] I would emphasize that Fassinger developed the model for lesbians in 1996 and validated it for gay men a year later.

[9] Alfred Corn argues that the head injury of "The Wound" is a metaphor for homosexuality. See "Existentialism and Homosexuality in Gunn's Early Poetry."

City spaces: "The Monster" in *My Sad Captains* (1961)

Thom Gunn's third volume, *My Sad Captains*, marks a change in his poetry. To emphasize this change, the collection is split into two parts. The first section is written in meter, just like his first two volumes, and consists of witty poems in Gunn's rigorous, reserved, "literary" style, with a quote from *Troilus and Cressida* as a motto. In comparison, the second section opens with a quote from the American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, and it is written entirely in syllabics. The second section is remarkable for both its looser style and that these poems seem to rely more on experience than imagination, with titles such as "Waking in a Newly-Built House," "Flying Above California," and "The Feel of Hands." I believe that the divide is not only unnecessary but counterproductive. Arranging his poems as such, Gunn gave up some of the tension that could have been achieved by juxtaposing poems that address similar concerns with different form and sensibility. For example, "Baudelaire Among the Heroes," an epigram about the nature of fetishes, could have been paired with "A Trucker," a poem in syllabics that troubles the boundaries between man and machine. The epigram's placement is rather dull, as it comes after "The Byrnies," a poem that fetishizes chainmail shirts, and "Black Jackets," a poem that fetishizes leather jackets. That is to say, the way the volume is divided feels artificial and deliberate. It is a construct similar to the closet: the personal experience and intimacy of the second section are separated from the "public-oriented" first section with a focus on the existential ("The Annihilation of Nothing"), the ecclesiastical ("In Santa Maria del Popolo"), and the historical ("Claus von Stauffenberg"). Yet, the two sections are not as distinct as they first seem. "The Value of Gold," for example, has an intimate feeling ("The hairs turn gold upon my thigh / And I am gold beneath the sun") that is similar to the poems in the second section. And vice versa: "Rastignac at 45," a poem about Balzac's fictional character, seems out of place next to "Lights Among Redwood." The two sections of the volume permeate each other due to the dynamism between the public and the private.

City life is a major concern of Gunn's poetry in the '70s and '80s, but his engagement with the city[10] and its locations starts earlier. The first two lines of Gunn's "A Map of the City" (from *My Sad Captains*), "I stand upon a hill and see / A luminous country under me" (*Collected Poems* 103), clearly set the perspective from which the city is viewed. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau differentiates between two ways of looking at the city. Watching Manhattan from the top of the Empire State Building gives one a map of the city. In contrast to the bird's eye view, which feels like the gaze of the outsider (91- 93), when one walks around the city, one participates in creating the space. Although the poem describes an

[10] Catherine R. Stimpson notes that "Consistent with the distrust of nature is a trust of cities. Urban places have the special virtue of being unfinished constructs of will that symbolize and promise freedom." (394)

unnamed city that is in the distance, away from the viewer, it is made clear that whatever meanings are inscribed onto urban space are significant for the speaker: "I hold the city there, complete; / And every shape defined by light / Is mine." The speaker is fascinated by the "Endless potentiality" of the city. A city is always "unfinished," it is constantly being built and is in constant decay. Since the city is connected to the speaker in such a way, the poem also addresses endless potentials and creative freedom for the speaker. The blurred lines of the city hold the promise of experimentation with himself, and, as the first line of the fourth stanza states, "The map is ground to my delight": it promises new sexual experience. He is not engaging the city yet, however, he merely views it from a distance, as the city clearly poses a "risk" for him. Engaging the city would make him a subject of the city, in the sense that it would deprive him of mastery: the city would not be under him, but over him. Still, this "risk" is not only something dangerous but something to be celebrated: "The crowded, broken and unfinished! / I would not have the risk diminished."

A similar poem, "In Praise of Cities" (from *The Sense of Movement*), addresses the city in a different way: "You welcome in her what remains of you; / And what is strange and what is incomplete / Compels a passion without understanding, / For all you cannot be" (*Collected Poems* 59). This poem is more sceptical than "A Map of the City" in that the urban space described does not fascinate him but "compels a passion" for the impossibility of experimentation with identity, "for all you cannot be." The first line, "Indifferent to the indifference that conceived her," sets the tone for the rather ironic praise. Instead of being "luminous" and interesting, the city is indifferent, it is born of indifference. It is no surprise, then, that the city is gendered as female: for Gunn, she is not an object of desire. And later on, "Casual yet urgent in her love making, / She constantly asserts her independence: / Suddenly turning moist pale walls upon you / – Your own designs, peeling and unachieved – / Or her whole darkness hunching in an alley." The risk Gunn mentions in "A Map of the City" is emphasized even more here. By walking in the city, in an alley, walls turn on the subject. This section of the poem is rather uncanny in the way it relates to the female body; it is a source of fear: the "pale moist walls" are ready to swallow and unmake the male subject. Being unborn would result in the unmaking of the self. The subject would cease to be one, it would cease to be distinct and in control.

In "Waking in a Newly-Built House," like in "A Map of the City," the poet is an observer. Even his position is similar, he is on top of a hill, but inside, in a house. A major difference is that in "A Map of the City," Gunn celebrates the blurred lines of the unfinished city, whereas in "Waking in a Newly-Built House," he praises the room's tangibility: "Calmly, perception rests on the things, / and is aware of them only in / their precise definition, their fine

/ lack of even potential meanings" (*Collected Poems* 115). In other words, the two poems differ in terms of the speakers' pleasure. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes differentiates between two types of texts, and more fundamentally, two types of pleasure:

> Text of pleasure [plaisir]: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss [jouissance]: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts […], unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

In other words, *plaisir* keeps our identity intact, while *jouissance* shatters it. The promise of *jouissance* in "A Map of the City" connects to the public domain, the outside world. Orgasmic pleasure, like the catharsis one feels at the end of a tragedy, is interpersonal. It relates to the loss of mastery: the subject's lack of control over himself, his surrender in front of the other. On the other hand, the *plaisir* in "Waking in a Newly Built House" connects to the private domain. Reading the cheap paperback is pleasurable in the same way as self-fashioning. The subject is in control, the lines are definite and clear. Waking in a newly built house is pleasurable because the clear shapes of the objects reassure the self—reassure one of his identity. Yet there is some degree of freedom here as well. The objects lack potential meanings and one is free to assign them meaning. For example, the poem can be read as an allegory of literary experimentation, the joy of writing in a new form.

The closet motif returns in *My Sad Captains* with "The Monster". The seventh stanza (What if I were within the house, / Happier than the fact had been /—Would he, then, still be gazing here, / The man who never can get in?, *Collected Poems* 96) refers back to "The Secret Sharer"; the "divided consciousness of the closet," as Brian Teare calls it (198), returns here; yet, the setting of the poem differs greatly, as the urban neighbourhood becomes the dominant space in the first two lines: "I left my room at last, I walked / The streets of that decaying town." Even the first line seems to refer back to earlier poems: "at last" presupposes a narrative in which the speaker has been staying in his room for a long time. The space opens up in "The Monster," although this does not necessarily mean that the speaker turns towards reality. The "decaying" town and the "carved cherub" in the fourth line imply that the poem "takes place in a foreboding Gothic landscape of ruin" (Teare 198), and, as Sarah Parker claims, "the Gothic genre has been associated with the unconscious mind and the compulsion to articulate what is 'unspeakable' or repressed" (7). Urban space is thus introduced to the closet as a playing field of repressed desire.

Likewise, the title of the poem alludes to Gothic horror and to the monster that stands for the speaker's double. When the speaker describes him, he confesses his own sexual dissatisfaction ("How had she never mentioned / This lover, too, unsatisfied?") reflected in the double. In the fourth stanza, the speaker sees the double's gaze, which is reminiscent to the spying gaze described in "The Corridor": "Those eyes glazed like her windowpane / That wide mouth ugly with despair / Those arms held tight against the haunches." In contrast to "The Corridor," in which the man is fascinated by his mirror image but does not recognise it as such, the double in "The Monster" is clearly acknowledged as a double: "It was myself I recognized." This suggests that the speaker of "The Monster" is psychologically more mature than the one in "The Corridor."

Furthermore, the speaker recognizes his double as fantasy: "Standing before this man of mine / The constant one I had created." The source of this fantasy is also given: "At once I knew him, gloating over / A grief defined and realized / And living only for its sake," yet it is unclear what "grief" refers to. It could be connected to the female lover, another addition to the motif of divided consciousness.[11] The three form a love triangle, although her role is considerably downplayed: she does not even appear in the poem. As Brian Teare contends,

> Gunn's early critics assume his and his speakers' identities to be heterosexual, there do exist early poems of Gunn's in which an oddly uncanny, almost gothic power derives from a meeting between the homosocial and the homoerotic, usually in a doppelgänger figure, as in "The Monster" from his third book, *My Sad Captains*. Even though at first it appears to be a textbook rendering of a Sedgwickian erotic triangle in which a woman is exchanged between two men—two men meet by chance outside the window of a female lover—it's notable for the powerful way in which its narrative situation turns away from this trope to become instead possible code for one man's negotiation between his heterosexual and homosexual identities. (198)

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick considers the erotic charge in the rivalry of the men in love triangles while analysing some of Shakespeare's sonnets. The word "grief" appears in Sonnet 42 describing the love triangle between the poet, the fair youth, and the dark lady: "That thou hast her, it is not all my grief, / And yet it may be said I loved her dearly; / That she hath thee, is of my wailing chief, / A loss in love that touches me more nearly." Although the nature of love shared between these agents is up for debate, I would emphasize that Gunn's poetry is considerably informed by Shakespeare. Sonnet 42 could easily have been an inspiration for writing "The Monster,"

[11] Nondescript "grief" is a recurring theme in Gunn's earliest poems in which characters suffer from social isolation and the mental prison of their own making. This grief often suggests a closeted sexuality—see Chapter 3.

especially since "grief" is treated similarly in the two poems. In the sonnet, the main reason for the speaker's grief is jealousy: the dark lady might deprive him of the love of the fair youth. The couplet at the end puts a surprising twist on the love triangle[12]: "But here's the joy; my friend and I are one; / Sweet flattery! then she loves but me alone." Similarly, Gunn's speaker and his double are one, but after the speaker realizes this, the perspective shifts from Gunn's "dark lady": "I could not watch her window now / Standing before this man of mine." Although he is not jealous of her, she is a reminder that the speaker might lose himself in the love of a woman, in a heterosexual setting.

Considered together with "The Secret Sharer" and "The Corridor," "The Monster" suggests the phase of deepening/commitment in Fassinger's model of homosexual identity formation:

> Exploration leads to a deepening of self-knowledge and to the crystallization of some choices about sexuality. Some may see relationships with women as only one possibility and identify as bisexual, and others may decide in favor of men as sexual partners. It is here that the emerging lesbian is likely to recognize her desire for other women as within herself and, with deepening self-awareness, will develop sexual clarity and commitment to her self-fulfillment as a sexual being. Intimacy and identity become meshed as the woman recognizes that her forms of intimacy imply certain things about her identity and then moves toward accepting and further examining those aspects of herself. (McCarn and Fassinger 522-23)

The speaker of the poem is characterized by "a deepening self-knowledge" as well as a "crystallization of some choices about sexuality" because of his clear understanding of his narrative situation and his treatment of his double. The last stanza, like the preceding one, does away with the female lover, replacing her with the self. Here, the double appears as a lover, which implies bisexuality. The speaker's higher "sexual clarity and commitment to [his] self-fulfillment" is evident from the way the emerging closet narrative expands the limits of the mental corridor and bedroom. By involving the city, the speaker has a better grasp on himself and his closeted situation. Considered on its own, however, "The Monster" does not necessarily suggest progress in terms of coming out. The speaker of the poem does not stand face-to-face to his monstrous figure: first he is behind him, then he stands next to him and they look towards the window together. Self-recognition does not take place in a narcissistic way, that is, not as part of the mirror phase. The monstrous figure can also be interpreted as the entity created by the operation of desire: the man who stands under the window of the object of desire and "can

[12] Sedgwick skips on analysing the couplet: she leaves it out from the block quote.

never get in" (96). If this is the case, he does not stand in the way of the speaker's desire—he is not the obstacle that triangulates desire, but the allegorical figure of a desire that cannot be fulfilled by its very nature. In the final stanza, furthermore, where the speaker suggests that perhaps he will find the monster at home, in bed, choosing him as the object of desire instead of the woman can allegorise falling back into a narcissistic phase, where he can be endlessly fascinated by his own image.

Spaces of Narcissism: "Bravery" and "Behind the Mirror"

Gunn included "Bravery" in *Touch*, a volume published in 1976, a year after private homosexual acts between consenting adults were decriminalized in California. The poem is dedicated to "a painting by Chuck Arnett," a ballet dancer and artist of considerable importance for the then contemporary San Francisco gay scene. He painted, among others, murals on the walls of gay bars, notably The Tool Box on Pierce Street (Fritscher 356), a bar that Gunn must have frequented. In *Touch*, the poem "Pierce Street" makes note of the murals in a building that might likely be The Tool Box. The picture described in "Bravery" can be easily identified as Arnett's painting *V-Jacket* (1964), in which a black silhouette of a man is looking at "an indeterminate pale / grey-and-yellow country" (*Touch* 16). It is not the first time Gunn wrote a poem about a painting ("Santa Maria del Popolo" from *My Sad Captains*, for example, is about Caravaggio's *The Conversion of Saint Paul*), but "Bravery" is a tribute to a work by an openly gay artist. I doubt that Gunn took a great risk by dedicating a poem to Arnett's painting, as most straight readers were probably oblivious to Arnett's existence, yet the gesture remains significant. It is proof of Gunn's engagement with the San Francisco gay scene, as well as his commitment to it. The poem thus correlates with the third phase of Fassinger's group membership identity development termed as deepening/commitment, a phase that involves "a deepening awareness of both the unique value and oppression of the lesbian/gay community. It involves a commitment to create a personal relationship to the reference group, with awareness of the possible consequences entailed" (McCarn and Fassinger 525).

The first line, "What a romantic picture!" exhibits Gunn's expertise about art and his skills of interpretation: the painting is indeed romantic (Romantic) in both the everyday and literary senses of the word. *V-Jacket* is similar to Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), a masterpiece of German Romanticism. Both portray Rückenfiguren (figures seen from behind) that invite the viewers to identify with them and see the landscape through their eyes. Friedrich's painting is frequently used as textbook illustration for the sublime and Romanticism in general. Joseph Leo Koerner's *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* emphasizes the introspective aspect of the picture: "The

Rückenfigur is so prominent in the composition that the world appears to be an emanation from his gaze, or more precisely, from his heart" (213). The painter himself wrote that "when a landscape is covered in fog, it appears larger, more sublime, and heightens the strength of the imagination and excites expectation, rather like a veiled woman. The eye and fantasy feel themselves more attracted to the hazy distance than to that which lies near and distinct before us" (Hinz 123). Koerner is quick to dismiss "the artist's controlling erotic metaphor" (212) especially since he establishes that "at the horizontal of [the figure's] waist, made visible by the gathering of his green coat and occurring at the canvas's midline, the picture divides into symmetrical upper and lower halves" (210). In Arnett's painting, the figure's waistline is similarly emphasized by the white dots of the studded belt. The colourful stripe that Gunn identifies as the "grey and-yellow country" is at the level of his loins. The stance of the figure is suggestive, perhaps masturbatory, and the picture is thus, if ironically, romantic.

The relationship of the Rückenfigur and his surroundings are, however, different in the two paintings. In *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, he is relatively small, or at least the environment appears considerably larger than he is. The foggy landscape that emanates from him is sublime: "*Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* aspires to invoke the sublime of a thoroughly subjectivized aesthetic, in which the painted world turns inward on the beholder" (Kroener 212-13). In contrast, Arnett's figure takes up most of the canvas, and seems to be feeding off the landscape. Gunn prophesizes that his "first step will / suck the country dry" and calls him a "Giant vampire." He is hostile, being "set against" the landscape. He acts as the embodiment of aggressive male sexuality: he drains, eats, and violates the country. This painting might reflect the way heterosexist society might have viewed gays as dangerous alien creatures hidden from the public eye and without human details. At the same time, it is a celebration of male sexuality, emphasizing not only its power (this explains the title "Bravery"), but its enticing nature. The 'V' on the figure's leather jacket could stand for "vampire," "victory," or "violence," but it also acts like a downturned arrowhead that, along with the belt, directs the viewer's attention to the figure's backside. If one can believe San Francisco artist Mark I. Chester's claim on his website, the jacket belonged to the poet himself, and given Gunn's obsession with leather jackets, this is very likely.

Like the speaker of "The Monster," the speaker of "Bravery" identifies himself with his "monstrous lover." The categories of same-sex desire and narcissism overlap, as in Gunn's several other poems (Powell 29, Wilmer 51), to mask their homoeroticism. "Behind the Mirror" from *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) addresses the myth of Narcissus, with a split consciousness similar to that of "The Wound". The poem is divided into two sections. In the first, the speaker looks into a mirror in a "dark restaurant" (*Collected Poems* 293) and recognizes himself in the

mirror. The self and his reflection are described as "two flowers from the same plant," which suggests some kind of kinship, a serene one compared to the "monstrous lover." This metaphor makes way in the second section for the myth of Narcissus, the story of a man turning into a plant. In the first stanza of the second section, Narcissus does not seem to know that he is looking at himself: "Narcissus glares into the pool: someone glares back." His gaze, and in his reflection, his sexual arousal is thus best understood as that of homosexual desire. His passion is best expressed in the agitated syntax of the second section: "he sees the rounded arms, / a hunk of auburn hair tumbled forward, lips parted / in awe, in craving, he stares him / straight in the ravenous eyes."

The death of Gunn's Narcissus makes more sense in this context. It is a deliberate act of will to unite parts of his split personality: "If he drowned himself he would be one with himself." In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when Narcissus's mother, the nymph Liriope asks the seer Tiresias whether the boy will have a long life, Tiresias answers, "If he never knows himself" (102). Narcissus's death is thus a moment of self-discovery, and freedom through self-knowledge: "If he drowned himself he would wash free into the world, / placid and circular[13], from which he has been withdrawn." Strangely, going behind the mirror is not an act of escapism, but a way of joining the world by an act of self-purification. Considering his "withdrawn" state, Narcissus's suicide resembles coming out. He transforms himself by crossing the boundary between the private and the public with his multidirectional desire (partly sexual desire, partly a desire of oneness, and perhaps the desire to die). As a result, he becomes an "unreflecting" flower, he becomes whole. Gunn solves the issue of the divided consciousness by transformation, but in terms of grammar, the events are recounted in conditional clauses. That is to say, transformation has both fantasy and ambiguity: it might suggest the hardships of coming out, even its impossibility, or it could be a fantasy that comes from the poet's experience.

The motif of the self's fascination with his double turns into an obsession in "Behind the Mirror." Paul Giles notes that the ending of the poem is ironically self-reflexive: "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. So 'unreflecting' is just what this poem's final word is not: on the contrary, the word punningly reflects upon itself, splits itself into two" (87). There are several fissures taking place: the poem itself is split into two sections, and it could be said that in the first section, when the speaker

[13] "placid and circular" refers to Narcissus's parents: Liriope and the river god Cephissus.

looks into the mirror, he recognises not only himself in his mirror image but himself and his mirror image as Narcissus and Narcissus's mirror image. This doubled narcissism evokes Oscar Wilde's prose poem "The Disciple," in which the pool that had reflected Narcissus's beauty mourns the death of Narcissus because it had seen its own reflection in the youth's eyes. Wilde's poem treats Narcissus's eyes as two mirrors—while it is not mentioned in the short poem, this leads to a proliferation of doubles: the two eyes will reflect two pools that reflect two pairs of eyes and so on. Gunn's poem can be reads as an ironic commentary on Gunn's ongoing obsession with doubles. In Ovid, Narcissus's obsessive self-admiration is a punishment for not reciprocating the love of others—while "Behind the Mirror" does not allude to that part of the myth, it clearly represents Narcissus's predicament as a trap.

Coming Out: "The Geysers", "Jack Straw's Castle" and "The Menace"

"Behind the Mirror" reflects Fassinger's last phase of individual sexual identity development termed internalization/synthesis: "Women at this phase of lesbian identity development are likely to have completed many years of emotional and sexual self-exploration and to have resolved difficult decisions about their desires and practices. This internal process of clarification will involve the synthesis of role identity into ego identity" (523). The poem indeed promises a synthesis of selves, but does not achieve it. The poems I analyse in this section perform what Narcissus cannot: they do away with the fantasy of the double and discuss sexual relations between men openly. "The Geysers" and "Jack Straw's Castle" (*Jack Straw's Castle*, 1976), as well as "The Menace" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) discuss hallucinatory experiences that feature the motif of the split self in divided space, but the tensions it produces are resolved by a real male lover at places that can be found in the real universe. These poems are longish sequences that appear to sum up, in Fassinger's words, the "many years of emotional and sexual self-exploration" (523) required for the synthesis phase of gay identity development, and effectively dramatize and seem to resolve the struggles of coming out.

"The Geysers", as opposed to the poems discussed above, is set in an existing place that the brief introduction describes in the following way:

> [The Geysers] are in Sonoma County, California. You could camp anywhere you wanted in the area for a dollar a day, but it was closed down in 1973. There was also a bath house, containing hot and cool pools. It was about seventy years old: it may have originally been open to the sky, but in the seventies it was roughly covered with sections of green corrugated plastic. (*Collected Poems* 239)

By including this under the title of the poem, Gunn makes it clear that the he is referring to things in the real universe (insofar as this is possible through representation). The sensual and

druggy experiences that take place in the poem, however, seem to contradict this, so much so that in the first section titled "Sleep by the Hot Stream", the speaker falls asleep, and it is unclear where exactly. In the second section "The Cool Stream", he and the other visitors are awake and active, but become part of the landscape. In the third, the speaker hikes up to a geyser and recognizes himself in it: he becomes a force of nature himself. The last section "The Bath House" is a transformative one: in a drug-induced trance, he goes through a process of ritualistic renewal. But even though the experience seems removed from reality, the panic that follows is resolved by the emotional revelations of a very concrete bisexual orgy.

The first two sections set up pairs of opposites that organize the poem. The temperature difference between the two streams are stated in the respective subtitles, and they are significant in terms of affect: the hot stream is relaxing, while the cool stream is reinvigorating. Yet these categories are muddled. Next to the hot stream, the speaker is enjoying the beauty of an open sky: "I lie an arm-length from the stream and watch / Arcs fading between stars. There / bright! faint! gone! / More meteors than I've ever set eyes on" (239). By degree, the light of the meteor extinguishes, which mimics sleep. But it is also suggestive of waking: "The flash-head vanishing as it is defined, / Its own end streaking like a *wake* behind. // I must have been asleep when morning came" (emphasis mine, 239). This last line clearly means that the speaker is awake, which retrospectively implies that he dreamed the meteor; or maybe the meteor itself stands for a dream which at the point of waking is "vanishing as it is defined", in other words, it is forgotten as it is recalled. "Sleep by a Hot Stream" is paradoxically an account of waking. Similarly, in "The Cool Stream", people are active and "are at play" (240), but some of them deliberately dull their senses: "And some are trying to straddle a floating log, / Some rest and pass a joint" (241).

Another key opposition that structure the poem is the one of intellect and sexual instinct. The landscape is both evocative of the head: the hills are "starlit scalps [that] are parched blond; where we lie, / The small flat patch of earth fed evenly / By warmth and wet, there's dark grass fine as hair" (239). But it also evokes the loins: "This is our bedroom, where we *learn* the air, / Our sleeping bags laid out in the valley's *crotch*" (emphasis mine, 239). "The v-sides of the shadowed valley" stands for the Apollo's belt, and the "perilous bush, an emerald fur of moss" for pubic hair. The birds perform their mating rituals here, and their flight is suggestive of sexual penetration: "Two birds like one dart upstream toward the falls / A keen brown thrust between the canyon walls" (240). Their darting movement parallels that of the dreamlike meteor: like "The Secret Sharer" and the other previously discussed poems, "The Geysers" describes a mental landscape; unlike them, however, it is also a concrete landscape that is excessively sexualized.

In setting up this opposition, the speaker errs on the instinctual, which puts him at odds with the landscape and the creatures that inhabit it. The visitors try their best to shed their human social restraints: "We get up naked as we intend to stay" (240). Their nakedness might be a deliberate human choice, but they make progress: "And here below, the talking animals / Enter an unclaimed space, like plants and birds, / And fill it out without too many words" (240). The speaker, however, is not frugal with words in this rather long poem. He describes his environment in detail, but he is also introspective. When he notices a little snake eating a fly, he comments, "What elegance! It does not watch itself" (240). Oscillating between first person plural, third person plural, third person singular and first person singular, the self-conscious speaker, like Narcissus in "Behind the Mirror," definitely lacks the "elegance" of the snake. The other visitors, "Tan black and pink, firm shining bodies, all / Move with a special unconsidered grace" (241), as the speaker himself considers. He gets the closest to Nature when he speaks in the first-person plural: "For though we have invaded this glittering place / And broke the silences, yet we submit: / So wholly, that we are details of it" (241).

In the third section, the speaker climbs up to a geyser alone to unite with Nature, but the boundaries between man and Nature are permeable from the start. While he is not said to be under the influence of drugs, the presence of the geyser suggests it: "The higher the more close-picked are Earth's bones" (241), "Beside the steep path where I make my way / Small puffs of steam bloom out at intervals" (241). The elevation is creaturely, almost humanized: "I reach the top: the geyser on the crown / Which from the distance was a smart panache / Is merely a searing column of steam from ash" (241). The word "crown" is a dead metaphor that refers to the top of the (most likely) hill, but it also unites the mental and bodily imagery (in anatomy, heads and penises both have crowns). In this context, "I reach the top" (241), "hot deposit seeps from soggy holes" (241) and the searing column that emerges from the geyser are all sexually suggestive. The identity-shattering force of the geyser's *jouissance* expresses itself in "A cinderfield that lacks all skin of soil, / It has no complication, no detail / The force too simple and big to comprehend" (241). The speaker internalizes the geyser which has no specificity, humanity or social identity, and by doing so, he returns to his origin: "And I do recognize […] Fire at my centre, burning since my birth / Under the pleasant flesh. Force calls to force. / Up here a man might shrivel in his source" (241-2).

The speaker's shedding of his identity is also performed at a textual level. Although rhyme is not abandoned, the iambic pentameter lines are broken down in favour of a more experimental line structure and syntax in the fourth section "The Bath House". The first three lines "Night / heat / the hot bath, barely endurable" (242) are reminiscent of a single iambic pentameter line only in the number of their added syllables, but the iambic thumping returns at

various places, including in the next lines: “Closer than that rank sulphurous smell / a sharp sweet drifting fume of dope” (242). The parallel between the geyser and the marijuana smoke is more pronounced here than it was in the previous section, and another parallel is added:

Down from half-lucent roofing moonrays slope
(by the plastic filtered green)
to candleflicker below. (242)

The visitors of the bath house mirror Nature with their joints and candles, and this parallelism is also expressed in the fragmented lines. With their “bodies locked soft in trance of heat” and “not saying much” (242), they allow the speaker to go into a trance himself:

I grasp my mind
squeeze open
touch within
And grope (242)

His trance retains the duality of intellectual and sexual due the connotations of the verbs “grasp” and “grope”. It opens him to new bodily sensations: “Upward, from my feet / I feel rise in me a new kind of blood” (243), and also a new, heightened consciousness: “Till waking one night I look up to see / new gods are shining over me / What flung Orion’s belt across the sky? / I lived the age of reptiles out” (243).

The speaker’s experimentation with his selfhood turns into a struggle when the speaker surrenders his subjectivity to Nature. The boundaries between subject and object are further blurred as it is given lungs to breathe with: “Beneath mud / branching / branching streams run through / through me / the mud breathes / breathes me too” (244). The speaker, in turn, degenerates into an embryonic state:

and bobbing in the womb, all round me Mother
I am part of all there is no other
I extend into
her mind her mountainous knees
red meadows salty seas
birdbone and pulp, unnamed, unborn
I live (242).

This state of being precedes the mirror stage. The subject enjoys the liberating feeling of having no boundaries and no identity. Yet he cannot stay like this, he must be born: “It tore / what flash cut / made me fugitive / caesarian lightning lopped me off separate” (244). The embryonic state, which Michelucci calls a “‘galactic’ regression to the womb” (107) is revealed to be a passing fantasy, and the state of having been born is articulated in the past tense as a traumatic fact. In

his separateness, he is condemned to be misrecognized and misinterpreted: “and born in flight from the world / but through it, into it / aware now (piercingly) / of my translation / each sense raw-healed in sudden limitation” (*Collected Poems* 244). The metaphor of translation makes his condition is all the more vulnerable: it is as if the self was aware of his own textuality, being read by the piercing eyes of the reader. The speaker’s struggle with his own subjectivity, therefore, has implications for the poet’s subjectivity as well.

The way the conflict of the speaker’s subjectivity plays out feels autobiographical for several other reasons. His sense of being thrown into the world echoes the existentialist concerns of Gunn’s early poems: “I hurry, what I did I do not know / nor who pursues, nor why I go” (245). He reflects on the past experiences of being looked at: “look back: / they marked me all the time / shadows that lengthen over whitened fields below” (245). The word “marked” and the “whitened fields” suggest literary criticism; the shadows imply critics, and the white fields paper. He tries to find refuge in the thickets of various plants, including laurel, which was a wreath of honour for poets in ancient Greece. His attempt at hiding underwater fails too: “I dive in / sink beneath / wait hid in / cool security / I cannot breathe” (245). His inability to both hide and show himself echoes the double bind of the closet, as Sedgwick put it, “the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden” (*Epistemology* 70).

The poem offers a poetic solution for the problem of the closet: “I burst for oxygen / shoot upward, then / break through / another surface / where I meet // dreamers” (*Collected Poems* 245). By becoming a geyser, he perhaps recognizes his drama as something natural, and by meeting “dreamers” (workers in imagination: junkies, poets and the like), he emphasizes intersubjectivity. Other people, like the “pubescent girl and bearded boy” might have similar struggles, after all, and exchange is necessary: “I brace myself light strong and clear / and understand why I came here // entering their purpose as they enter mine” (246). In Tom Sleigh’s terms, the speaker recognizes “our sexual and social interdependence, in which we cannot help but enter other people’s purposes if we are to be in relation to them” (252). This revelation is intellectual, but also suggestive of sexual penetration. The poem concludes with affirming the speaker’s identity in the same ambiguous way: “I am / I am raw meat / I am a god” (*Collected Poems* 246). This retains and celebrates the duplicity of the intellectual and the carnal, and it is certainly a very effective ending, but being a spiritual being and the embodiment of the profane at the same time cannot be an identity one can inhabit permanently and without the influence of psychedelics.

In his introduction to Gunn’s 2018 *New Selected Poems*, Clive Wilmer identifies “‘Jack Straw’s Castle’ as the poem in which Gunn ‘came out’ as a gay poet, having masked his orientation in earlier books” (xxxvii). But if that is indeed the case, the rather obscure title,

which suggests a persona or mask, seems to work against this. In the Notes section of his *Collected Poems*, Gunn gives the following explanation for the title: "The Oxford dictionary defines Jack Straw as 'a 'straw man'; a man of no substance, worth, or consideration.' A pub in Hampstead is called Jack Straw's Castle, but I just took the name and intended no allusions to Hampstead in the poem." (*Collected Poems* 491). Jack, then, is a representative of the poet, but unlike in dramatic monologues, this is openly disclosed. The relationship between Jack and the poet is thus tighter but indeterminate.[14]

The "Castle" is similarly elusive. Although Gunn claims that Hampstead is not referenced in the poem, it is obvious that he knew about the pub, furthermore, there is a reference to Hampstead in the title of the poem "Hampstead: the Horse Chestnut Trees" from the same collection. The castle is thus perhaps not completely imaginary. In the poem, Jack, feeling trapped in his castle, is wondering about its nature: "sometimes I find myself wondering / if the castle is a castle at all / a place apart, or merely / the castle that every snail / must carry around till his death" (270). He explicitly talks about the emotional baggage he carries around, maintaining the castle as a metaphor while undermining it. The first two sections set up the atmosphere in a similar way. Watching the rain, Jack is alone in a meditative state, possibly under the influence of drugs: "and then there's the matter of breath / on a cold day it rears before me / like a beautiful fern / I'm amazed at the plant […] visions, voices, *burning smells* / all of a rainy day" (emphasis mine 270). The lack of punctuation reinforces this impression. But his trance is immediately broken in the second section by a woman's voice: "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" (271). All this motivates a reading that oscillates between literal and allegorical: the setting is meant to represent something other than itself yet Jack happens to actually inhabit it.

In section 3, the speaker's voice changes into the first person as he describes his environment. He is comfortable in his sunlit room with wooden floor, and the suckling kittens in a box keep him company. At night, however, the domestic bliss quickly turns into a nightmare:

But night makes me uneasy: floor by floor

[14] Paul Giles provides a thorough explanation for the title: "in this poem Gunn deploys two tricks of language to undercut his castellated self. Firstly, the oxymoron of the title, 'Jack Straw's castle', reminds us that Jack Straw - the vagrant peasant leader of the Middle Ages - was the last person likely to possess a castle of his own, and so this oxymoron serves to burlesque the poet's implicit claims to isolation and autonomy. And secondly there is a pun on 'Jack Straw's castle' which contradicts the author's mental imprisonment, for (though the poem does not openly admit this) Jack Straw's Castle is the name of a roundabout and well-known public house on the edge of Hampstead Heath in London, where Gunn was brought up and where many of his autobiographical pieces are set. The actuality of the location has the effect of demonstrating how the poetic voice must necessarily be left incomplete: the punning revelation of the objective fact of Jack Straw's Castle provides a guarantee of the insufficiency of the author's solipsism within the framework of his poem: and so it exemplifies Gunn's adroitness in mirroring or ironising his own narcissism" (91-92).

> 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).

The speaker does not simply dream of a scary castle: its rooms emerge from the house he lives in. It may be that his psychological state alters his perception of reality, but he is definitely inside, both the room and the castle. Like the decaying town of "The Monster", the castle evokes the Gothic mode. The labyrinthine castle is reminiscent of Bluebeard's or Dracula's, the mental projection of their respective owners. The idea that Jack Straw's castle represents repressed emotions is considered: "Do these rooms / Spring up at night-time suddenly, like mushrooms, / Or have they all been hiding here all day?" (272). While the castle in Gothic fiction has been a cliché by the time the poem was written, Jack Straw's is specific for several reasons. Besides it being both real and imaginary, it is populated: "I have met or believed I met / People in some of them, though they were not / The kind I need. They looked convincing, yet / There always was too much of the phantom to them" (271). These beings live in the castle that is "room on room on room", but this could mean rooms opening from other rooms or multiple dimensions of the same room. (It is also worth comparing it to the proliferating image of Narcissus's glaring into the pool—the endless rooms imply a fractured psyche.) "Boudoir and oubliette", the places of intimacy and suffering could be separate rooms, but they could also be the same room. That is to say, the third section of "Jack Straw's Castle" extends the closet to multidimensional and monumental proportions.

The nightmare castle does not exclude the external world, however. Reality permeates it: "Dream sponsors: / Charles Manson, tongue / playing over dry lips, / thinking a long thought; / and the Furies, mad / puppety heads appearing / in the open transom above / a forming door, like heads / of kittens staring angrily / over the edge of their box" (272). The serial killer Manson, who, according to popular lore, ended the Summer of Love with the Tate murders and corrupted the hippie movement, materializes in section 4. Even though they are in the same collection, "Jack Straw's Castle" greatly differs from "The Geysers" on how they relate to the hippie ethos of peace and love. Gunn believed in applying the ideology of his orgiastic experiences to our everyday world:

> Everyone walked around naked, swimming in the cool stream by day and at night staying in the hot baths until early in the morning. Heterosexual and homosexual orgies sometimes overlapped: there was an attitude of benevolence and understanding on all sides […] There is no good reason why that hedonistic and communal love of the

> Geysers could not be extended to the working life of the towns. Unless it is that human beings contain in their emotions some homeostatic device by which they must defeat themselves just as they are learning their freedom. (*Occasions* 184-5)

"Jack Straw's Castle", or at least some parts of the sequence, function as such a device. While "The Geysers" celebrates the fluidity of feeling without shying away from the surrounding anxieties, "Jack Straw's Castle" is fixated on them. The speaker is so anxious that the suckling kittens from section 3 return here in the shape of the Furies, and as they shriek for Medusa to come, they evoke Canto IX of Dante's *Inferno*, mixing literature from the external world into the nightmare vision. Manson, in turn, becomes literary via the poem, and his snake-like tongue-flicker connects him to Medusa.

Medusa represents the fear of being visible. In Freudian psychoanalysis, she is associated with the castration complex: her severed head symbolizes "the 'heimlich place' for women or the uncanny absence of the phallus. The principal evidence for the uncanniness of castration is the relation of castration is the relation between castrating and blinding." (Siebers 142-3). In a non-heterosexual context, castration must have little to do with the woman as a source of fear (in the shape of Charles Manson, she is not even female), but Medusa's petrifying gaze still robs the subject of his agency. Looking at earlier poems that problematize the visibility of the self, such as "The Secret Sharer" and "The Corridor", one could say that the subject surrenders his ability to define himself by being visible: Medusa's gaze fixes his identity on the Other's terms, she misrepresents him. In section 4 of "Jack Straw's Castle", the speaker attempts to tame the source of his fear: "Maybe I won't turn away / maybe I'm so cool / I could outstare her" (272). He seems to succeed in section 5: "The door opens. / There are no snakes. / The head / is on the table" (272). Even though Medusa is decapitated, her powers remain (this is why Perseus, according to the myth, could use it as a weapon). But Medusa turns out to be indifferent, and the source of the speaker's fear is trivialized: "And her eyes / gaze at me, / pale blue, but / blank as the eyes / of zombie or angel, / with the stunned / lack of expression / of one / who has beheld / the source of everything / and found it / the same as nothing" (273).

Undefeated by Medusa, the speaker has no choice but to defeat himself: "In her dazzle I / catch fire / self-delighting / self-sufficient / self-consuming / till / I burn out / so heavy / I sink into / darkness into / my foundations" (273). He ends up "Down in the cellars [where] 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). He is trapped in the cellars which are also his body: it appears that Medusa was successful. But he is not all stone: he hears "many breathing", and feels "a stickiness along the ridges / Of a large central block that feels

like granite / I don't know if it's my own, or I shed it / Or both [….] For this is the seat of needs" (274). The needs, characterized by hardness and stickiness, are sexual needs, yet they have wider implications: "They, the needs, seek ritual and ceremony / To appease themselves […] / Or they would tear apart the life that feeds them (274)". This echoes the recognition of sexual and social interdependence in the last section of "The Geysers". Unlike in that poem, however, the needs here are connected to "ritual and ceremony", that is, fixity, the ordered ways of life. Fixity and fluidity do not seem to exclude each other, rather, they exist in a dialectic. The cellar-like body he is trapped in points to the way out: without a lover, he consumes (defeats) himself, and with a lover, he liberates himself by fixing (defeating) himself.

From this perspective, the castle is recognized to be a self-imposed construct that traps and tortures the self. He reflects on the self-torturing pattern in section 7: "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). Following this realization, he is ejected from the cellar in section 8: "Might it not have been / a thought up film / which suddenly ceases / the lights go up / I can see only / this pearl-grey chamber / false and quiet / no audience here / just the throned one // nothing outside the bone / nothing accessible" (274-5). Section 7 is revealed to be a dream, but the chamber and the throne (Jack Straw's, probably) imply that he still has not returned to reality. But his solitude cannot stay for long: the nightmare returns, Manson's face comes back to the nightmare. It is so close that the speaker assumes his perspective, his identity, and even gains his memories: "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" (276). The speaker and Manson are connected by the motifs of the laurel, which refers to both poetry and ranch life, and the two kinds of sweat that mirrors the boudoir/oubliette duality of the castle. Manson, therefore, is the speaker's double, with which he tortures himself in his nightmare.

The speaker, however, is emotionally attached to the castle, and thereby it poses an unsolvable problem. Manson points out the speaker's solipsism: "dreams don't come from nowhere: it's your dream / He says, you dreamt it. So there's no escape" (276). It may be that there is a world outside his consciousness, but only through his consciousness can he engage it. With this remark, Manson also indicates the fault in relying on the poetic practice of assuming another identity. Manson removes himself from the speaker's face: "And now he's squatting at a distance / To wait the taunt's effect, paring his nails / From a time to time glancing up sideways at me" (276). The speaker interprets Manson's remark as an attack, so that a solution offers itself: "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). He climbs the stairs and wakes up to

see that the nightmare had an effect on the external world. But instead of calming down, he promptly starts imagining the castle in a crumbling state:

> My coldness wakes me,
> mine and the kitchen chair's.
>
> How long have I sat there? I
> went to sleep in bed.
>
> Entering real rooms perhaps,
> my own spectre, cold,
>
> unshivering, as a flight of
> steps that leads nowhere,
>
> in a ruin, where the wall
> abruptly ends, and the steps too
>
> and you stare down at the broken
> slabs far below, at the ivy
>
> glinting over bone-chips which must
> at one time have been castle. (277)

This fills him with panic and to calm down, he makes sure that "The castle is still here, / And I am in the kitchen with a beer / Hearing the hurricane thin out to rain" (277). In this section, the rhyme pattern returns, which gives the poem a sense of control. The castle, nightmarish as it is, provides safety from the storm outside and he is scared of losing it. He hollowed out its meaning, however: "The castle is here, but not snug any more, / I'm loose, I rattle in its hollow core" (277). The castle will always be a problem, but now it seems more manageable than it was before the nightmare: "at though the dungeon will be there for good / […] at least I found I could, / Thrown down, escape by learning what to learn; / And hold it that held me. / Till I return" (278).

The ambiguous ending follows from this realization. The speaker returns to sleep, but hears a muttering coming from an upper floor. He finds out that the man he heard is actually in the same bed as him. They are sharing the bed but their identities are intact: "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" (278). The speaker reassures himself that the man who is in his bed is not imaginary and states, "[t]he beauty's in what is, not what may seem".[15] He has to engage the world outside of his consciousness, only there can he find a lover, it cannot be done internally. Charles Manson, the man who got into his nightmare from the outside, is one of the personae that awaken him to this very idea. As Stefania Michelucci contends,

> "Only after his self has split into a series of personalities which allow him to assume a range of viewpoints (even though these threaten his ontological unity), does Jack Straw finally manage to accept the presence of the Other and break the shell of his isolation. He transforms the nightmare into a dream of union and confronts external reality (51).

This is, however, not a heroic final confrontation: "I turn. And even if he were a dream / – Thick sweating flesh against which I lie curled – / With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world" (279). The speaker embraces the Other, suggesting their unity, but the other meaning of "turn", that is, transformation does not take place. In the course of the poem, he recognizes that he has committed something like the straw man fallacy in a debate: he substituted the other with a made-up viewpoint and struggled against that instead of engaging the partner. But then in the last line, he reassumes his own straw man persona and ends the poem in an indeterminate state. Therefore, even though the poem performs the act of coming out in the sense that it admits homosexual feelings, it is also a declaration of failure.

My description of the poem so far has focused on its content elements, reading the long poem as a narrative text. The poem does read as a coherent narrative of a night of bad dreams with the speaker waking up multiple times, but in terms of form, it is anything but coherent. Out of its eleven sections, some are written in free verse, some in metre, in different varieties of both: meditative free verse with word repetitions but without punctuation, stanzas composed of iambic pentameter lines rhyming ABACCB, short-lined free verse stumbling forward like Gunn's syllabic verse from the 60s, sections that are prose-like but with line breaks, couplets with irregular rhythm, and in the last section, heroic couplets. Colin Falck draws a parallel between the formal features of Gunn's poetry and his addressing of problems of consciousness:

> One realises, in long retrospect, that metres are for Gunn something like a formal equivalent of the protective gear of his motorcyclists; that his difficulty in evolving his own rhythms, or in getting them to hold up for very long, parallels the problem – which increasingly becomes his theme – of his impotence to find any way of accepting or

[15] It is worth to repeat Stephen Burt's remarks about the role of touch here: "Sight, for Gunn, often alienates,– touch unites […] the habits of ordinary life make us associate our own tactile sense with friends and lovers – the people whom we touch, the people we want to touch us. Gunn uses this property of touch to present, and to analyze, friendship, erotic love, and the finally unerasable boundaries between even the closest selves" (Burt 391).

> believing in himself as a finite individual or determinate character within a world of other finite individuals or determinate characters – to find any mode of existence between pure existential will, unable to open itself up to or to receive anything from the world around it, and a kind of sentimental emotionalism which longs to recover the unity of pre-individualised primal state; also that while Gunn's Californianism panders to this sentimentality it also makes inevitable the Charles Manson-ish violence which tends to erupt within its illusory paradise. (42)

Falck sees Gunn's "lack of personality" and lack of "personal rhythms" (38) as an issue with his poetry. In the same article, he mentions Gunn's habit of "playing off content against form" (38), but does not seem to think that it happens in "Jack Straw's Castle." A fragmented personality is represented in the poem in line with its patch work (fragmented) form, but in other ways, form and content are not aligned. The poem does not admit but reflects on vulnerability and failure, while demonstrating masterful formal versatility, and it ultimately manages to create a coherent narrative out of fragments.

The speaker certainly is trapped within his own consciousness, which is "unable to open itself up to or to receive anything from the world around it", but the diverse influences that inform the formal features of the poem actively work against this. Gunn admits, so to speak, several poets into his solipsistic trap: the disorderedness of Robert Duncan, the short compact unpatterned lines of Mina Loy, the heroic couplets echoing Alexander Pope, among others. The central question of the poem, "why can't I leave my castle" (*Collected Poems* 270) echoes some of Alfred Tennyson's poems, such as "The Palace of Art" and "The Lady of Shalott"—not their discussion of pure poetry, free from social concerns, but the struggle they stage between the inner world of the artist and the outside world. The lady of Shalott, notably, chooses to embrace reality, abandoning her shadowy isolation, even though it destroys her:

> She left the web, she left the loom,
> She made three paces through the room,
> She saw the water-lily bloom,
> She saw the helmet and the plume,
> She look'd down to Camelot.
> Out flew the web and floated wide;
> The mirror crack'd from side to side;
> "The curse is come upon me," cried
> The Lady of Shalott. (23)

This self-destruction has been interpreted in feminist criticism as "an act of defiance, a symbol of female empowerment" (Poulson 179). Her mirror is worth to be "crack'd" if it liberates the

Lady of Shalott, and similarly, the merits of self-fragmentation and failure should be acknowledged in connection with the tour de force that is "Jack Straw's Castle." Jack's epiphany ("if I brought all of this stuff inside / There must be an outside to bring it from") is a result of his fragmentation, and the real lover in the last section is his reward and consolation, which is a lot more than the Lady of Shalott can hope for as she gazes on her potential lover Lancelot.

"The Menace" from *The Passages of Joy* (1982) reads like a rewriting of "Jack Straw's Castle", and it should be briefly mentioned here, as it is a more compact and perhaps better realized poem. It retains some of the motifs from the earlier poems that deal with the closet, notably the split in the mental landscape ("an opposition lurks / in the hollows of the cranium", 337), mirror reflections of the self ("There is menace, perhaps cruelty, in his inert mouth […] I can see what he was, clothed mannequin in a stored window", 338) and dissociative paranoia ("I am, am I, / the-one-who-wants-to-get-me", 338), but the hallucinations are quickly proven to be hallucinations and are dissipated. Like in "The Monster", the speaker traverses the city. His walk includes the meat district ("cobbles and flags thick / with accumulated grease / from slaughtered animals", 338) and the gay flesh market ("Romantics in leather bars / watch the play of light and dark", 339). These places, however, are not projections of repressed feelings but parts of everyday life. While intimacy was only implied in the closet poems, the speaker and his male companion in "The Menace" have sex unambiguously. The speaker is definitely out of the closet, of which only traces remain. The poem is a step forward from "Jack Straw's Castle" in the sense that the speaker's facing his inner demons results in not failure but conquering by surrender: "And we sleep at the end / as a couple. I cup / the fine warm back, / broad fleshed shoulder blades. / We gave the menace / our bodies: his arms / were our arms, / his sperm ours. / His terror became / our play" (342).

"The Menace" is thematically more concerned with gender and the nature of fetishes, and is not at all about coming out, but it is a lot more optimistic about language than "Jack Straw's Castle". In section 3, the speaker of "Jack Straw's Castle" admits to be rambling: "the echo of each word drowned out / The next word spoken, and I cannot say / What I was going on about" (271). The leather men of "The Menace", on the other hand, "frame fantasies like the beginnings / of sentences, form opening clauses, / seeking a plausible conjunction / that a sentence can turn on / to compound the daydream" (339). A prose passage later on argues that the conjunction effectively connects the two clauses of a sentence even though it expresses opposition: "The opposition it introduces does not contradict or delete what came before; instead, the whole sentence could be said to turn on it, since it qualifies and extends the meaning

of the first clause, which would otherwise be incomplete" (341). That is to say, language reveals that even though the Other is different, connection between men is regardless possible.

The expression "the-one-who-wants-to-get-me", which is repeated three times in different contexts confirms the same idea. The word "get" means something different in each instance (catch/hurt, know/understand, love/possess), the dangers of opening up to the Other are countered with the possibilities. "The Menace" also ends with insisting on the reality of the speaker's bedfellow: "The 'exemplary figure' / strides away, i.e. / a cheerful man in workclothes / stumbles off grinning / 'By babe gotta get to the job'" (343). Here "the speaker's paranoid consciousness becomes assimilated into the dailiness of domestic routine" (Sleigh 244), and as a result of this transformation, he trusts the Other ("the-one") to express the nature of their relationship. He gives him a voice by directly quoting him and his endearing term "babe". The poem thus realizes a goal which was attempted but not quite achieved in the ambitious "Jack Straw's Castle" sequence.

All three poems analysed in this section address gay sexuality in connection with self-shattering, but in different ways. In his 1995 essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?", Leo Bersani argues for the transformative power in the affirmation of gay sex as dangerous, as "self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance*" (30). He suggests that accepting the vulnerability and the potential for self-annihilation in sex, particularly anal sex, offers a possibility for radical resistance to oppressive heteronormative structures: "Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis" (30). The speaker of "The Geysers" undergoes a ritualistic transformation, a sexual and communal self-shattering experience through which he is, at least momentarily, renewed. In "Jack Straw's Castle", the fragmented castle, which mirrors the split self, traps the speaker, yet also provides him with an ongoing sense of stability. His coming to terms with the chaotic aspect of his identity leads to a more profound understanding of himself. "The Menace" retains the theme of self-shattering terror just to dissipate it in play and everyday domesticity. While these poems clearly make use of the self-shattering potential of gay sex, they also posit sociability as a resolution: "The Geysers" discusses the orgy as a communal experience, "Jack Straw's Castle" posits its speaker as finally "ready for the world," and "The Menace" shows the speaker's lover going to work in the morning after sex. This goes against the antisocial aspect of Bersani's conception of gay sex, the way it refuses to participate in the normative processes that sustain societal structures. On the contrary, Gunn's poetry is engaged in the social integration of gay experiences.

Out-Gay Spaces: "At the Barriers" and "Saturday Night"

"At the Barriers" (published in the *Poems from the 80s* section of the 1994 *Collected Poems*) commemorates a Dore Alley Fair, a leather and fetish event annually held in San Francisco. While it is not a political event like an LGBT pride march, the crowd consists mostly of gays and lesbians who openly celebrate their belonging to the same group:

> The fog burns off and the crowd mingles promiscuously,
> they gaze at each other with a lazy desire
> –the whole city block, its trade suspended for today,
> is warmed by the sun and by this prolonged friendly lust [….]
> We wake drowsily to ourselves, we yawn, we stretch,
> we stretch our sympathies, this is a day of *feeling with* (*Collected Poems* 399)

The poem starts with the symbolic clearing of the fog, which allows for better visibility both in the literal and socio-political sense: the fairgoers can look at each other and be aware of their numbers and close presence. In the sunshine, the poem switches from third person plural to first person plural, indicating that the speaker is one of that crowd. This stands witness to a fully formed minority identity as described in Fassinger:

> *Phase 4: Internalization/synthesis.* In this final developmental phase, the lesbian woman has moved through a process of conflict and re-evaluation, identified herself as a member of a minority group, redefined the meaning of that group, internalized this new identity, and synthesized it into her overall self-concept. This synthesis will be reflected in feelings of fulfilment, security, and an ability to maintain her lesbian sense of self across contexts. (525)

The fairgoers acknowledge themselves as a group and show solidarity, but Gunn's poetic identity shines through, insofar as his obsession with duplicities and contradictory impulses is concerned. In this poem, however, these are not derived from the mental disconnections of the closeted subject, but from the characteristics of the queer community and the event itself.

The first important contradiction is that of unity and competition. Accordingly, the next stanza cuts away from the crowd and sets it against a natural spectacle:

> On the TV screen I saw two Leopard Slugs mating.
> They are hermaphroditic, equally taking and giving,
> overspread with a pattern of uneven spots, leopard-like.
> By a strong thread of mucus reaching from their tails,
> which suspends them from a branch of the Tree,
> they hang – in air – nothing impeding them (399)

The hermaphroditic coupling of the slugs expresses not only uniformity, but familiarity, equality and mutuality: the emotions the fairgoers want to feel at the event. But their relationship to the

slugs is not metaphoric, only parallelistic. The slugs are seen suspended in air, but the fairgoers are obviously not: they have a social context. While mating, the slugs are undisturbed, that is, they do not suffer from the discrimination and violence of other animals, or at least not on the television screen. They are seen indirectly, though the cultural lens of the camera, which shows them as an ideal of unity. The street that the fairgoers are part of, however, is inscribed with the opposite of unity:

> Think of the store-rooms and warehouses on this block,
> crates stacked here, a dolly propped beneath a smudged curtainless window,
> a pervasive smell of cardboard, or wood, or metal.
> It is a holiday, a Sunday, and the businesses are closed;
> but for us in this fair, when we see their signs over doors and showrooms,
> there are still remembrances of competition.
> And we are not as simple as Leopard Slugs,
> not hanging in the air we enjoy a sense of impediment,
> our amity has an edge, as this atmosphere of loving play
> has its limits, each end of the block, marked by flimsy barriers. (400)

Trade may be suspended, but the competitive spirit of capitalism still lingers, and its residue points towards human social limits, the complexities of people and their relationships, and the differences between them. The fog has only temporally retreated: the communal embrace can only last the duration of the fair, and reach only the end of the block.

This limitation opens the floor for further contradictions. As the barriers separate the space into an inside and an outside, the inclusiveness of the fair becomes ironic: “it is an open place, once you have found the way in” (400). Even though the fairgoers celebrate together, it is done “breathing beside our knowledge of the excluded” (400): the people who do participate, as well as the ones who might oppose the fair. There are also inner exclusions: “we enter the Fair's embrace / of men attracted by men and of women attracted by women, / all together, though there are mixed couples too, all are welcome” (400). The crowd must remain somewhat heterogenic if it is to include a variety of identifiable sexual identities. Being a fetish event, the fair celebrates power as much as it celebrates free love: “there must be competition and conflict, humans cannot get by without them, / black boots on the black street making a show, a play, / a play of strength, a show of power put on to be disarmed” (400). Therefore, the contradictions of inclusion and exclusion, as well as of unity and competition seem to be inherent in this community. It follows that regardless of the ambiguities of the fare, it permits anyone who wants to enter.

This mixture of exclusiveness and permissiveness allows for the diverse literary influences of the poem. The street in its remoteness is an idyllic place, "where the poet and lover are active, an Arcady of tarmac" (400), even though it is nothing like an uncorrupted wilderness. In this place, "the paunchy, dewlapped, and wrinkled […] have full rights" (401) among the young fashionable people, so does the poet who attended, and even the dead join in the fun. After all, the poem commemorates not only the fair: it is written in the memory of Gunn's most important literary influence, Robert Duncan. "I think of Duncan's field", the speaker says, by which he alludes to Duncan's *The Opening of the Field*, and the first poem of the collection, "Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" describes a place similar to Arcady. The next stanza, furthermore, adopts a Whitmanesque cataloguing technique to describe individuals in the fair:

> The short bartender at the beer-stall works briskly,
> his chaps bright with splashes of beer from the cans he opens.
> A few feet from me two women embrace, with joking boisterous cries.
> One of my friends has got so fat I do not recognize him for a moment.
> A jazz band plays on the stage; there are contests; unarm, Eros; I gaze after a young man
> of such compacted good looks I can hardly believe it. (401)

As in Whitman's "I Hear America Singing", where the diverse workers singing their individual songs together create the song that is America itself, the fairgoers in Gunn's Arcady of tarmac are each "a sum of specifics" (401) united to form a greater whole. Finally, the poem alludes to Ben Johnson and his masques. In the Notes section of his *Collected Poems*, Gunn mentions that "At least two of Ben Jonson's masques were composed in connection with 'barriers' (which for him meant an exhibition of tilting). I use barriers in a modern sense but retain the associations of a masque" (491-2). The incoherent coherence of union and competition, of inclusion and exclusion, of the difference that makes them similar, of their similarity that points towards their difference is the community's inherent trait. This makes it possible that "we play, at the barriers, the Masque of Difference and Likeness" (402).

"Saturday Night" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) describes a gay bath house, and does so by playfully echoing the nightmarish interiors of "Jack Straw's Castle":

> I prowl the labyrinthine corridors
> And have a sense of being underground
> As in a mine... dim light, the many floors,
> The bays, the heat, the tape's explosive sound.
> People still entering, though it is 3 a.m.,

Stripping at lockers and, with a towel tied round,

Stepping out hot for love of stratagem (*Boss Cupid* 45)

The terza rima form, inherited from Dante, suggests a descent into hell. But the maze in "Saturday Night" is very real, not something religious, psychological or imaginary. The speaker's "sense of being underground" is not infernal but cultural: instead of the silence or the wails of sinners, there is loud music. "And in each room, a different scene attends" (45), which could be different factions of the gay scene, fashion scene, or even enacted BDSM scenes; the attendees of the bath house are, furthermore, "ready for every fresh phenomenon" (45). Unlike in "The Corridor", attendees are visible to each other and their gaze is mutual: they are "Pausing at thresholds (wonder never ends), / Peering at others, as others peer at them / Like people in shelters searching for their friends / Among the group come newest from the street" (45). The "Friends by the bedful" enjoy a sense of camaraderie in the "Barracks", and their community is a democratic one: "All here, of any looks, of any age, / Will get whatever they are looking for" (45). Their sense of being together, furthermore, do not last for only the duration of a fair or holiday, but as the title suggests, it is a part of everyday life.

The liberating experience of the bath house scene is a quasi-spiritual experience, its attendees are builders of a utopia:

If, furthermore,

Our Dionysian experiment

To build a city never dared before

Dies without reaching to its full extent,

At least in the endeavor we translate

Our common ecstasy to a brief ascent

Of the complete, grasped, *paradisal* state

Against the wisdom pointing us away. (emphasis mine, 45-46)

This is very different from the urban environment described in "At the Barriers". The terza rima form suggests not only the *Inferno* part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but also *Paradiso*, and thereby the soul's ascent to Heaven. As Tom Sleigh contends, "not only does Gunn appropriate the holy city's name to describe the nonmonogamous, noncompetitive, noncapitalist polis of carnal desire, in which everyone gets what they want, but there are no losers and hence no winners either in this New Jerusalem" (249). The weakness of this utopia is that it is "of the carnal heart" (46), tied to the body[16], which is vulnerable to time:

[16] It is worth comparing the enthusiasm of the poem to Leo Bersani's pessimistic description of gay bathhouses: "Anyone who has ever spent one night in a gay bathhouse knows that it is (or was) one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable. Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours, and rejection,

Some lose conviction in mid-arc of play,
Their skin turns numb, they dress and will depart:
The perfect body, lingering on goodbyes,
Cannot find strength now for another start.
Dealers move in, and murmuring advertise
Drugs from each doorway with a business frown.
Mattresses lose their springs. Beds crack, capsize,
And spill their occupants on the floor to drown.
Walls darken with the mold, or is it rash?
At length the baths catch fire and then burn down,
And blackened beams dam up the bays of ash. (46)

Like Jack Straw's castle, the bath house is an extension of the body. The attendees and the facilities they use both weaken with old age. The dark spots on the walls could either be mould or rash for bodies and bath house are both vulnerable to disease. Times change in general: the hippie ethos is discarded for the "business frown" of dealers, and the 1980s capitalism and commodification they signify. The Barracks, like AIDS patients, does not have a functioning immune system by which it can protect itself from disease and death. It thereby turns into a nightmare hellscape, Gay Liberation cast back into the Inferno. The baths burn down, but this loss is not something only the self suffers from: it belongs to the entire community. The title could refer to both repeatedly visiting the bath house and repeatedly remembering its loss.

The poems previously discussed render legible the entire process of a gay individual sexual identity development. They form a narrative in which the closet and the divided consciousness within are being reimagined and transformed in each poem. In Gunn's first two volumes, "The Wound," "The Secret Sharer," and "The Corridor" address a fatal dissociation between selves and a seemingly impenetrable split between the inside and outside. From the 60s on, there is a deepening understanding of this disconnection as Gunn experiments with addressing his experiences more openly. This is also the time when the closet becomes associated with the city, as seen in "The Monster". In the 70s, several of Gunn's poems address the transformation of the self. "Bravery" (*Touch*, 1967) and "Behind the Mirror" (*Jack Straw's Castle*, 1976) describe places, and consider solving the problem of the split consciousness by way of transformation. In *Jack Straw's Castle*, which is identified as Gunn's coming out

generally accompanied by two or three words at most, could be swift and brutal, with none of the civilizing hypocrisies with which we get rid of undesirables in the outside world" (Bersani 12). Both descriptions are from the time after the AIDS crisis broke out, yet they are strikingly different: "Saturday Night", while mentioning competitiveness (the "business frown" of the dealers), sees the bathhouse as a social utopia, even if it is a failed one.

volume, the disconnected self has to struggle in real places, and with real people, and this is where homosexual desire is openly and unambiguously admitted (I analyse the long sequences "The Geysers" and "Jack Straw's Castle", and briefly consider "The Menace" from his 1982 book *The Passages of Joy*). Finally, I look at some later poems, namely "At the Barriers" and "Saturday Night" from the *Collected Poems* (1997) and *Boss Cupid* (2000), where the disconnection of the selves is gone, but some of the old motifs (the city street split between inside and outside, and the maze from the title poem of *Jack Straw's Castle*) are retained for a discussion of a fully-formed gay minority identity. Reading all these poems together is a fascinating experience because it shows how the recurring motif of the closet is deliberately developed throughout Gunn's oeuvre, and one may follow his considerable personal, political, and poetic development.

Chapter 2

"He / looks into / his own eyes": Thom Gunn's Ekphrastic Poems

Thom Gunn appreciated the visual arts: of the ten volumes of poetry he published, eight include ekphrastic poems, in which he wrote about paintings, cinema, photography, and sculpture, indiscriminately. Some of Gunn's "verbal representation[s] of visual representation[s]," to use James A. W. Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis (3), like "In Santa Maria del Popolo," have become widely popular, but all of them are significant in relation to his oeuvre. In the span of over forty years, the poet's attitude towards art changed substantially. Gunn, who started out as a post-war English antimodernist (categorized as a member of the Movement) was considerably influenced by contemporary American poetry, and by the end of his career, his ekphrastic work became thoroughly postmodern in character. It could be argued, however, that already his early poetry exhibited a social constructivist conception of culture and art, not differentiating between high art and mass culture or various art forms; Gunn, like W. H. Auden before him, always discussed art embedded in its context.

This context also includes the viewer, whose own visibility informs the way Gunn describes art throughout his career. He addressed homosexual topics only indirectly for decades before the publication of *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), the collection in which he publicly "came out" (*New Selected Poems* xxxvii). While most of the artworks discussed in Gunn's ekphrastic works have little to do with homosexuality, they are gazed at by a gay man. Being gay, of course, is being defined by the object of desire. In psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the act of looking and being looked at carries sexual pleasure (Freud 156), and recognizing one's own image is a key moment in one's psychological development (Lacan 442). W. J. T. Mitchell's work on images shows that in Western thought, notably in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's influential *Laocoon*, art is not genderless but exists in a heterosexual binary between a male viewer and a female object, even in a battle between the sexes (109–10). In his book *The Wallflower Avant-Garde* (2016), Brian Glavey explores how queer poets have moved beyond playing (superior) words against (inferior) images in their ekphrastic writing. In his view, "[q]ueer ekphrasis in particular is dedicated to the proliferation of an unpredictable spectrum of relationality, multiplying ways of desiring, identifying with, attaching to, loving, imitating, envying, and sometimes ignoring works of art" (6). Glavey's book discusses how modernist art and literature utilized ekphrasis to articulate and negotiate queer identities, offering insights into the interplay between visual and textual representations. In his analysis of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, and others, he "looks to the relation between the verbal and the visual to elaborate something like a reparative reading of aesthetic concepts generally considered in repressive terms—spatial form, abstraction, stasis, silence,

impersonality—showing each of these not be allied exclusively with repression and negativity, but rather as generating points of sociability" (16).

My contention is that the relationality of word and image is to address questions of selfhood in Gunn's poetry too. Describing images and/or strongly visual experiences is a way for the self to relate himself to the Other and the outside world. Throughout Gunn's career, ekphrasis is repurposed to explore Gunn's themes of isolation, sympathy, sociability, and escaping selfhood, until word and image become interdependent, equal, even complicit, in line with the open expression of queer sociability in Gunn's late work. The poems I discuss in this chapter are not all ekphrastic in the strict sense (as Heffernan would define ekphrasis): "the queerness of ekphrasis has in part to do with a definitional incoherence that vacillates between a minoritizing and a universalizing logic: on the one hand, it is considered a limited and specific sort of lyric; on the other, it is taken to be emblematic of the lyric in general" (Glavey 8). I include, therefore, some poems that, while not discussing visual art per se, discuss the relationship between words and strongly visual experiences in a similar way.

The earliest examples of Gunn's ekphrastic poems set the dynamism of language against the static image. The painted figures in "Before the Carnival" (*The Sense of Movement*, 1957) and "In Santa Maria del Popolo" (*My Sad Captains*, 1961) are in the process of putting on a new identity, but this process is halted by the static medium. The speakers of "On the Move" and "Merlin in the Cave" (*The Sense of Movement*) desire to be part of the moving image but they remain inactive, and maintain their mastery through their objectifying gaze, while they themselves remain invisible. *Positives* (1966), a book of collaboration by Gunn and his brother desexualises the poet's attitude toward images. He experiments with various ways of relating images to words. Dynamism is a central concept, but the poems reinforce, complement, counterpoint and extend the images instead of spying at them. "Thomas Bewick" (*Jack Straw's Castle*, 1976) integrates a human figure into the natural imagery surrounding him, even though the speaker remains distinct. The ekphrastic poems from *The Passages of Joy* (1982), "Expression," "Selves," and "Song of a Camera," highlight images and visual techniques that fragment and erase the speaker/viewer's individuality, and thereby dominate language.

The ekphrastic poems from Gunn's last two books, "Her Pet" (*The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992), "Painting by Vuillard," and "The Artist as an Old Man" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000), relate words and images in a more sympathetic way. While several of Gunn's ekphrastic poems have an element of queer sociability in the sense that they affirm connections between gay artists and foster a sense of belonging together ("Song of a Camera," for example, was addressed to Robert Mapplethorpe), these late poems are also queer in their attitude towards art. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,

> Most moderately well-educated Western people in this century seem to share a similar understanding of homosexual definition . . . organized around a radical and irreducible *incoherence*. It holds the minoritizing view that there is a distinct population of persons who "really are" gay; at the same time, it holds the universalizing views that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities. (85, emphasis mine)

Gunn's ekphrastic poems in his last two volumes are organized by oscillations that are analogous to the oscillation between the universalizing and minoritizing views of queerness as described by Sedgwick.[17] They conceive of the self—and the artwork that represents it—in radically and irreducibly incoherent terms. The Renaissance sculptures discussed in "Her Pet" depict both the genderless universality of death and the particularities of life, and become associated with the universal(ized) deaths (due to the particular cause of AIDS) of particular people (who in turn become universalized by Gunn's art)[18]. In a similar manner, "Painting by Vuillard" discusses a picture the style of which the speaker as a young man associated with the assumed simplicity of old age. The poem thus initially sets up a dichotomy between simplicity/old age and complexity/youth only to deconstruct it by pointing out the complexity and vividness of all age groups among museumgoers, and linking them all with art. A synaesthesia at the end then completely muddles the identities of the museumgoers, young and old: they are differentiated from the homogenous painting as they are a heterogenous crowd, yet they become indirectly associated with the painting as they evoke the taste of the coffee represented in the painting. "The Artist as an Old Man" goes a step further by deploying the trope of turning into an image in a light-hearted manner and completely doing away with the idea of the original self. None of the three poems features a hierarchy between art and viewer/speaker as these become reconciled and sympathetic to each other. I consider this to be a sign of mature self-acceptance. Gunn's ekphrastic work changes in tandem with his gay self-creation process (see Chapter 1): as the closet is transformed into gay social spaces like a bathhouse and a street fair, the ekphrastic poems come to express interdependence and sociability in the way they relate words to images.

Pictorial stasis as halted identification: "Before the Carnival" (1957) and "In Santa Maria del Popolo" (1961)

[17] This radical and irreducible incoherence is what I take as the narrow definition of "queer," the wide being a synonym for not heterosexual.

[18] Colin Gillis notes that "Gunn eschews the conventional vocabulary of the AIDS crisis in *The Man with Night Sweats* […] In disavowing this vocabulary, Gunn affirms the similarity between the social problems caused by AIDS and those caused by outbreaks of disease in the past." (160)

It is perhaps ironic that Gunn's first ekphrastic poem is included in *The Sense of Movement* (1957), considering the static nature of painting and the volume's obsession with dynamism. The poems from this collection celebrate the human will, action, and being in motion as means of an existentialist quest for authenticity. Some meditative poems, however, linger on static moments that merely suggest future movement. "Before the Carnival," for example, clearly celebrates the stasis of the image, not unlike John Keats's paradigmatic "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Musical instruments and their "unheard melodies" are crucial elements of the composition on Keats's urn, but in Carl Timner's painting *Four Dancers* (1954) as described in Gunn's poem, they are the central motif. Both poems call attention to the irony of music represented in visual art; after all, music is fundamentally temporal and cannot exist in a single moment. Furthermore, Timner's painting suggests that music is played by way of pretence.

Gunn's speaker contrasts the characters that pretend to play music and those that do not—the former are deceitful adults, while the latter are innocent and young. One of the adult characters is described as disingenuous on various levels:

> And lit by a sudden artificial beam
> A smocked pretender with his instrument
> Knowing that he is fragment of a dream
> Smirks none the less with borrowed merriment (*Collected Poems* 44)

Although he appears to be smiling, he merely imitates emotion, just like he imitates playing music. He is aware of the illusoriness of his presence, which is emphasized by the "artificial" light that illuminates him. He is already "smocked" for the carnival, whereas the little boy is still naked and free of theatricality. He and his brother, moreover, are described as idle: "A naked boy leans on the outspread knees / Of his tall brother lolling in costume" (44). Although "He too must pick an instrument at length / For this is painted during carnival" (45), the stasis of the painting preserves his inaction: his static innocence is opposed to the temporal movement of music and carnival theatrics that corrupt the self with experience. It is important to note that the last line contradicts the title of the poem. The painting was made "during" carnival, that is, the painter was aware of what a carnival entails. The carnival, which serves as the context of the painting, would allow for free expression of socially non-sanctioned behaviour (including non-normative sexual behaviour), but this is deliberately put on halt in the depicted reality of the painting; the partakers in the carnival are condemned, while innocence (including sexual innocence) is preserved and celebrated.

"In Santa Maria del Popolo" (*My Sad Captains*, 1961) discusses a painting about personal transformation not prevented by, but caught in stasis: Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul* (1601). On the road to Damascus, the Pharisee Saul, a persecutor of Christians up until

then, has a vision that changes his mind about Christianity. He eventually becomes an Apostle of Christ under the name of Paul, but the poem's speaker does not put the static painting in a dynamic narrative. On the contrary, he in effect secularizes the painting by treating it as static. The rhetorical question focuses on the painting as an image:

> O wily painter, limiting the scene
> From a cacophony of dusty forms
> To the one convulsion, what is it you mean
> In that wide gesture of the lifting arms? (*Collected Poems* 93)

The V-shape of Saul's arms has a destabilizing effect that defines the painting: "Caravaggio, ignoring the celestial vision, prefers to anchor the scene in the material reality of a horse-riding accident which symbolizes the shock experienced by the apostle" (Witting and Patrizi 64). The speaker recognizes this authorial intent for realism by comparing the painting with other paintings by Caravaggio:

> The painter saw what was, an alternate
> Candour and secrecy inside the skin.
> He painted, elsewhere, that firm insolent
> Young whore in Venus' clothes, those pudgy cheats (93)

Although the image remains silent, the church building itself is verbally available for the speaker. The title of the poem refers to the chapel in Rome in which the encounter with the painting takes place, but the title of the painting is not identified. Ironically, the speaker's attempt to offer a secularized interpretation of the painting is made possible not only by his knowledge of Caravaggio, but the lighting of the church:

> I see how shadow in the painting brims
> With real shadow, drowning all shapes out
> But a dim horse's haunch and various limbs,
> Until the very subject is in doubt. (93)

Light and shadow in the building are treated in the same manner as the chiaroscuro of the painting, and the context is just as important as the painting itself. Discussing Auden, William Carlos Williams, and John Ashbery, James A. W. Heffernan contends that modernist and postmodernist ekphrastic poems differ from previous efforts as they "typically evoke actual museums of art along with the words they offer us, the whole complex of titles, curatorial notes, and art historical commentary that surround the works of art we now see on museum walls" (8). The first three stanzas treat the church building as a museum, and it does not even occur to the

speaker that the paintings here might also have religious uses.[19] As he moves to the "dim interior of the church" (94) in the fourth stanza, however, he sees praying figures, "[m]ostly old women: each head closeted / In tiny fists holds comfort as it can" (94). By showing sympathy to and understanding of their plight, he proposes an existentialist reading of both the praying figures and the painting: "Their poor arms are too tired for more than this / —For the large gesture of solitary man, / Resisting, by embracing, nothingness" (94).

While the speaker sheds light on the painting and its context, his identity remains elusive but significant. As he observes the shadows, both painted and real, "[u]ntil the very subject is in doubt" (93), he exploits the ambiguity of the word "subject." Whatever the painting represents becomes uncertain due to the altered visibility of the canvas, but it is clear that the speaking subject (the poet's representative) is also "in doubt" as he tries to decipher the painting. When he fails to do so, and stops looking at it, he is "hardly enlightened" (94): by making this pun, he draws attention to his own visibility. Even though he speaks in a disinterested manner and does not assume an identity, his thought process to an extent defines him. He sees Saul's gesture both as the "defeat of a yearning for the Absolute which is inevitably denied to man" (Michelucci 83) and as the assumption of a new identity: "I see him sprawl, / Foreshortened from the head, with hidden face, / Where he has fallen, Saul becoming Paul" (93). Identification and self-defeat are recurring topics in *The Sense of Movement*. As Brian Teare points out, "its subjects might be said to be a man's capacity to define himself on his own terms and the ways in which he's best able to do so—ironic, given the context in which it was written" (222). This irony comes from the fact that Gunn himself was unable to publicly identify as gay without complete self-defeat.[20] In this context, coming out is self-defeat not only because of the psychological torment involved in getting rid of internalized homophobia, but also because it would have been a terrible choice at a time homosexuality was not yet decriminalized and was held in considerable contempt. "In Santa Maria del Popolo" explores this contradiction further, so the situation in the shadowy chapel with the painting, "an alternate / Candour and secrecy inside the skin" (93), and the old women, "each head closeted / In tiny fists" (94) can be seen as his objective correlatives for his own opaque visibility, silence, and halted identification.

Even though the speaker is implied as an object of somebody else's gaze, he and the painted man are not equals. Saul is not only conveniently silent but conveniently blind: he

[19] The origins of this secularized perspective are to be found in the museum culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in Romanticism. Museum visitors experience a sense of physical presence during contemplating artworks, which is reflected in Keats's quoted poem. Works of art on display have a purely aesthetic effect because museums remove artworks from their original places and change their functions (Phinney 212).

[20] Jeffrey Meyers points out that "Gunn describes an apocryphal account of the artist's death, in a fight over money with a male prostitute" (589). The poem puts it very discreetly: Caravaggio "was strangled, as things went, / For money, by one such picked off the streets" (*Collected Poems* 93), yet the gay subtext is apparent.

cannot see the one who deciphers and fixes the meaning of his mysterious gesture and has no way of doing the same. Fallen from his horse, legs spread apart, and intimately close to the viewer, he is helpless and vulnerable. In "Before the Carnival," the naked boy and musicians (referred to as "miser" and "pretender," respectively) are similarly mastered by the speaking subject. The boy and his brother "must dress for trooping" (45) eventually, for they are to assume an identity by becoming a spectacle, just like Saul in the poem "In Santa Maria del Popolo" as Saul becomes a spectacle by assuming a new identity. During his time in Rome, Gunn saw both Timner's *Four Dancers* and Caravaggio's *The Conversion of St. Paul*, and he even had his own portrait painted by Timner. It is only fitting that the painter's biography on his website announces the existence of the portrait, but the portrait itself does not appear there; like the implied author of the poems discussed in this section, the painted young Gunn avoids the risk of becoming an object of our gaze.

Mastery, identification, and motion picture: "On the Move" (1957), "Merlin in the Cave: He Speculates without a Book" (1957)

"On the Move" (*The Sense of Movement*, 1957) is one of Gunn's most famous poems, and has been widely read as a depiction of existential struggle. The motorcyclists it depicts, as G. S. Fraser argues, "are vividly the topic but, savingly in the end, not the theme of the poem. The theme, rather, is Sartrean existential humanism" (20). He finds their movement to be "towards value", in connection with "the Sartrean idea that value is imposed by choice, not there in the world to compel choice" (22). The poem indeed has an explicit and very convincing existentialist moral, but it is rarely considered to be ekphrastic, despite of the fact that it was inspired by László Benedek's 1953 film *The Wild One* (Campbell 29). This is probably because Gunn has taken considerable liberties with the source material. The epigraph "Man, you gotta Go," for example, is a quote from the film, albeit an incorrect one (perhaps this was why it was omitted from the *Collected Poems*). When Kathie the barmaid (Mary Murphy) asks Johnny (Marlon Brando) where he and his biker gang are headed, he says "Man, we're just gonna go" (00:21:35). The motorcyclists in the poem also lack a clear goal: "They ride, direction where the tyres press" (*Collected Poems* 39). The baffling last lines of the poem "Reaching no absolute, in which to rest / One is always nearer by not keeping still" (40) is similar in meaning to Johnny's explanation of their directionlessness:

> Listen, you don't go any one special place. That's cornball style. You just go. A bunch gets together after all week, it builds up. The idea is to have a ball. If you're gonna stay cool, you've got to wail. You've got to put something down. You got to make some jive. Know what I'm talking about? (00:21:57).

The diction, however, is so radically different that the film is barely recognizable as source material. Yet the iconic opening scene of the film, in which the bikers are arriving from a great distance towards the camera is accurately captured in the second stanza: "On motorcycles, up the road, they come / Small, black, as flies hanging in the heat, the Boys, / Until the distance throws them forth" (39).

The poem also greatly differs from the film in the way the speaker's gaze objectifies the bikers[21]:

> their hum
> Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.
> In goggles, donned impersonality,
> In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
> They strap in doubt (39)

The boys in the poem are indistinguishable in their "donned impersonality," but those in the film all look different; only some of them wear goggles, and Johnny's sunglasses definitely make him stand out. They all wear similar black jackets with their logo on them, but these jackets are visibly clean, while the second-place trophy they steal from the Carbonville race is reworked into the dust metaphor in the poem. This is where the similarities end. The poem ignores the rest of the film; there is no narrative, no characters are mentioned, and the small town where most of the film takes place is completely absent. It might seem unjust to even consider fidelity in an ekphrastic poem, after all, it is impossible to completely translate visual art into text. Exploring the fidelity of the poem to the film, however, sheds light on the original visual elements in the poem. István Rácz contends that Gunn's "early poems (such as 'On the Move,' to mention the most famous) are based on the detailed descriptions of familiar situations. Such texts are not unlike snapshots" (199). He sees the poem's sexualized descriptions, such as "their hum / Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh" as photographic or cinematic: "The imagery of the poem shows characteristically macho men wearing leather jackets, riding their motorcycles, and the 'close-ups' reveal sexual symbols" (201).[22] Although the speaker of the recreates the source material with his words, he adopts a visual technique to do so.

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[21] In her influential 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey describes how the male gaze is activated in films not only by directors, but also in spectators as an inner urge (17). Although Mulvey discusses the female spectacle gazed at by men, the scopophilic pleasure and objectifying gaze of the speaker in "On the Move" is also present.

[22] The queerness of macho men wearing leather jackets and riding motorbikes is now a cliché in popular culture, but the connection between bikers and queerness was not so obvious for the mainstream in the 50s, the time when the icon of the outlaw motorcyclist made its appearance in popular films such as *The Wild One* (1953). Still, in some of Gunn's early poems including "On the Move," "the combined erotic charge of man, machine, and leather . . . is inextricably linked to a pursuit of freedom that is both sexual and existential" (Powell 20).

The speaker's impartial and objective tone effectively muddles the way he relates to the image: he desires and identifies with the bikers only indirectly. When he "zooms in" on the boys' crotch and clothes, he probes deeper and reveals a feeling a viewer would not have access to: "In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust, / They strap in doubt." Since the boys all wear goggles and are moving at great speed, he cannot possibly know this by simply looking at them. Like in the poem about Caravaggio's painting, "the subject is in doubt," and it is still unclear whose doubt it is. As the poem takes this doubt to an existential level, it completely effaces the subject by repeatedly using the indefinite pronoun "one":

> One is not necessarily discord
> On Earth; or damned because, half animal,
> One lacks direct instinct, because one wakes
> Afloat on movement that divides and breaks.
> One joins the movement in a valueless world,
> Crossing it, till, both hurler and the hurled,
> One moves as well, always toward, toward. (40)

This rhetorical awkwardness has to be intentional: the pronoun refers to both the bikers and the speaker. Yet the speaker remains more or less invisible, spying on the image.

He is also spying on the natural imagery, especially the birds at the beginning of the poem, with similar interest. The blue jay and the swallows in the poem are completely missing from *The Wild One*. While the film contrasts the disrespectful and violent biker gang with the dull and petty townsfolk, the poem contrasts them with nature: the bikers have no goal, but "The blue jay scuffling in the bushes follows / Some hidden purpose" (39), and birds, as opposed to the bikers, "complete their purposes" (40). This is to establish the poem's existentialist interpretation of the motorcyclists and their ride, whereas the film is much more concerned with social order and the motorcyclist as a potential threat to it. (The tightly controlled iambic stanzas with the elaborate ABACCDDB rhyme scheme, however, supplement the idea of order and control.) To save Kathie from the drunk bikers wrecking the town, Johnny takes her on his bike to a wooded area. The sexual tension generated between the two characters is expected to be released here after the exhilarating ride. But Kathie is too exhausted and Johnny is too insensitive, and the nature scene ends up in a chase that is mistaken for attempted rape, which results in violence and the death of an old man. Sexual violence is also an important element in the poem. Nature is to succumb to the phallic riders: "They scare a flight of birds across the field / Much that is natural, to the will must yield" (39). Yet before the bikers arrive, the birds are engaged in an erotic play by "scuffling in the bushes," as they "spurt" and so forth (Rácz 252), which effectively makes the speaker a voyeur.

One of the last poems from the same collection, "Merlin in the Cave: He Speculates without a Book," is similar to "On the Move" in the sense that he is peeping at natural imagery, but the violence of the gaze is toned down in favour of trying to be part of the spectacle. The speaker of the dramatic monologue is situated within a cave from which he is viewing the world outside[23]: "Pressing my head between two slopes of stone / I peer at what I do not understand, / clouds, and separate rooks" (*Collected Poems* 81). He is clearly alienated from what he sees, for he has replaced his animal impulse with the intellectual endeavours of the wizard: "I lost their instinct. It was late. To me / The bird is only meat for augury" (81). Merlin has painstakingly tried to recover this instinct by reclaiming both his sexual appetite and his sex appeal:

> With aphrodisiac
> I brought back vigour; oiled and curled my hair;
> Reduced my huge obesity, to wear
> The green as tightly girdled at my waist
> As any boy who leapt about in court. (81–82)

Nature is also excessively sexualized. The convolvulus (also called morning glory, which is a slang term for the erection following sleep) is "as fat and rich in sap" as the speaker "was rich in lusting" (81). Birds, widely featured in poetry for their spectacular mating habits, are suggestively mentioned together with bees to stress the sexual idiom "birds and bees."

"Merlin in the Cave" is not an ekphrastic poem in the strict sense. Yet the speaker attempts to overcome his isolation by verbally recreating what he sees in order to become part of it. Unlike "In Santa Maria del Popolo," in which the speaker moves around the chapel and looks at the static painting, the passive Merlin finds the image(ry) to be in motion:

> I watch the flux I never guessed: the grass;
> The watchful animal that gnaws a root
> Knowing possession means the risk of loss
> Ripeness that rests an hour in the fruit. (82)

He is compelled to action regardless of the risk of transience that comes with it. He revisits the problem in the last stanza: "How can a man live, and not act or think / Without an end? But I must act, and make / The meaning in each movement that I take" (84). Movement here is meaningful, therefore verbal. As Stefania Michelucci argues, "while the self suffers exile from the world in the existence of others who become testimony of his alienation from nature, through language, in the naming of the universe, the Self (à la Heidegger) finds itself and

[23] Several of Gunn's longer poems stage man's isolation from the outside world. See Chapter 1 for a discussion of "Jack Straw's Castle" and Chapter 3 for "Troubadour".

becomes part of the universe" (80). This is indeed the conclusion that the speaker comes to at the end of the poem, but it is merely speculation: he does not act. He is doomed to failure not only because "possession means the risk of loss," but because he is out to possess. He wants to make the spectacle (nature) his own in the sexual sense: he seeks not to identify with, but to penetrate into it, and verbally master it. If this is indeed a contest, the poem clearly brings out the spectacle as the winner (as it is suggested by the title), and not language, yet it can be argued that the strongly controlled language, especially the ostentatiously formalistic rhyme royal stanzas, redress the imbalance of power.

Brother Artists and Sister Arts: *Positives* (1966)

Positives, a collaboration between Thom Gunn and his brother Ander Gunn stands out from the rest of the poetry. The book features Ander's photographs, and as a result, Thom's poems (the cover says "verses") are not self-contained. Even though it is an admirable effort as a collaboration, only two *Positives* poems are included in Gunn's *Collected Poems,* and this makes *Positives* a rarity or a collector's item for Gunn's readers. Most of it simply does not stand on its own. It is a milestone in his artistic development, however, because it includes his first attempts at free verse and fragmented syntax. Thematically speaking, *Positives* continues what *My Sad Captains* (1961) started: existential anguish is juxtaposed with humane gentleness. The photographs have the same duality to them: while inspired by bleak social realism, they show a more optimistic outlook on life: images of play, work, consumption and entertainment evoke the economic progress and flourishing popular culture of 1960s London. According to Gunn's autobiography, he "spent a year of happiness" (*Occasions* 180) in London, but he struggled with "shaping the new 'humane impulse'" (179). Getting his experience down was his major concern during the 60s, and this is relevant to *Positives* too. As Michelucci contends, since the pictures preceded the poems and Gunn was mostly there when they were taken, "he had to capture their essence by adding a verbal complement" (111). Collaboration, co-presence and complementation define *Positives*: the pictures and poems relate to each other in various complex ways, like brothers do.

The photographs represent all kinds of people: labourers, musicians, businessmen, housewives, rich women, etc. indiscriminately, but they are ordered according to age from babies and children to teenagers and adults and the elderly. This suggests that the images record the development of a single lifetime from beginning to end. The poems in turn connect the images to reinforce the sense of continuity. The verb tense in the very first poem points to the time when the bathing baby adjacent to the poem was still in the womb: "She has been a germ, a fish, / and an animal" (*Positives* 6). The poem following the baby starts with "The body

blunders forward / into the next second" (8), which connects the baby to the toddler who raises a hat in the air on page 9. Although the gesture is described as a "triumph" (8) in the poem preceding her, the next poem starts with a conjunction: "But childhood takes a long time" (10). This urges the reader to similarly connect the rest of the poems and photographs, even where it is not motivated by the grammar.

The teenagers and young adults following the children are represented as in motion or with objects that suggest movement: seated on bikes, crossing the street, smoking and drinking, playing music and singing. Things are going well up until page 37, which shows a couple of newlyweds, and with them, a shift in speed and tone. Adulthood is represented by images of labour and idleness, and even consumption takes a more sombre tone: shopping becomes one of the "responsibilities / of marriage" (38), and having coffee and cake is "quite a relief" from the "hard life a rich person leads" (64). Self-development gives way to developing the city: raising children (40), constructing buildings (48), shovelling rubble (58), etc. A lonely drunk in a pub (42), a black figure in a snowy car park (47) and a bored waitress (61) suggest the bleakness and routine of adulthood. The book ends with photographs of and poems about people at the margins of the new consumer society of 60s Britain: the elderly and the homeless, who are consumed by time instead of consuming themselves and decline instead of developing.

The movement from birth do death is considerably smooth: the photographs aim to document life as a whole, and the poems do not reveal them to be representations. *Positives* exploits the popular (mis)conception of photography, namely, that it is an objective art. In his book *Camera Ludica*, Barthes discusses the "noeme" of photography, something that differentiates photography from other forms of representation: "I call 'photographic' referent not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens [...] in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*" (76). As David Kennedy puts it, based on Barthes, "We tend to think of the photograph as true, objective recording of reality and […] something that can give us more than it really can. Our belief in the photograph's 'truth' is also a belief that it is a macrocosmically complete sample of the world" (147). Some of the pictures are portraits, and four of the sitters look directly into the camera, but the poems make no reference to such technicalities. Since the reader is aware of Gunn's presence at the shooting, he becomes even more elusive in the poems. It is often impossible to tell which sections are purely descriptive and which were deduced by interpretation. For example, the young child holding a doll to his face on page 11 is described in the adjacent poem as follows: "you feel a loose tooth, in / pleasurable pain, you think." Gunn could have simply talked to the child and be informed about the toothache. Yet the gesture the child makes could be easily interpreted as an attempt to soothe a toothache, and it is probable

that the child was actually losing a milk tooth at the time of shooting. It is uncertain just how inventive and invasive the descriptions are.

The bland rhetoric of the poems tones down the presence of the poet. The relatively few metaphors, like women as flowers (18) and a young man as an animal (20) are mostly unsurprising to say the least, but the similes are clever without being imposing: "To find it is / evening among the Dodgems, / is luck, an overflowing / like tears, uncontrollable" (34). The poem describing a young woman's laugh is organised by two connected similes: "She rests on and in / the laugh with her whole body, like an expert swimmer […] or the laugh is like a prelude: / The ripples go outward" (22). The two are both acceptable interpretations, and they do not exclude other possibilities. Elsewhere, the speaker makes it clear that he is talking about reality and not using a figure of speech (inasmuch as discussing real life without figures is actually possible): "It is not a symbolic / bridge but a real bridge; / nor is the bundle / a symbol" (72). Lyric address, while rarely used, always has a conversational quality to it: "You grow accustomed to this: / the Rostovs have different / personalities, you say" (40), and it is never used to talk to objects.

The use of prosopopoeia, however, produces various effects. The speaker often seems to be identical with the person represented by the photograph. The poem accompanying the workers having tea, for example, includes a section that could be from an overheard conversation: "Make it strong, Jonesy / that's how I like it, strong / with plenty of sugar in it" (62). But the first stanza makes it clear that it is an implied poet speaking, and merely assumes different voices one after the other, picture by picture: "I have closed my brief-case, dropped my / pick, stopped serving pints, thrown down the / broom, finished fighting: it is the tea- / break" (62). As Michael Nott puts it, "Gunn maintains an omniscient relationship to the photographs, and in that sense his 'captions' do not attempt to recreate the photographs verbally; rather, they extend and modify. Hence we are allowed an insight into an individual's consciousness alongside the supposed detachment of description" (*Photopoetry* 177). In comparison, the lines the child with the toothache seems to utter are simply inauthentic: "there is pleasure in reaching / a painful conclusion / with a tooth or with a thought" (10), as the idea and the diction are too poetic. The two stanzas of the poem on page 42 are spoken by both of these contrasting voices. The first assumes the colloquial language of the figure in the photograph next to it: "No music in this boozer. / She says she's with her / mother, though my / theory is it's a fellow" (42). The second stanza, however, is spoken by a poet who pretends to be the drunken man in the photograph:

I doze into a twilight,
a dry foul taste in my mouth,

nodding on the brown cracked

American leather of the sofa. (42)

He speaks in a descriptive mode, but for the sensation of taste, he has to impose: pry into the mouth or empathically add his own experience.

Besides taste, sight, touch, smell, sound and other senses (balance, temperature etc.) are often evoked, which extends the series of images into a multisensory world. This is partly to insist on the realism of the images, as in the poem with the bridge: "The wind / is cold, stone / hard, and Salvation Army / tea not sweet enough" (72). Things get more interesting when the sensual passages counterpoint the images. The poem paired with the photograph of a bass player does this quite literally: it starts with a treble clef symbol, indicating that the poem provides the lead (in music, "counterpoint" is a fancy term for bassline). The double barlines inserted into the text punctuate it so it reads in a hesitant, awkward manner:

𝄞The music starts || tentative

nobody notices it

they go on drinking, talking,

absorbed in || the music starts (24).

This is to imitate the tentative-looking bass player, who in turn, being a photograph, imitates playing music. Similarly, the poem accompanying the first scooter rider imitates the momentum of the vehicle by alternating the length of the lines:

two mirrors

for the self-regarding rider

the learner

tentative but with increasing

momentum (28),

three and eight syllables, which resembles musical notation. The poem with the other scooter makes this connection explicitly: "an impetus: its roar, its music / mastering and yet / mastered by the body" (32), also noting the balance of power between sound and the (visual, tactile, etc.) body. In these instances, poem and image thus create a harmonious world because they depend on each other and another art for self-reference.

Visual counterpoints also effectively complement and extend each other on multiple levels, but they are more problematic. The photographs and the poems relate to each other both metonymically and metaphorically: by being placed next to each other, meaning is being carried over. As seen from the above examples of prosopopoeia and metaphor, *Positives* aims to make images speak, but also speaks in images. Some of these verbal images describe the adjacent

photograph, but others are original additions. The poem accompanying the child with the hat, for instance, starts with a descriptive stanza:

> The body blunders forward
> into the next second in
> its awkward bold half-aware
> fashion, and getting there too
> –doing things for the first time. (8)

The second stanza parallels this with a description of building materials being transported on land:

> Precarious exploration
> from coast to interior:
> by which a workable route is
> opened, for the later transport
> of lathes, heavy crosses and
> crates through the undergrowth. (8)

These sections create tension by way of surprising juxtaposition. (This also works on the material level of the text: stanzas, like their content, visually complement each other in an Imagist fashion). The overall theme of bodily development, however, encourages a metaphorical reading. This implies that the speaker is peering into the child as if through a microscope, and observes cell migration and the formation of tissue. The poem with miniskirt-clad women crossing the street also suggests verbal mastery over the photograph: the women can be read as identical to the "swelling buds" in the second stanza that are to be pollinated by bees, being trod on by "those black hairy legs" (18).

The poem accompanying the street sweeper restores power to the image by insisting on the falsity of the figurative reading of the juxtaposed verbal image (very much like the poem with the bridge insists on the bridge not being symbolic). It starts with the original image separated into a stanza:

> The pigeon lifts, a few feet
> from the ground, its wings outspread,
> its pink claws clutched on themselves
> like a baby's featured hands:
> the span of wing flutters (66)

The connection between the pigeon and the sweeper is denied but paradoxically maintained in a metaphor in the second stanza:

> He is no young pigeon, he

has ceased fluttering, an old
man with a face like some gnarled
shiny section of black wood (66).

Neither the pigeon, nor the man's face is visible in the photograph: the sweeper is seen from behind, and pigeons are simply not present. They are likely to have been behind the camera, however, or within the perspective of the sweeper but still outside the frame, which makes the photograph-poem pair analogous to Cubist paintings as they represent several perspectives simultaneously.

The sweeper is looking at a woman, another Rückenfigur, who is passing toward the right side of the frame. The pigeon is reinserted into his description in a fluid way, without any stanza breaks:

He sweeps rubble all day
off the streets, leavings
of other men his takings. The pigeon
flutters, the female cowers
in fear and delight. The sweeper,
his broom reversed in the gutter,
watches the girl, not with hope
or even much desire. (66)

The speaker states that the sweeper's gaze is not sexual (does he actually know?), but the imagery clearly is: the pigeons are mating, and the speaker does notice the awkward phallic placement of the very large broom. Perhaps the only way the speaker's statement can be true is if the viewer refuses to interpret (verbalise) the image (of another viewer, who is, after all, unknowable), which makes the poem self-defeating. Or perhaps the viewer is to accept the interdependent, complex and often contentious relationship between the siblings: word and image.

Losing the self in the image: "From the Wave", "Words", "At the Centre", and "Thomas Bewick"

Even though the *Moly* (1971) poems return to the strict iambic forms of Gunn's early collections, they represent a wholly different attitude towards the object of the gaze. This is something that Gunn developed over time, but his engagement with photographs in *Positives* was definitely a milestone: the book would have been a lot less entertaining if he did not experiment with various ways of relating words to images. And then perhaps he got bored: *Moly*, not including his first book *Fighting Terms* (1954), is the only one that does not include

ekphrastic poems (in the strict sense). But since several poems address the changed relationship between words and images, I will very briefly consider some of them here.

In "Words," the speaker recollects watching a beautiful natural scenery with crisp shadows, "and, from obsession, or from greed, / Laboured to make it mine" (*Collected Poems* 197). He attempted in the past to verbally recreate what he saw, but ended up with the reverse of ekphrasis: "In looking for words, I found / Bright tendrils round which that sharp outline faltered: / Limber detail, no bloom disclosed" (197). Language, the instrument of possessing images was revealed to be visual: letters relate to tendrils metaphorically. In turn, the ekphrastic attempt was a failure. Changed into language, the shadow "faltered," and the "bloom" that the speaker saw could not be articulated as it was. But the encounter is successful regardless as the poem is completed. This is so because the speaker has recognised the mutuality between self and spectacle: "I was still separate on the shadow's ground / But, charged with growth, was being altered, / Composing uncomposed" (197). In other words, the poem questions the superiority of language over the image, which is equally capable of possessing the viewer and changing him to be more like itself.

"From the Wave," the poem following "Words" in the book, goes further and describes a harmonious relationship between man and nature, and by the same token, spectacle and language. As Michelucci claims, the poem "constitutes a kind of response to 'On the Move' (*The Sense of Movement*). The image of the boys who try to overcome nature […] contrasts with that of surfers who try to adapt themselves to its rhythms" (126). The poem, in turn, formally recreates their movement on the moving water[24], like the scooter poem recreated the momentum of the vehicle in *Positives*. The four-line stanzas composed of alternating quick tetrameter and slow dimeter lines mimic the gathering and receding of the waves:

> The mindless heave of which they rode
> A fluid shelf
> Breaks as they leave it, falls, and, slowed,
> Loses itself. (*Collected Poems* 198)

The waves do not last, the surfers become "Half wave, half men" (198) only momentarily. They have to time their movements:

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

[24] Adam Scheffler describes how in "From the Wave" and in many of Gunn's later poems, characters show skill and vitality with which they counteract the enclosure of the poem, and "turn an instinct for lyric tyranny into forms of empathy and care" (123).

Triumph possession. (198)

Like in "Words," it is unclear who or what is being possessed, and in what sense: as property, or as attribute? The difference between these two meanings of possession[25], which is essentially a difference between mastery and identification, remains unresolved: as the waves lose momentum, the poem ends. The form of the poem mirrors this ambiguity. Stephen Burt contends that "Gunn likes the purpose-built stanzaic forms of the seventeenth century, partly because their lengths and breaks can replicate walking, or reaching, or jumping and falling" (387), but, as Adam Scheffler adds, the surfers "are inverting the iambic metre while adhering to it overall; and they are setting up their own pattern of verb use and then varying from it while also adding the extra pattern of a chiasmus. […] And the surfers' taking formal *possession* of the poem is then highlighted by the wave's immediate decline in power right after they bend the rules the most in the fourth and fifth stanzas" (emphasis mine, 115).

Perhaps it is odd to consider "At the Centre" an ekphrastic poem, for it describes an LSD trip, and not a painting or photograph. One might say that tripping is a full-body experience, and not merely visual, but as in *Positives*, photographs can also engage the other senses. Drug-fuelled visions are regardless images, even if they are difficult to categorise. W. J. T. Mitchell differentiates between several types of images, namely graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal, in order to point out that the word "image" refers to various loosely related things (10). The LSD experience might fit into three of these. György E. Szőnyi divides Mitchell's categories into two further groups: natural/unintentional and manmade/intentional, the latter including physically made representations like paintings and photographs (10). Tripping, of course, borders on the intentional and the unintentional: the way the visions play out are out of our control, but having them in the first place needs as much intentionality as clicking the camera. Nevertheless, the poem definitely engages in something like ekphrasis as it intends to verbalise radically non-verbal, and primarily visual experience.

The poem, like "Words," insists on the impossibility of ekphrasis and the power of the image to alter the self, but the relationship between self and image is renegotiated in terms of shared similarity, not possession. The speaker is standing on the street and stares at the scenery in awe, asking several rhetorical questions: "What place is this," "What sky," "What is this steady pouring that" (*Collected Poems* 220), "What place is this" again and "What am" (221). These questions, all without question marks, structure the poem, and the last section attempts something of an answer. The first two are followed by short descriptions of the building nearest

[25] Gunn's cannibal-themed poems exploit the same duality—see Chapter 3.

to the speaker. His experience of it is a fluid and liberating one, and he emphasises that he does not possess what he sees:

> 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. (220)

He makes the same claim about the electric lights above: "You cannot keep them. Blinking line by line / They brim beyond the scaffold they replace" (220). Drugs peel the film of familiarity off of these everyday objects, and by doing so, they reveal them to be dynamic: "Currents of image widen, braid and blend / – Pouring in cascade over me and under – / To one all-river" (220). He is located, as the title says, right at the centre of their dynamism, as opposed to the speaker's isolation in "Merlin in the Cave."

The images are engaged in continuous and nonverbal creation. Their source "broods / Barely beyond its own creation's course / And not abstracted from it, not the Word" (221). Capitalised, "Word" may refer to the Word of God. The Bible describes Creation as a series of verbal acts, for example: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). In this realm of images, verbal acts have no such authority. More generally, "Word" refers to the philosophical term logos, which is, among other things, language and reason. The source of the images may not be verbal, but the images are engaged verbally: "I abstract / Fence, word, and notion. On the stream at full / A flurry, where the mind rides separate" (221). Logos, meaning here the verbal domain, abstraction/ekphrasis, and the poem itself, is part of a current, but not its end. As the speaker watches a painted board, he finds that the ekphrastic attempt was incomplete: "White paint-chip and overwhelming sky: / The flow lines faintly traced or understood" (221). The speaker, however, recognises his common source of origin with images as a result of the attempt: "We started choosing long ago / – Clearly and capably as we were able – / Hostages from the pouring we are of" (221). Verbally contained, the LSD experience deepens his understanding of himself.

"Thomas Bewick" from *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) is an ekphrastic poem that integrates the self into the natural imagery surrounding him. It tries to reconstruct the eponymous natural historian's way of seeing and his relationship to the natural world:

> I think of a man on foot
> going through thick woods,
> a buckle on his brimmed hat,
> a stick in his hand. (258)

The man's movements in the setting are imagined, but his closeness to nature is evidenced by Bewick's carefully detailed engravings. The environment he is imagined in is ekphrastic, as its descriptions show the same detail:

> I think of a man fording
> a pebbly stream. A rock
> is covered in places with
> minute crops of moss
> —frail stalks of yellow rising
> from the green, each
> bloom of it distinct, as
> he notices. (258)

The personal pronoun "he" is deliberately left unspecified. He is, of course, Bewick, who "notices" the details in the reconstructed scenery, but he is also the speaker noting down the details of the engravings and thereby reconstructing their origins. This instigates one of the rare occasions of representational friction in Gunn's ekphrastic work: "He notices . . . the rise of a frog's back / into double peaks, and this morning / by a stile he noticed ferns / afloat on air" (258). This could be interpreted at least in two ways. On the one hand, the man (Bewick) could be hallucinating, as he sees the plants in the air right after examining the (possibly toxic) frog. Considering the many references to hallucinogenics in Gunn's work, this is a possibility. On the other hand, the man (the speaker) is looking at botanical illustrations, which typically show plants, ferns included, out of the context of the environment, as if they were "afloat" on the page.

The speaker thus assumes the illustrator's closeness to nature by way of ekphrasis, but the interpretation proposed in the last two stanzas distances him. "Drinking from / clear stream and resting / on the rock [the man (Bewick)] loses himself / in detail" (259): he literally becomes one with his surroundings, like Alice drinking the potion or Persephone eating the pomegranate seeds. His transformation, however, is not enacted but told: "he reverts / to an earlier self, not yet / separate from what it sees, // a selfless self" (259). Michelucci interprets this as a return to the womb and points out that the "return to infantile innocence and a state of intellectual virginity" (138) is a recurring topic in Gunn's poetry. The man (Bewick) indeed gains an inner perspective by regressing into this state, but the man (the speaker) cannot. He cannot give himself completely to the experience by becoming one with the image. He is to interpret (verbalize) its meaning. The ending thus separates the two men with strong enjambments, deictically identifying the object of Bewick's gaze by citing the source: "a burly bluetit grips / its branch (leaning forward) / over this rock / and in / The History of British Birds" (259).

The Image as Threat: "The Colour Machine," "Expression," "Selves" and "Song of a Camera"

In "The Colour Machine" (*Moly*, 1971), Gunn discusses drug use as a dangerous activity. The poem describes tripping as a visual experience, which not only reveals the subject's own visibility, but by making him lose control, also threatens to erase him. The speaker is tripping together with other people, and their experience resembles cinema or a laser show: "Suddenly it is late at night, there are people in the basement, we all sit and lie in front of the colour machine" (*Collected Poems* 205). The word "Suddenly" is significant here: the group lacks control of time. They cannot control what they see either. The one person in control is probably the drug personified: "Someone among us, at the controls, switches to green and red" (205). What this means for the group is unknowable. Being a radically non-verbal experience, it resists language: "we can name it only afterwards" (205). Yet the desire to verbally contain the experience comes before that. The speaker attempts a simile: "it is like matter approaching and retreating from the brink of form" (205), which also addresses the form of "The Colour Machine." This is the only prose poem in Gunn's *Collected Poems*, the only occasion in which he gave up almost all means of formal control, in order to emphasise the shapelessness of the overwhelming experience. It ultimately resists rhetoric, and by it, cognition: "We cannot tell what it reminds us of" (205).

For a certain member of the group (the poem is dedicated to Mike Caffee), there is no "afterwards," at which point one can verbalise the experience: "Giving himself to the colour machine, one of us became invisible" (205). By dying, he became a "thing": the trip, like an electric Medusa, deprived him of subjectivity. Unlike Medusa's victims, however, he did not turn into a statue (meaning, art), but something like a ghost: "he drifted from the room into a world where he could no longer make an impression" (205). The word "impression" is an odd choice, as both meanings, literal and figurative, could refer to writing (pressing the pen onto the paper and gaining fame for it). The change into the first person, that follows, is thus not surprising: "I too am a lover, but I am cowardly, selfish, and calculating. When I most long to give myself, heart, body, and mind, to the colour machine, I remember our friend" (205). Perception is contained by cognition. The idea that intensity and energy (meaning, for our purposes, the vivid image) must be kept in check by the intellect recurs throughout Gunn's poetry. As Michelucci puts it, "The theme so prevalent in earlier collections here reemerges—the prison of intellect, the inability to abandon oneself to impulse, to open oneself completely to the world and others. Even if his resistance allows him to be, in this case, still among the living, it also causes him to reflect on his own inner transformation, which at this moment he

feels is incomplete" (136). What keeps him intact is also the desire to verbalise the image: the act of remembering is, of course, narrativization, through which he keeps himself intact. He is saved by the impossibility of ekphrasis. The threatening and deadly image cannot be claimed by words. Musing on his friend's life after life, the speaker ends the poem with "I am visible and do not know" (206).

"Expression" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) celebrates an image that overpowers words. The poem begins with a critical remark on the "confessional" mode of writing (as in Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath), especially young poets who try to imitate their confessional predecessors:

> For several weeks I have been reading
> the poetry of my juniors.
> Mother doesn't understand,
> and they hate daddy, the noted alcoholic.
> They write with black irony
> of breakdown, mental institution,
> and suicide attempt, of which the experience
> does not always seem first-hand.
> It is very poetic poetry. (321)

The speaker's problem is not that they address personal trauma and mental extremities, but that this has turned into a style. The epigonal "juniors" fail to construct convincing representations of themselves. As life provides insufficient material for poetry, they try to create narratives that are similar to the ones they know; the word "daddy" is clearly a reference to Sylvia Plath's eponymous poem. She and Anne Sexton both went through "breakdown, mental institution, / and suicide attempt," with the latter affecting Gunn as well: his mother committed suicide when he was a teenager. Some of the biting sarcasm of the line "It is very poetic poetry" may come from this experience.

In the second stanza, the speaker proposes an alternative to the confessional mode of speaking, an impersonal voice that is engaged with the description of a particularly alluring image. His approach is Romantic in the sense that it is poetry as searching:

> I go to the Art Museum
> and find myself looking for something,
> though I'm not sure what it is.
> I reach it, I recognize it,
> seeing it for the first time.
> An 'early Italian altarpiece'. (321)

This is evocative of John Keats's term negative capability—a poet's ability to pursue beauty regardless of "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (277). By sidestepping fact and reason (logos), the speaker reclaims something instinctual and primal, as opposed to the stylistic experiments of the epigones. Like their fashion and style, his aims are also traditional, even conservative, but his diction is halfway between old and new, like the Virgin Mary's lips in the painting:

> The outlined Virgin, her lips
> a strangely modern bow of red,
> holds a doll-sized Child in her lap.
> 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)

The disinterested and descriptive mode of speaking is probably the opposite of the obsessive voice of the traumatized self in confessional poetry. The altarpiece is neutrally described as an image, bits of information about its size, proportions, colour, geometry, and figurativism are given. The speaker deliberately ignores the spiritual meaning of the work, that is, the narrative considerations behind it, nor does he try to give it an interpretation of his own. The figures depicted have no individuality, and no interest in the viewer: "Solidly there, mother and child / stare outward, two pairs of matching eyes / void of expression" (321). The eerie "void" swallows up the viewer's individuality and, submitting to it, the speaker celebrates the power of the unsaid.

"Selves" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) discusses a self-portrait by Gunn's friend and housemate Bill Schuessler (Nott et al. 694), which, while giving the illusion of a new unified self, splits its painter into several fragments.[26] The painting shows the identity the painter fashioned for himself over time, yet it seems to be spreading to the household objects that resemble him, foreshadowing his fragmentation:

> I look round the cluttered
> icons of your room:
> quilt, photo, stuffed bird.
> On one wall, the self portrait

[26] The radical and irreducible splitting of the self is in itself a queer trope; for a closer look at the split self as the closeted gay subject, divided between the private and public spheres of life, see Chapter 1.

you laboured at these two years
since you broke with your lover.
The new self. (*Collected Poems* 322)

The old self the painter has left behind was characterized by innocence: "I do miss / what you formerly were, / the vulnerable and tender man" (322), whereas the new, hardened self is that of a man who has the agency to do productive work. His painting work and self-work are closely related; as he was doing exercise, his "body kept pace / with the body in the self-portrait" (322). The new self, therefore, was not painted and then imitated in real life, but fashioned in a laborious process of mutual imitation. In this process of lifting weights and painting the results, the painter was "learning / to carry the other, / the constant weight," which refers to both muscles and the invisible weight of manhood.[27] Although the painter and his self-portrait look the same, and their particularities have developed in tandem, they are clearly distinguished from each other, meaning that two new selves have been created. The speaker, furthermore, is attracted not to the self-portrait, or the painter now, but to the self that the painter has already shed. This old self has been transformed into a piece of memory: "I suppose / it was an imaginary son / that I held onto" (322), which suggests another fragment with a life of its own.

Having fragmented the painter, the self-portrait brings about a proliferation of images: "Completing it / freed you, apparently, / to other subjects, for / a dozen new sketches are tacked / on another wall" (322). The representations overpower the self-portrait, which receives almost no attention from the speaker (the painter himself is barely described at all). This suggests that the self-portrait is already an old self, even though it is still more recent than the memory the speaker has of him. A landscape sketch, however, is described in detail, and serves as a more profound representation of the painter's present self:

You got used to the feel
like a hitchhiker
shifting his knapsack
as he improvises his route
along roads already adjusted
to the terrain. Here in your sketch
the roadway pushes forward
like a glittering unsheathed serpent
that tests with the flicker
of his tongue from

[27] Not much is said about the nature of the weight except that "it is necessary to carry" (323). In the context of body building, one might associate it with normative masculinity affecting gay men.

side to side as he advances. (323)

The improvisational quality of the painter's life is suggested by the speaker's referential interpretation of the landscape. The curving line of the road (the serpent, personified as "he") implies bravery and experimental freedom, but at the end of the poem, it is unclear whether these apply to both the painting and the painter's life. They are both in progress, which is described as playful but also menacing in its ambiguity: the road "narrows into the distance where / it steals at last / right off the top of the paper" (324). The verb "steal" is suggestive of loss, the image seems to liberate itself, but the painter also leaves behind his earlier selves.

In "Song of a Camera" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982) ekphrasis proves to be an impossible attempt to tame the violent and disturbing power of the image to fragment the self. The poem differs from Gunn's previous work with photographs, poems that treated them as "macrocosmically complete sample[s] of the world" (Kennedy 147), such as those in *Positives* (1966). Instead, "Song of a Camera" emphasizes the fragmentation that photography imposes on its subject by making the camera frame visible as an integral part of the image:

I cut the sentence
out of a life
out of a story
with my little knife (*Collected Poems* 347).

It is unclear who exactly is speaking here. It could be a personified camera that figuratively cuts up (with its phallic "little knife") the sitter's dynamic life narrative into static fragments, thus exercising power over him. But if one interprets "cut" and "sentence" literally, the speaker could be someone who does the cutting with a pen (the poet), metaphorically foregrounding the frame by typographically cutting a sentence, thereby suggesting an analogy between pen and camera, both cutting like a knife:

Look at the bits
He eats he cries
Look at the way
he stands he dies (347).

This works in two ways: the speaker deictically points to individual photographs by ordering the addressee (who is perhaps the reader) to look in the imperative, thus subjugating both sitter and addressee. The sitter of the photographs "eats," "cries," and so forth in the simple present tense, which emphasizes his static state of being. The speaker, moreover, points to the "bits," not the man they represent, making it clear that the photographs are representations, not real life.

In the next stanza, the speaker envisions a hypothetical viewer (who is very likely identical with the addressee in the previous stanza):

so that another
seeing the bits
and seeing how
none of them fits

wants to add
adverbs to verbs
A bit on its own
simply disturbs

Wants to say
as well as see (347)

Looking at the photographs, the viewer ("another") is upset by the lack of continuity between them. He wants to interpret the images because "none of them fits," and tries to construct a meaningful narrative from them; in other words, he makes an attempt at ekphrasis. The first lines of the poem ("I cut the sentence / out of a life") presumes that life is fundamentally verbal, not visual, and that images also harbour meanings at their core, which can be interpreted, that is, translated into words. Ekphrasis, in this logocentric line of thought, is adding "adverbs to verbs" (347). But this is proven false, for the ekphrastic attempt is a failure. The speaker then insists that the photographs have no meaning:

look again
for cowardice
boredom pain

Find what you seek
find what you fear
and be assured
nothing is here. (348)

The viewer tries to look "for cowardice / boredom pain," that is, to interpret the pictures, but he is unsuccessful—meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

W. H. Auden's poem "I Am Not a Camera" discusses the difference between the camera lens and the eye in a similar way. The poem is a series of statements about looking and photography, divided into small sections that are not unlike fragments:

To call our sight Vision
implies that, to us,
all objects are subjects.

***

What we have not named
or beheld as a symbol
escapes our notice. (841)

The speaker associates the natural eye with language. "Vision" implies that the objects we are looking at are "subjects", that is, things for discussion. In order for us to notice things, they need to be named or otherwise interpreted, in other words, turned into language. The natural eye is interpretive and subjective, engaged in meaning-making. The camera lens, on the other hand, is objective, intrusive, and reductive:

It is very rude to take close-ups and, except
when enraged, we don't:
lovers, approaching to kiss,
instinctively shut their eyes before their faces
can be reduced to
anatomical data. (842)

The lovers shut their eyes not only because they are respectful: the kiss is meaningful, part of their love story. While their eyes are perfectly capable of examining each other's pores, they do not, probably because the "anatomical data" produced by the reductive "close-up" would be at odds with the personal meaning of their kiss. The camera, on the other hand, is not engaged in interpretation; it does not capture love. Similarly, in "Song of a Camera", the "bits" lack meaningful cohesion.

Auden's poem finds the camera "rude", and has a distaste for it, but Gunn's poem does more than that: it portrays the camera as violent and threatening. For the viewer ("another"), his inability to connect the "bits" is debilitating. If life is indeed a continuous flow, like a narrative, then the static image must be death: "Look at the way / he stands he dies." (In this regard, the word "sentence" in the first line of the poem could refer to confinement or punishment by death.) For Barthes,

> the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us

> attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ('this-has-been'), the photograph suggests that it is already dead. (*Camera Lucida* 78-9)

Barthes contends that photography's ability to capture the moment is suggestive of death: they remind the viewer to the passage of time, and in effect, mortality. This intrinsic feature is behind the violence of the camera in Gunn's poem. The photograph can "cut" the viewer because it provokes an emotional response—Barthes calls this "punctum", which is Latin for piercing (*Camera Lucida* 27). Gunn suggested a connection between photography and death already in *Positives*. There are only two close-ups in the volume, and the poems accompanying them both discuss death. The first one is the close-up of an old man, whose enlarged wrinkles depict "the small / but constant losses endured" against his annihilation (68). The second depicts an old woman in a cemetery, with terror in her eyes, and coldness intruding her body, implying death: "Her flesh has felt / a chill in her feet, a draught / in her groin […] Will it hurt?" (78).

In "Song of a Camera", the intrusiveness of photography is not only a matter of piercing the viewer: it splits. It is unclear just how many subjects there are in the poem: the addressee, the sitter and the viewer might be the same person. The speaker appears to be fragmented as well. The first line is repeated in the eighth stanza, with slight modification, indicating that perhaps the two lines are said by two different subjects:

> I cut this sentence
> look again
> for cowardice
> boredom pain
> . . .
> I am the eye
> that cut the life
> you stand you lie
> I am the knife. (348)

The poem ends with the camera menacingly asserting itself. The sitter ("he stands he dies") is replaced by the addressee ("you stand you lie"), who, in turn, is threatened by the knife. It can be thus argued that the speaker, the sitter, the viewer, and the addressee are all aspects of the same persona. As Gunn writes in a letter to Douglas Chambers, "I had the idea for [the poem] when [Robert Mapplethorpe] was photographing me" (Nott et al. 399). If they are indeed the same persona, the sitter is speaking to himself as the camera that cuts him into "bits." By doing so, he himself is doing the cutting as he engages with the image-making process. Poet and camera are engaged in imitating each other as they perform each other's art: the poet imitates

the camera frame by keeping the lines short, and the camera imitates the poet by singing. It is worth comparing the titles of Gunn's poem and Auden's: while Auden clearly rejects assuming the role of the camera (although the fragmented structure of the poem is at odds with that claim), Gunn makes the camera speak, or better yet, the camera usurps the role of the poet and appropriates the verbal domain.

Queer ekphrasis: "Her Pet," "Painting by Vuillard," and "The Artist as an Old Man"

Instead of vying for mastery, "Her Pet" (*The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992) allows for a sympathetic relationship between art and viewer/speaker by relying on the technique of doubling. The poem, like Gunn's early ekphrastic efforts, addresses artwork integrated into its context. Unlike "In Santa Maria del Popolo," however, the context is not a live exhibition but a book (a note says *High Renaissance* by Michael Levey) read in the comfort of the poet's home:

> I walk the floor, read, watch a cop-show, drink,
> Hear buses heave uphill through drizzling fog.
> Then turn back to the pictured book to think
> Of Valentine Balbiani and her dog:
> She is reclining, reading, on her tomb;
> But pounced, it tries to intercept her look,
> In front paws on her lap, as in this room
> The cat attempts to nose beneath my book. (*Collected Poems* 475)

As is typical in Gunn's poetry, the context deliberately eschews class distinctions; television and buses are treated the same way as the book on art history. In a postmodernist fashion, art is not discussed as possessing the sacred quality Walter Benjamin calls "the aura of the work of art" (221); the speaker is looking at photographic reproductions, not original artwork, representations of representations embedded in art commentary. There are two related pictures on the page the speaker is reading; one is of a statue of Valentine Balbiani on her tomb, depicting her as if she were alive, accompanied by her small dog, and reading a prayer book, while the other one is that of a side-relief that shows her corpse.[28] The statue mirrors the speaker—he is also reading a book (the one she is in), and his cat is with him. While nothing correlates with the side-relief in the speaker's environment, he is mortal, so his death is implied. Doubled like this, the illustration serves as memento mori for the speaker; he is very much in danger of being turned into a statue any day.

[28] Renaissance tomb effigies depicted the corpse of the deceased up until the sixteenth century when "live effigies" became popular (Zirpolo 138). Balabiani's tomb is special because of the double representation: the vivid sculpture of the reading woman is in stark contrast with the representation of the decomposing body on the side of the tomb.

The ekphrastic mode in "Her Pet" also gains significance in the context of the poem within the collection. The poems in the fourth section of *The Man with Night Sweats* are elegies written for Gunn's dead friends, dealing with dying rather than personal loss, and thus reveal a close acquaintance with the material realities of the dying body, often depicted as statuesque, as for example, in "Still Life":

> I shall not soon forget
> The greyish-yellow skin
> To which the face had set:
> Lids tight: nothing of his,
> No tremor from within,
> Played on the surfaces. (*Collected Poems* 470)

Real-life bodies and their representations rely on each other's signifiers: the dying bodies in *The Man with Night Sweats* are still lives "set" in their "surfaces," cold as marble, while the sculptures in "Her Pet" are defined by both verisimilitude and plasticity. They are still lives also in a temporal sense, that is, most of them are depicted as dying but still alive. The sculpture representing the living Balbiani is characterized by neatness, which stands for her vitality, intellect, dignity, and femininity:

> Her curls tight, breasts held by her bodice high,
> Ruff crisp, mouth calm, hands long and delicate,
> All in the pause of marble signify
> A strength so lavish she can limit it. (475)

The corpse on the side-relief, on the other hand, is "loose," "unbound," and "genderless." The plainness of the corpse is in sharp contrast with the richly decorative garment the "live" Balbiani is wearing. The poet's preoccupation with death renders legible the laborious process of dying: "In the worked features I can read the pain / She went through to get here" (475).

But death also sharpens his eyes to life. Balbiani's vitality is not only represented by her elegance, but is also embodied by the dog that accompanies her. It is also reminiscent of the animals in love poetry that serve as an obstacle between lovers onto which desire is displaced (Gray 116), as in Catullus's poem to the sparrow: "Sparrow, precious darling of my sweetheart, / always her plaything, held fast in her bosom, . . . how I wish I could sport with you as she does" (Catullus 45). While this tradition is not a purely heterosexual one, the absence of its sexual implications in "Her Pet" are significant. Death is, after all, genderless: everyone is equally affected. The poems in *The Man with Night Sweats* make use of this universality to

legitimize AIDS victims as objects of public grief.[29] While representation and real life are connected by the poet's gaze, this gaze is not sexual but one expressing sympathy; Balbiani and the poet have life, love for pets and books, sexuality, and mortality in common. He can sympathize with the pain she went through, "Thinking at first that her full nimble strength / Hid like a little dog within recall, / Till to think so, she knew, was to pretend" (475). The word "pretend" adds a subtle irony to this. Even though it refers to the subject matter of the statue and not to its aesthetic qualities, it brings to mind the constructedness of the speaker's identity. By the same token, Balbiani's dog and the speaker's cat, by being obstacles between self and representation, playfully suggest both the similarity between man and statue, and the impossibility of ekphrasis.

"Painting by Vuillard" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) also suggests both continuity and discontinuity between viewer/speaker and painting. While it is not specified in the poem, the painting corresponds to Édouard Vuillard's *Two Women Drinking Coffee* (c. 1893), on display in the National Gallery, London. It depicts figures blended into their environment in the style of Les Nabis, a group of French artists active in fin-de-siècle Paris, whose paintings featured "pure colours and no more than casual resemblance to nature" (Preston 18). That is to say, even though they were precursors of modernist abstract painting, their paintings still retained some degree of figurativity. The speaker of the poem has a hard time distinguishing between objects on the canvas:

> 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.
> 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. (*Boss Cupid* 49)

The painting is recollected from memory by someone who has some experience in savouring artworks. Right from the beginning, he makes it clear that the painting is semi-representational by tentative phrasing ("I think"); "I think" can refer both to cognition and imagination. In his youth, the speaker noticed the simplistic colour scheme of the picture and associated it with old age. The second stanza, however, contrasts this interpretation with the speaker's current reality:

[29] For example, as Tyler B. Hoffmann contends, the refusal to name AIDS in *The Man with Night Sweats* can be interpreted as a gesture "to allow anyone (regardless of sexual orientation) to feel the pain they record" (36). The use of traditional forms, furthermore, integrates the AIDS elegies into (heteronormative) tradition (17–18).

"But it's not like that for me: age is not simpler / Or less enjoyable, not dark, not whitewashed" (49). Now that he is actually old, his experience differs from early expectations.

Ironically, the speaker insists on the contrast between the monochrome simplicity of the painting and the colourful life outside while subtly creating numerous continuities between them:

> 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 (49)

The visitors of the museums are all associated with art. The steps leading into the museum, on which they sit, are made of marble, a material typically used in sculpture. The first thing the speaker remarks about them is how they are lit, which suggests the gaze of a painter or a lighting designer. The chocolate milk the children are drinking has the same colour as Vuillard's painting, the young woman wears a T-shirt with decorative calligraphy, and the elderly visitors carry cameras, which are potential instruments for making art. Cataloguing the museumgoers leads to a change of perspective:

> 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. (49)

Even though the catalogue technique is to emphasize that the museumgoers are varied (that is, they are unlike Vuillard's monochrome painting), the synaesthesia/simile at the end homogenizes them and connects them to the painting. In other words, they are unlike the coffee-coloured painting as they are not homogenous or brown, yet they become indirectly associated with the coffee in the painting as they are as "pungent and startling" as it is. There is no ideal or essence to which the painting can be true to or deviate from: the painting and the visitors both borrow signifiers from each other.

"The Artist as an Old Man" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) continues along this line of thought, by depicting a painter looking at his self-portrait without any hierarchy between them. As he engages in ekphrasis, he also describes his own body, completely blurring the line between representation and reality:

> Muscled and veined, not
> a bad old body

for an old man.
The face vulnerable too,
its loosened folds
huddled against
the earlier outline (*Boss Cupid* 63)

This suggests that the self *is* the Other. The word "outline" is significant in that it can refer to both the sketch on the canvas before the paint, and the tight face contours the artist had in his youth. (It is also self-reflexive because the poems in the *Gossip* section of *Boss Cupid* are all raw and deliberately sketchy free verse poems that mostly address trivial and everyday topics.) The artist's description indicates not only self-reflexivity, but also self-knowledge:

the earlier outline: beneath
the assertion of nose
still riding the ruins
you observe the down-
turned mouth: and
above it,
the asserting glare
which might be read as
I've got the goods on you
asshole and I'll expose you. (63)

The artist reflects on himself by describing the portrait; what he sees is not the nose but "the assertion of nose," and his look is an "asserting glare." He also makes the portrait speak by way of prosopopoeia, but what he says is rather ridiculous, sounding like a cheesy one-liner of an action hero. The light-hearted manner in which the poem treats the trope of turning into an image is in stark contrast with Gunn's earlier ekphrastic work, notably the poems from *The Passages of Joy*, in which becoming an image was a source of anxiety. The attack playfully threatens the self, but it is a chiding comment rather than a real threat. The word "goods" suggests that the artist is somehow guilty, a keeper of some shameful secret the self-portrait knows. In other words, the illusion paradoxically criticizes his referent for being deceptive.

The poem's attitude towards the "original" self is, therefore, a postmodern one, with rich intertextual references that work against notions of originality. Even the title of the poem is an allusion to James Joyce's 1916 novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The posture of the artist evokes earlier examples of ekphrastic poetry:

The flat palette knife
in his right hand, and

the square palette itself
held low in the other
like a shield,
he faces off
the only appearance
reality has and makes it
doubly his. (63)

The shield echoes the very first example of ekphrasis in literary history that has survived: the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*.[30] Together with the palette knife, the shield-like palette is reminiscent of the equipment of an ancient Greek infantryman, of the short sword and the round shield. (Not discriminating between action hero and ancient soldier is characteristically Gunn.) Like a soldier, the artist assumes an attacking stance:

his attack on the goods
repeats the riddle
or it might be
answers it:
Out of the eater
came forth meat
and out of the strong
came forth sweetness. (64, emphasis in the original)

The shield image also echoes another poem that alludes to the *Iliad*, John Ashbery's "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror," in which the speaker compares a painter's—the Italian late Renaissance artist Parmigianino's—hand to a shield. He extends it "to protect / What it advertises"; the shy gesture is both self-disclosure and self-protection (Glavey 133). The artist's riddle in Gunn's poem (borrowed from the Biblical Samson in Judges 14:14) is a similar gesture; it is a riddle that only its inventor (Samson) and his wife know the answer to.

The unsolvable riddle suggests a complicity between artist and portrait. It is unsolvable because it is based on Samson's personal experience of finding honey in the carcass of the lion he killed. Therefore, it implies self-disclosure for the self and for those in the know only. Similarly, in his analysis of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, Brian Glavey suggests that O'Hara's posturing as a statue and Ashbery's shyness are forms of queer sociability (20–21). Some of Gunn's earlier ekphrastic poems, notably "Song of a Camera," addressed to Robert

[30] The allusion to the *Iliad* can in itself be read as a queer subtext considering the undoubtedly homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Gunn's early poem "The Wound" depicts Achilles with a head injury, which can be interpreted as the psychological state of closetedness (see Chapter 1).

Mapplethorpe, and "Bravery," addressed to Chuck Arnett, serve the same function: both artists were known to be gay, and thus the dedications are also dedications of complicity or solidarity. ("Bravery" was included in the 1967 volume *Touch*, when homosexuality was still illegal in California.) Yet "The Artist as an Old Man" is also suggestive of a complicity between words and image. Like Ashbery's "Self-Portrait," which depicts an "artist who is also an alter ego, a man whose virtuosity in representing himself 'naturally' distorted by a convex mirror could well serve as a model for any postmodern poet" (Heffernan 174), Gunn's poem erases the boundaries between poet and his subject matter, replaces hierarchy with interdependence, and thereby reveals the constructedness (the natural distortedness) of the self. What makes "Her Pet," "Painting by Vuillard," and "The Artist as an Old Man" queer is precisely the idea that the self is a radically and irreducibly incoherent construct, which implies that there can be no real hierarchy between self and image because both are imperfect imitations.

Thom Gunn's ekphrastic poetry develops together with his gay identity. In most of the poems discussed in this chapter, the way words are related to images addresses questions of selfhood and mastery. In Gunn's early work, the isolated self is spying at images without being seen himself, and the tight formal control over words serve to counter the spectacle and preserve his mastery. The poems in *Positives*, on the other hand, support and counterpoint images, and extend them in order to represent the social life of the city. Images are empowered in the ekphrastic poems of the 70s and 80s, with the image gaining the ability to fragment and erase the speaker–this is the period in which Gunn unambiguously comes out and faces the dangers of visibility and being misrepresented. Tensions are resolved in Gunn's last two collections, in which the ekphrastic poems conceive of the self and the artwork that represents it in radically and irreducibly incoherent terms. The boundary between the speaker and the work of art becomes blurred, the question of originality is eliminated, and so is the hierarchy between language and image. Thus, his late ekphrastic poetry becomes queer in an aesthetic sense.

Chapter 3

"pretending he is legible": Self and Other in Thom Gunn's Poetry

Thom Gunn was preoccupied with characters throughout his entire career, and his most famous poems, from "On the Move" and "Elvis Presley" to his AIDS elegies all describe men. These characters differ considerably from volume to volume, yet in the first half of his career, from *Fighting Terms* (1954) up to *Moly* (1971) the poems that are centred around them all are, to various degrees, concerned with the interpersonal: the failure or success of man's integration into the (social) world. His earliest attempts in *Fighting Terms*, such as "Lofty in the Palais de Danse" and "Round and Round" describe tough young men at odds with society and its norms. Isolated, they are unable to fit their socially prescribed roles, and their struggle shows itself as repressed doubt and grief, against which they hope to preserve their dignity through aggressive masculinity. The characters in *The Sense of Movement* (1957), namely in "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death" and "The Allegory of the Wolf Boy" are similar but their struggle is more specifically against Nature; they are existential heroes who struggle and fail against life. While these characters are isolated from society, the ones in *My Sad Captains* (1961) are in each other's company: their uniform provides them with a group identity. Even though they lead double lives like Gunn's earlier characters, they are visible to each other because they look the same. In the "Misanthropos" sequence published in *Touch* (1967), and in *Moly* (1971), furthermore, identity is dissolved. The characters repossess their innocence by becoming part of Nature–almost ceasing to be characters. This ambivalence remains a central issue in the poetry of the second half of Gunn's career: from *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) on, Gunn is aware that as he was describing characters, he was paradoxically erasing them.

He develops two strategies of dealing with the problem. Firstly, he avoids it by insisting on the impossibility of describing the character at hand. In Gunn's early poetry, most characters serve as objective correlatives to discuss things other than the characters themselves.[31] Even when he writes from experience, as he does it in "Three" (*Moly*, 1971), he aims to express other concerns: "It wasn't till the poem was finished that I realized I had among other things found an embodiment for my haunting cluster of concepts, though I hadn't known it at the time. […] Looked at one way, idea preceded its embodiment; looked at another, particulars preceded induction" (*Occasions* 152). "The Release" in *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), in contrast, notably

[31] John Miller connects this to Gunn's indebtedness to existentialist philosophy. "What I call the 'stipulative imagination,' in Gunn's case, is that which asserts identity, metaphoric equivalence, or meaning within a provisional, often elaborately concocted situation. The stipulative imagination is one that passes from a situation perceived in terms of its sensible particularities to a more general "meaning" willfully [sic!] imposed on that situation. [… Will] or volition is a primary faculty not only for the existentially oriented self, but also for the stipulative poet. To define oneself, or to create some metaphoric extension of meaning for particular circumstances, is to assert or stipulate. Such assertion, in Gunn's poetry, often seems precious or desperate exercise of will in the face of apparent meaninglessness." (55)

attempts describing a man but ends up letting him and the matter go; he accepts that the other is self-contained, and as a result, ultimately unknowable. This motif recurs throughout the rest of his books in poems about urban characters from the city's underbelly, namely "The Idea of Trust" (*Jack Straw's Castle*, 1976), "Elegy", "Donahue's Sister", "At an Intersection" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982), "Old Meg" (*The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992), and "The Problem" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000). By the end of these poems, he typically ends up learning something about himself in relation to the character rather than the character itself.

In contrast, several poems confront the problem of description-as-erasure by positioning the self as a man-eater (a vampire, cannibal, or parasite) that feeds on the Other, especially on attractive young men. In several cases, it is not possible for the speaker to actually consume the Other, so he only eats with his eyes: the hunger is displaced onto the gaze. In several cases, tension is resolved at the end of the poem by the speaker supplementing the Other with the poem itself and insisting on his role as a poet. The poems I analyse here are "Sweet Things" and "San Francisco Streets" (*Passages of Joy*, 1982), "Venetian Blind" (from the "Poems from the 80s" section of the *Collected Poems*), "Meat", "Cafeteria in Boston", "The J Car" (from *The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992), "Front Door Man" and "In the Post Office" (from *Boss Cupid*, 2000). Finally, by looking at the "Troubadour" sequence and "The Gas-Poker" from the last volume, I will attempt to theorise the role of oral sadism in Gunn's poetry by applying Sigmund Freud's ideas about melancholia and Melanie Klein's object relations theory.

Men in Isolation: *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957)

Gunn's earliest characters are isolated from society. Being a dramatic monologue, "Lofty in the Palais de Danse" (from *Fighting Terms*) makes use of indirect characterisation, more specifically, his diction and rhetoric make the titular Lofty, a soldier stationed near a dance hall, an aggressive and antisocial character:

> You are not random picked. I tell you you
> Are much like one I knew before, that died.
> Shall we sit down, and drink and munch a while
> – I want to see if you will really do:
> If not we'll get it over now outside.
> Wary I wait for one unusual smile. (*Collected Poems* 9)

The addressee ("you") is called upon three times in the very first line, which sounds about as impolite as pointing at the other with a finger. The third "you" expresses similarity between the addressee and another person in the second line, but the awkwardly placed line break disrupts this and reveals the hidden, more sinister statement "I tell you you". Lofty is stating the obvious:

in dramatic monologues, only the speaker has a voice, and the reader is to rely on this voice for information on the silent addressee. Yet he also reinforces her silence. In the second line, he uses the relative pronoun "that", not "who", to refer to the woman the addressee is compared to, which objectifies not only the dead woman but the addressee as well. (The word can be categorized as a relative pronoun but also as a demonstrative, especially with the comma before it.) His striking honesty makes obvious not only that Lofty is looking for a sexual partner, but also the fact that he is looking for a woman who looks like the one he has lost.

While Lofty clearly wants to exploit some bad boy image (an image that was, at the time, being invented in literature and cinema), he overplays his role to such an extent that it becomes self-defeating. In the second stanza, he claims that his loss made him what he is: "Like the world, I've gone to bad. / A deadly world, for, once I like, it kills" (9), yet this is also a veiled threat: if he is like the world, he too kills by analogy. Elsewhere, he calls her stupid in a similarly indirect way: "And partly that I couldn't if I would / Be bed-content with likenesses so dumb" (9). He may be referring to the other girls he seduces, but she is clearly one of these "likenesses". Furthermore, he refers to the sexual act as "expected harm" (10), blurring the line between sex and violence, which puts him at odds with his role as seducer. His open discussion of his grief may elicit sympathy from the addressee, but he also declares, rather disgracefully, that she is part of his revenge on the world:

> The same with everything: the only posting
> I ever liked, was short. And so in me
> I kill the easy things that others like
> To teach them that no liking can be lasting:
> All that you praise I take, what modesty
> What gentleness, you ruin while you speak. (9)

This last line changes the roles of speaker and listener, which renders legible the subversive nature of Lofty's speech in terms of gender. He implies certain actions performed by the addressee. She feels his muscles, for example, in the fifth stanza: "You praise my strength. The muscle on my arm. / Yes. Now the other. Yes, about the same. I've got another muscle you can feel" (10). Yet he is the one who deliberately abandons "modesty" and "gentleness" by speaking the way he does, that is to say, he projects himself into her. As Neil Powell claims, "these lines aren't just ludicrously crass: they are also wrongly gendered. In other words, while "I've got another muscle you can feel" is a terrible and improbable chat-up line for a 1950s boy to try on a 1950s girl, it becomes far more probable (if not much less terrible) if spoken between two gay men" (23). The women Lofty talks about (the addressee included) being failed copies of a lost original gains new significance here. The homophobic

idea of gay men being failed imitations of straight men is projected onto the addressee, who is, in turn, a failed imitation of a man. From this perspective, Lofty's failure at the end does not come as a surprise:

> Now that we sway here in the shadowed street
> Why can't I keep my mind clenched on the job?
> Your body is a good one, not without
> Earlier performance, but in this repeat
> The pictures are unwilled that I see bob
> Out of the dark, and you can't turn them out. (10)

The shadowy "pictures" that haunt the scene would make sense in a heterosexual context, as the beloved woman would make a proper ghost for a traumatised Lofty. Neither his hook-up, nor the pictures are gendered, however. All sorts of bodies can be "good" and experienced, of course, and all kinds of mental images can be involuntary, including those of loss. The vagueness of their description, therefore, allows for a reading in which Lofty cannot perform because he is groping his own inadequacy in the dark.[32]

"Round and Round", which follows "Lofty in the Palais de Danse" in *Fighting Terms*, also explores one's inability to fit one's role:

> The lighthouse keeper's world is round,
> Belongings skipping in a ring –
> All that a man may want, therein,
> A wife, a wireless, bread, jam, soap,
> Yet day by night his straining hope
> Shoots out to live upon the sound
> The spinning waves make while they break
> For their own endeavour's sake –
> The lighthouse keeper's world is round. (*Collected Poems* 11)

The lighthouse keeper who, unlike Lofty, is described from the outside, is characterised by desire. What the object of his "straining hope" might be is rather elusive (how does one "live upon the sound" of the sea?), but he seems to identify with the waves that are given the human characteristic of free will, something he sorely lacks. The list of whatever "a man may want" in

[32] Adam Scheffler connects Gunn's use of characters as objective correlatives to his closetedness: "seem like victims of a deforming lyric impulse. These characters lack independent life: his bored demobbed soldiers and his existentialist bikers may be drawn from the world, but once they enter into an early Gunn poem, it is hard to imagine them ever leaving it again: they become props or exemplars of Gunn's grey emotional climate; of his feelings of rigidity and boredom; of his own existentialist reckonings about how to live; and of his (at that time) unacceptable sexual desires and wishes for self-containment" (110)

the fourth line is not what he wants, but it is still significant. His possessions, in line with the changing economy of the 50s, are consumer goods, and in line with the conservative gender politics of the 50s, they also include his wife. The alliteration of "wife" and "wireless" further deconstructs the distinction between human and object into a general air of domesticity. Against the mundane images of domesticity (note that the last item comes after two food articles, which suggests the taste of soap), the masculine image of the waves is set. The lighthouse keeper is clearly uncomfortable in his role as husband.

While the lighthouse keeper is not able to articulate the reason of his anguish, he mentally projects it onto his environment: "He wonders, winding up the stair / To work the lamp which lights the ships, / Why each secured possession skips / With face towards the centre turned" (11). The word "skip" from the first stanza is repeated in the second without much explanation, but it is likely related to the effect of the light in the lighthouse. Whatever the reason, the illusion makes inanimate objects (what is more, "secured", meaning, fixed objects) animate, which suggests the lighthouse keeper's inability, and desire, to move. The emotions that go hand in hand with freedom, "fear and doubt" can be avoided by staying inside the mental prison of the lighthouse. Torn between these two contradictory impulses, the lighthouse keeper obsesses over the roundness of the lighthouse in which the objects seem to ricochet like thoughts in his head:

> When it is calm, the rocks are safe
> To take a little exercise
> But all he does is fix his eyes
> On that huge totem he has left
> Where thoughts dance round what will not shift –
> His secret inarticulate grief.
> Waves have no sun, but are beam-caught
> Running below his feet, wry salt,
> When, in a calm, the rocks are safe. (11)

The rondeau form performs the same circular obsessive motion, which is also the movement of the light at the top of the lighthouse.[33] Charles Leftwich draws an analogy between the repetitive forms in *Fighting Terms* and the solipsistic prisons its characters are in: "An inescapable circularity is the greatest menace, and its frustrating and ultimately enervating effects are

[33] Stefania Michelucci points out that inertia is "pertinent to the situations delineated in the majority of the other poems in the collection; indeed, movement is always revealed as substantially illusory. Movement is a narcissistic oscillation around a point, as in "Wind in the Street" and "Round and Round"; it is an obsessive wandering in search of something nonexistent as in "Lofty in the Palais de Danse"; it is a haunting doubling of self and the voiceless fear of one's own shadow in "The Secret Sharer." (53)

conveyed by the constantly repeated refrains in so many of the poems, usually at stanza beginnings and ends" which encloses the reader in verbal prisons (49). Since the light provides only a momentary flash in the darkness, he cannot grasp the object of his desire; his visual stasis will not translate into the dynamism of speech.

"The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death" (from *The Sense of Movement*, 1957) describes a complex antagonism between man and his natural environment:

> Across the open countryside,
> Into the walls of rain I ride.
> It beats my cheek, drenches my knees,
> But I am being what I please. (*Collected Poems* 54)

By itself, this statement, which sounds like something out of a rock and roll song, is rather simple. Nature is an obstacle, an enemy; yet by engaging it, the motorcyclist liberates himself. The poem, on the other hand, is not an account of conquest but defeat. Nature is both a means of self-actualisation and a threat to one's existence. The motorcyclist may recognise Nature as his source of origin, but since he is fundamentally alienated from it, his way of engaging it is resistance: "My human will cannot submit / To nature, though brought out of it" (54). Man and Nature are represented as opposing forces, and by being a dichotomy, they invite other dichotomies into play, first and foremost, the antagonism of mind and body: "I urge my chosen instrument / Against the mere embodiment" (54). Man is an agent in possession of intellect, while Nature is merely a body, albeit an unfeeling one. The motorcyclist's ride overloads the senses: sounds and images are blurred as the rain beats down on his face and legs. Nature, however, does not react: "The front wheel wedges fast between / Two shrubs of glazed *insensate* green" (emphasis mine, 54).

The relationship between the motorcyclist and the marsh becomes even more ambiguous post mortem. After a stanza break that performs the (imaginary) event of death, he looks back on his life in the past tense:

> I used to live in sound, and lacked
> Knowledge of still or creeping fact,
> But now the stagnant strips my breath,
> Leant on my cheek in weight of death.
> Though so oppressed I find I may
> Through substance move. (54)

Being an agent of speed, the motorcyclist is "oppressed" by the stagnancy of death. Decomposition, however, the movement "Through substance", seems to remobilise him. He imagines himself moving from his body into Nature, but decaying would imply that it is Nature

that makes a move on his body. Similarly, whereas he sees himself as an agent of intellect and Nature as lacking intellect, he admits an ignorance of death. The knowledge of death, furthermore, is engendered as a plant, a "creeping fact". This gives some agency to Nature indirectly, who in turn creates a mock copy of the motorcyclist:

> And though the tubers, once I rot,
> Reflesh my bones with pallid knot,
> Till swelling out my clothes they feign
> This dummy is a man again,
> It is as servants they insist
> Without volition that they twist;
> And habit does not leave them tired,
> By men laboriously acquired.
> Cell after cell the plants convert
> My special richness in the dirt:
> All that they can get, they get by chance.
>
> And multiply in ignorance. (55)

Nature is almost personified here in the literal sense: it becomes similar in shape to a human. It does not overcome what he maintains as the key difference between man and Nature, however, namely that humans have their own will, and Nature does not.

Ironically enough, this lack of volition is expressed with a human metaphor, which further muddles the unclear boundaries between the motorcyclist and the marshland. Plants grow and multiply without a sense of purpose and without intelligence. But earlier, the motorcyclist admits living in ignorance of death. According to Albert Camus's The *Myth of Sisyphus*, the absurd condition is that people live "as if no one 'knew'. This is because in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious" (21). The motorcyclist's account of his death is, of course, merely speculation, which happens to end with critical remarks on plant life. This hides a barely veiled commentary of human life. The last line evokes the creation of man: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). This ironic reiteration of the divine command pairs reproduction with lack of intelligence. The motorcyclist in the poem exercises his intelligence and chooses to die instead of reproducing. His rootedness into the earth is very much ironic as he refuses to put down figurative roots.

"The Allegory of the Wolf Boy" (from *The Sense of Movement*) also discusses an antagonistic relationship between man and Nature, and does it in a rather straightforward allegory of the double life many gay men had to live to avoid violence. The titular boy changes into an animal at night, revealing his true nature, yet he is already distinct during the day:

> The causes are in Time; only their issue
> Is bodied in the flesh, the finite powers.
> And how to guess he hides in that firm tissue
> Seeds of division? At tennis and at tea
> Upon the gentle lawn, he is not ours,
> But plays us in a sad duplicity. (61)

The boy seems not to belong into the group identified by the first-person plural voice ("he is not ours"), and it is not explained why. The problem manifests itself in the body at night, and during the day he hides his condition and "plays us", he being a deceiver in flesh. His difference is not only coded as a species difference but also a difference in class: the boy merely pretends to belong to the middle-class "tennis at tea / Upon the gentle lawn". Similarly, before he transforms, he "wedges his clothes between / Two moulded garden urns" (61). His condition puts him in a socially subordinate position, and his transformation also comes with a loss of status. As Michelucci puts it (without reading the poem as an allegory of closetedness), "whether the marks on his body are physical, or only a metaphor for inner discomfort, they make him an outsider who is excluded and misunderstood, and destined to be slowly distanced from his family's and society's affections" (134).

The poem represents being gay[34] as being (considered as) subhuman, but it also naturalises it. As he transforms, he "goes beyond / His understanding, through the dark and dust: / Fields of sharp stubble, abandoned by machine / To the whirring enmity of insect lust" (61). The sexual drive he experiences is both illogical and hostile to him, but it comes from the natural world; it is not artificial like a machine. His animality, furthermore, appears to come from his repression of natural desires: "he seeks the moon, / Which, with the touch of its infertile

[34] While I am eager to read the poem as a sexual allegory, a wider interpretation is certainly possible. Gunn's friend and fellow author Oliver Sacks, for example, treated the poem as an allegory of a life divided between professional life and leisure life. In his autobiography, which shares a title with Gunn's "On the Move", Sacks explains that "'The Allegory of the Wolf Boy' corresponded to a certain duplicity I felt in myself, which I thought of in part as a need to have different selves for day and night. By day I would be the genial, white-coated Dr. Oliver Sacks, but at nightfall I would exchange my white coat for my motorbike leathers and, anonymous, wolf-like, slip out of the hospital to rove the streets or mount the sinuous curves of Mount Tamalpais and then race along the moonlit road to Stinson Beach or Bodega Bay. This doubleness was assisted by my having the middle name of Wolf; for Thom and my bike friends, my name was Wolf, where for my fellow doctors it was Oliver. In October of 1961, Thom gave me a copy of his new book, *My Sad Captains*, and inscribed it 'to the Wolf Boy (no allegorizing needed!), with alles gute, and admiration, from Thom'" (78). Nevertheless, Sacks kept his homosexual orientation a secret most of his life.

light, / Shall loose desires hoarded against his will / By the long urging of the afternoon" (61). These impulses find an outlet in the "infertile light" of the moon, which is quite unlike how one typically conceptualises the (reproductive) sexuality of animals. Lee Edelman's "No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive" focuses on how non-reproductive sexuality is marginalized by society's focus on reproductive futurism: "If, however, there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (13). The moon may be characterised by an inability to reproduce sexually, but it is still a natural satellite with associations of love:

> White in the beam he stops, faces it square,
> And the same instant leaping from the ground
> Feels the familiar itch of close dark hair;
> Then, clean exception to the natural laws,
> Only to instinct and the moon being bound,
> Drops on four feet. Yet he has bleeding paws. (*Collected Poems* 61)

The close dark hair, which Michelucci connects to puberty (129), could also be interpreted as the fur of a mate brushing against his; the synecdoche certainly alienates the hair from the body it grows from. His being both bound to instinct and being an "exception to the natural laws" is also ambiguous: his instinctual animal behaviour comes from nature, but the double life caused by his supernatural transformation does clearly not. He may become a wolf, but he changes "not into a predator (like the name 'wolf boy' would lead one to believe), but into prey" (Michelucci 128). As he gets on his knees, he both shows a sign of defeat and enacts a receptive sexual position (note that his body is already penetrated by the "spikes" that pierce his feet in the third stanza). Thereby the concept of homosexual intercourse as violence against Nature is flipped on its head: the boy is violated by Nature.

While "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death" and "The Allegory of the Wolf Boy" represent a hostile relationship between man and nature, "St Martin and the Beggar" (from *The Sense of Movement*) offers a reconciliation between man and his human nature. The poem retells the legend of Saint Martin of Tours, according to which he as a young man cut his military cloak into two parts to share it with a beggar. The story can be easily understood as a parable about goodwill and generosity, and Gunn's interpretation keeps it didactic by stating the lesson in the second to last stanza. The poem ponders upon the existential problem of the insufficiency of Christian doctrine to find meaning in life, and of human nature which contradicts this doctrine. Young Martin follows his impulse to become a soldier: "Though I hold the principles / Of Christian life be right, / I cannot grow from them alone, / I must go out to

fight". Yet following the path of a soldier will not erase his doubt: "'Is not this act of mine', he said, / 'A cowardly betrayal, / Should I not peg my nature down / With a religious nail?" (66). This issue appears to be solved by an event that happens in nature; like "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death", most of the poem takes place in a stormy marshland. But whereas the motorcyclist is defeated by his environment[35], Martin finds shelter and grows as a person.

Nature provides backdrop and occasion for Martin to encounter a man and share a cloak, and by it, an intimate humane experience. Martin recognises that they are both in need. As the beggar explains:

> My enemies would have turned away,
> My holy toadies would
> Have given all the cloak and frozen
> Conscious that they were good.
> But you, being a saint of men,
> Gave only what you could. (68)

Martin's act is appropriate because his generosity is measured and rational, but this is not why it is beautiful. Being a "saint of men", Martin behaves humanely: he does not save the man's soul but protects his body from the cold. The two men indirectly join their bodies: in addition to their sharing a piece of clothing, Martin also offers the beggar food from his plate. Martin's acts, however, are unlike Christ's feeding of the multitudes and its divine economy of love: his cutting of the cloak is indeed a (temporary) loss. The half-cloak is not enough to shield him from the elements: he is "soaking to the skin" (67), and giving food obviously means less food for Martin. Therefore, his sacrifice is not divine but comradely: he uses the instrument of the soldier to cut the cloak to warm another man's flesh. The beggar's description is not without eroticism: he is not only naked but "brawny", and when he gives the half-cloak back to its owner, he is "Still bare but round each muscled thigh / A single golden band, / His eyes now wild with love" (68). The golden band is probably Gunn's invention: it might be that the beggar kept a small strip of cloth from his half of the cloak as a memento of his encounter with Martin, something like a love knot.

The poem ends with Martin's uneasy meditation on his experience with the beggar, and paradoxically, this is what elevates him into sainthood. His generosity is unlike that of sycophants ("holy toadies"): he is not entirely sure that he is a good Christian. He is characterised by human doubt, and a need to eat:

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[35] So is the Wolf Boy. In contrast, "On the Move" from the same volume describes a biker gang that subdues Nature (see chapter 2).

St Martin stretched his hand out
To offer from his plate,
But the beggar vanished, thinking food
Like cloaks is needless weight.
Pondering on the matter,
St Martin bent and ate. (68)

The Martin of this poem is not just a holy man but an existential hero: having recognised that Christian principles are not sufficient for living the life he wants, he goes out in search of meaning relying on more carnal impulses ("to fight"). (This is probably what the beggar means by calling him a "saint of men".) His supper reconciles intellect and body: he ponders as he is eating (Gunn exploits the double meaning of "matter", which can refer to both an intellectual problem and a physical substance). His posture is also revealing of a flexibility between these contradictory inclinations. Yet in the stanza, he is unambiguously referred to as "St Martin" twice (earlier, he is simply "Martin"), suggesting that his encounter with the naked man was a transformative experience.

Group Identity and Erasure: *My Sad Captains* (1961), *Touch* (1967) and *Moly* (1971)

The heroes in Gunn's early poetry are mostly isolated characters (St Martin is certainly an exception, not the rule). While he continues to write about men in isolation, *My Sad Captains* (1961) features men being part of groups. Accordingly, many poems in the third collection make use of light symbolism to emphasise group identity. In "'Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt'" (from *My Sad Captains*), for example, a young man is getting a tattoo of stars to signify him belonging to a group. Tattooing itself is a communal experience: "We watch through the shop-front while / Blackie draws stars – an equal // concentration on his and / the youngster's faces" (*Collected Poems* 118). This is not a tattooist working on a passive body but a mutual activity, which is performed, moreover, to the voyeuristic pleasure of the group outside the tattoo parlour. The action is sexualised significantly:

his eyes follow the point
that touches (quick, dark movement!)

a *virginal* arm beneath
his rolled sleeve: he holds his breath.

… Now that it is finished, he

hands a few bills to Blackie (118, emphasis mine)

The boy watches as the needle is penetrating him, and loses his innocence in turn. The ellipsis, as well as the bandages that cover the tattoo at the end of the poem point to the violence that comes with such loss. As a result of their exchange, the tattooist gets some money, and the boy a new identity: on his arms, there are "stars, hanging in a blue thick / cluster. Now he is starlike" (118). He wears his new identity on his skin, represented by a source of light, which is visible to everyone.

"Black Jackets" (from *My Sad Captains*) considers the same topics of identity, exchange and loss, but places the character it describes in a leather bar:

In the silence that prolongs the span
Rawly of music when the record ends,
The red-haired boy who drove a van
In weekday overalls but, like his friends,

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. (*Collected Poems* 108)

In an interview, Gunn clarifies that at the time of writing the poem, leather bars were not yet associated unambiguously with gay culture: "I didn't know leather bars existed; maybe they didn't exist! I was describing a straight bar, though obviously with a sexual interest in the boys. So it's very complicated to say what I was really writing about there. Maybe I helped to create a leather bar, by writing that poem" (Sinfield 223). Ironically, the red-haired boy is wearing leather as a (gay fetish) costume, and not because he drives a motorcycle. While he clearly assumes an identity with the help of the jacket and boots, the word "'Remote' seems to include both detachment and reverence, distancing him from the 'heroic fall or climb' or perhaps even suggesting that the jacket is second-hand, its scuffs and its identity not his own" (Powell 30). The leather, therefore, is not to express an inner attribute but to fulfil a social purpose.

While the patrons of the bar do aim to express their identity with their clothing, the red-haired boy believes that it is merely a means of communication:

On the other drinkers bent together,
Concocting selves for their impervious kit,
He saw it as no more than leather
Which, taut across the shoulders grown to it,

Sent through the dimness of a bar
As sudden and anonymous hints of light
As those that shipping give, that are
Now flickers in the Bay, now lost in night. (108)

For the readers of today, these exchanges of signs and glances in the leather bar are probably less ambiguously sexual. The light symbolism in these passages, furthermore, is strikingly different from the obsessive light in "Round and Round" or the "infertile light of the moon" in "The Allegory of the Wolf Boy". In these earlier poems, light is cast on solitary characters, whereas the lights in "Black Jackets" promise shared experience. Upon closer inspection, however, it is clear that "hints of light" are not the same as light, and "flickers" do not quite illuminate the night. Even so, these signs do express a belonging together:

If it was only loss he wore,
He wore it to assert, with fierce devotion,
Complicity and nothing more.
He recollected his initiation,

And one especially of the rites.
For on his shoulders they had put tattoos:
The group's name on the left, The Knights,
And on the right the slogan Born To Lose. (109)

The red-haired boy adopts a gang identity by sporting the bikers' uniform and tattoo. As a result, he inevitably loses other aspects of his identity as he becomes one of them. The fact that he is distinguishable, however, means that this is an incomplete identification. His adolescence points to another kind of loss, the loss of innocence. He may have not quite grown into his jacket yet, but clearly aims to do so, in other words, his isolation is temporary.

The shiny uniform serves as a symbol of human connection in several other poems. In "The Byrnies", which precedes "Black Jackets" in *My Sad Captains*, a group of heroes wear chainmail tunics, protective gear that consists of interconnected rings. The men hesitate to enter a dark and quiet forest, but are reassured by their uniforms: "Thus for each blunt-faced ignorant one / The grey rigid uniform combined / Safety with the virtue of the sun" (*Collected Poems*

107). Chainmail provides physical and psychological defence: it not only stops "the nicker's snap and hostile spear" (106) but traps the light and makes noise to counter the darkness and "quietness absolute" (106). The terrifying forest reiterates the conflict between man and his environment as seen in "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death", but this is handled differently in "The Byrnies". As Michelucci contends,

> Both the 'barbaric forest' and the 'quietness absolute' evoke a primordial dimension in which the individual faces the surrounding world; although the world is hostile, foreign, and full of evil, there is no other solution than to adapt to it, accepting a re-dimensioning of self, from the hero who believes himself capable of dominating and incorporating the world, to the "little group" that measures itself against the surrounding forest and adapts itself to that reality. (88-89)

Where the lone hero is destined to failure, the group of heroes may succeed (the results of their attempt is not revealed). Their byrnie is a metonymy (in the sense that they identify with what they wear) and also a metaphor: as the rings of the chainmail move together making boisterous noise, the heroes bravely move together. Accordingly, they are consistently referred to in the third person plural or as a "group".

Gunn's fascination with men in uniform is, at least partially, an erotic one.[36] Much of the sexual energy is sublimated in the philosophical topics of these early poems, but often comes to the surface in the intimate imagery of chainmail rings, softly creaking leather jackets and the like. This also happens in "Innocence" (from *My Sad Captains*), which, strangely enough, serves as an antithesis to the "The Byrnies" and "Black Jackets". The uniform of the soldier described in that poem carries within the painful absence of fellow-feeling: he watches an enemy soldier being burned alive, his "ribs wear *gently* through the darkening skin", "the fat burn with a *violet* flame" which "melting *quietly* by his boots it fell" (100, emphasis mine). Whereas the soldier shows no empathy whatsoever, the speaker of the poem adds a layer of gentleness as the body of the Russian partisan is radically and violently opened up (as in, less extremely, sexual intercourse). The light symbolism that can be found in many of the *My Sad Captains* poems also has homosexual undertones inasmuch as Gunn has probably borrowed it from fellow gay poet W. H. Auden. "September 1, 1939" makes use of similar imagery: "Defenceless under the night / Our world in stupor lies; / Yet, dotted everywhere, / Ironic points of light / Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages" (89). At the outbreak of the Second World War, Gunn was only ten years old, but the dissident heroes he writes about later serve as his moral examples at a time when the homosexual was an outlaw.

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[36] See Powell, Neill. "Young Gunn: Coming out Fighting." In *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, edited by Joshua Weiner, University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 19-34.

In Gunn's poems about rebellious Wehrmacht soldiers, namely "Claus von Stauffenberg" (from *My Sad Captains*) and "Epitaph on Anton Schmidt" (from *Touch*), men in shiny uniform perform compassionate action. In the former, the uniform is merely implied and the light takes on a more abstract sense:

> They chose the unknown, and the bounded terror,
> As a corrective, who corrected live
> Surveying without choice the bounding error:
> An unsanctioned present must be primitive.
>
> A few still have the vigour to deny
> Fear is a natural state; their motives neither
> Of doctrinaire, of turncoat, nor of spy,
> Lucidity of thought draws them together. (*Collected Poems* 111)

"They" most likely refers to members of the resistance to Nazism within the Wehrmacht, who are brought together by the inner light of their heroism. Yet in the broader sense, the poem places Stauffenberg in a transhistorical pantheon of antitotalitarian heroes: "The maimed young colonel who can calculate / On two remaining fingers and a will, / Takes lessons from the past, to detonate / A bomb that Brutus rendered possible" (111). Stauffenberg's plot, furthermore, is an attempt at existentialist conquest. By going against the chain of command ("the bounded terror"), he defines his own purpose as he makes different choices from what was prescribed for him by the ruling ideology. Like the heroes in "The Byrnies", he bravely faces the irrational evil: "Over the map a moment, face to face: / Across from Hitler, whose grey eyes have filled / A nation with the illogic of their gaze, / The rational man is poised, to break, to build" (111). Although Stauffenberg undermines the shared identity between him and his Führer/enemy, his self-definition depends on the mutuality of the gaze, as in "Black Jackets".

Part of the *Misanthropos* sequence[37] but a poem in its own right, "Epitaph for Anton Schmidt" deals with concerns similar to "Claus von Stauffenberg", such as group identity, the gaze, and heroic altruism in the face of adversity, but it is an altogether better realised poem.[38] The uniform suggested by the poem is one of facial features:

> Was the expression on his face

[37] The poems in Misanthropos follow a solitary survivor across a war-torn landscape until he finds his way back to mankind; they stage the drama of the alienated subject in search for human connection. He realises that even in his most solitary moments, "his own nature as an individual is communal", which compels him to recognize the importance of human community (Brown 84). I skip on analysing the entire sequence due to the confines of this chapter.

[38] What Gunn did not succeed in was spelling correctly the name of Anton Schmid, an Austrian who saved Jews during the Holocaust.

'Reposeful and humane good nature',
Or did he look like any Schmidt
Of slow and undisclosing feature?

I know he had unusual eyes
Whose powers no orders might determine,
Not to mistake the men he saw,
As others did, for gods or vermin. (*Collected Poems* 143)

As in "Claus von Stauffenberg", Nazism is described as opposed to logic, and an error of the gaze. Although Schmidt is one out of many soldiers, the heroic quality that distinguishes him lies in his atypical use of his eyes, which lack the ideological lenses of Nazism. Unlike Stauffenberg, however, Schmidt is not a hero in the destructive sense but one of radical compassion. The gaze that distinguishes him reinforces the sameness of the people he sees: unlike the Nazis who ignored their common humanity, "He helped the Jews to get away / – Another race at that, and strangers" (143). Yet he too is an existential hero: "He never did mistake for bondage / The military job, the chances, / The limits; he did not submit / To the blackmail of his circumstances" (144). Both poems situate their characters in the harsh winter landscape of snowy Poland (harsh as in "The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death"); and their last lines freeze them mid-stride: Stauffenberg is "Falling toward history, and under snow" (111), and Schmidt is "Breathing the cold air of his freedom / And treading a distinct direction" (144) in the same snow. Schmidt is lauded here as active and undefeated.

"Elegy on the Dust", which is also a part of the *Misanthropos* sequence, discusses a dust bowl, a landscape destroyed by wind erosion, which stands for the impersonal unison of mankind after death. The poem starts with natural images that suggest cooperation. The first section describes small animals that, in their hunting and breeding, resemble the sexually violent scuffling birds of "On the Move" (see Chapter 2):

The upper slopes are busy with the cricket;
But downhill, hidden in the thicket,
Birds alternate with sudden piercing calls
The rustling from small animals
Retreating, venturing, as they hunt and breed
Interdependent in that shade. (*Collected Poems* 144)

But whereas the birds in "On the Move" followed "Some hidden purpose" (39), the way these animals live is better understood. They are not random obstacles on the road, but live in an ecosystem in which different species rely on each other for resources. Even so, this community

of animals is also under threat by the dust bowl which is close to the thicket. The result of poor agricultural practices, dust bowls are, however indirectly, manmade. The dust from the eroded landscape covers the plants and kills them: "First touching stalk and leaf with silvery cast, / They block the pores to death at last / And drift in silky banks around the trunk, / Where dock and fern are fathoms sunk" (144). Dust is thus associated with both humanity and death; and they both incorporate the natural world they come in contact with.

The third section describes the dust bowl as a dump where "the world's refuse and debris" (145) lies, which include the individual. Death is a universalising force: the human race is reduced to the small particles of dust and is mixed with animal matter. Dust is an obvious reference to Genesis 3:19, where humanity becomes mortal: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." As individuals are becoming "one form and one size" (145), they are also averaging out in power. The dust bowl is a "knacker's yard" (145), which was a part of the slaughterhouse where dead horses were skinned and turned into products like tallow and glue. To this unglorified place "they have come who sought distinction hard" (145), in other words, men who struggled for their identity. Their struggle becomes ironic as they are all the same after death. The term "averaging out", meaning becoming average in size, is almost sarcastic: whoever thought themselves special becomes fatally average in quality too. While Gunn's existential heroes proved their worth by radical action, the grains of dust are destined to be passive, being "Too light to act, too small to harm, too fine / To simper or betray or whine" (145). As the wind blows, the grains move together in an ironically "Perfect community" (145). It is perfect in the sense that there is no conflict between the individual grains[39]: becoming dust results in the complete erasure of the self. The title may identify the genre of the poem as elegy, but since the voice is impersonal and disinterested, this self-erasure is not mourned at all. It could even be read as celebratory:

> Perfect community in its behaviour.
> It yields to what it sought, a saviour:
> Scattered and gathered, irregularly blown,
> Now sheltered by a ridge or stone,
> Now lifted on strong upper winds, and hurled
> In endless hurry round the world.[40] (145-6)

[39] The dust motif returns in the last poem of "Misanthropos." When the survivor finds that he is not alone anymore, "The touched arm feels of dust, mixing with dust / On the hand that touches it" (151). People, like a dust bowl are "subject to the winds of fashion and political demagogues, they are also conscious of their common mortality: their companionate origin and rise from dust as well as their eventual return to it. It is the 'first man's' recognition of this fact, in part, that enables him to struggle painfully against his isolated misanthropy" (Miller 71).

[40]This image echoes William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal": „No motion has she now, no force; / She neither hears nor sees; / Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees" (150).

"Three" (*from Moly*) is another poem that explores the idea of sameness and connection, but instead of returning to dust, the family the poem describes returns to innocence in Nature by liberating themselves from social norms. They are all naked at the beach, which is a kind of uniform as their look distinguishes them as a group. The father's hair, "Matted like rainy bracken" (*Collected Poems* 195) implies that they are hippies, which situates their nakedness in an ethos of community and harmony with Nature. Accordingly, the poem blurs the boundaries between humans and Nature: the father swims in the "sinewed ocean" (195), his son "Swims as dogs swim" (196). The mother and father may want their child to be as thoroughly united with Nature as possible, but they themselves still bear the marks of civilisation. The mother has tan lines on her body: the remnants of clothes are reminders of the life in which one has to cover their body in order to function in everyday life. Similarly, the father is surprised by his own physical change of his naked body when he comes out of the ocean: "Drying his loins, he grins to notice how, / Struck helpless with the chill / His cock hangs tiny and withdrawn there now" (195). In contrast, "their son / Is brown all over. Rapt in endless play, / In which all games make one, / His three-year nakedness is everyday" (195). He is not naked because he consciously wants to be in harmony with nature–he actually is.[41]

As a consequence, the two generations differ in how they relate to innocence, and this difference is expressed in how their bodies relate to knowledge, the opposite of innocence. By being naked, the hippie parents do their best to liberate themselves from the subjectivity imposed on them, that is, the Foucauldian concept of the self-disciplining subject:

> The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A 'soul' inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body. (*Discipline and Punish* 30)

Unfamiliar with the body-soul binary, the son is not limited by social norms: "Rushes his father, wriggles from his hold. / *His body which is him* / Sturdy and volatile, runs off the cold" (emphasis mine, 196). His body, therefore his self is not fully formed: being both "sturdy" and "volatile", he lacks the civilizational discipline that would bind him into place. By "continually accepting / everything his play turns up" (196), he is engaging real life as it is without any judgment. In his free play and malleability, the boy is similar to the averaged-out dust particles

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Justin Quinn, on the other hand, attributes Gunn's use of dust imaginary in other poems to American influence, Emerson's and more indirectly Whitman's (Quinn 223).

[41] This, like earlier the human dust circulating the Earth, is also a Romantic image. Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" describes a child in a similar harmony with nature: "But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze / By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags […] so shalt thou see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters" (83).

"Scattered and gathered, irregularly blown" in "Elegy of the Dust", but while the latter laments the change that comes when one returns to innocence in Nature (or at least, frames it in sombre meditation), "Three" explores what is to be gained. Accordingly, the parents are clearly in the process of unlearning social norms, yet the last stanza phases this process in positive terms: "He […] comes back to that pebble-warmed recess / In which the parents sit / At watch, who had to learn their nakedness" (196). The poem, however, does not reconcile the difference between the two generations.

"Tom-Dobbin" (from *Moly*) discusses a perfect union between two creatures without any opposition or ambiguity. As they are having sex, they become one body with two intermingled selves. The poem puts a twist on the old sexual topos of horse riding, and unites the lovers into a single mythological creature, the half-horse-half-man centaur, which troubles our idea of selfhood in various ways. It is, first of all, a creature of redundancy: where a horse head should be, there is an entire upper body of a man. That is to say, it is one creature that retains the twoness of conjoined man and horse. Secondly, the poem describes two humans having sex but it is unsure where the animal element is coming from. Thirdly, the bodies are described while in transformation. The free verse form, the fractured syntax and lack of punctuation dramatically enacts the process:

> light is in the pupil
>
> luminous seed
>
> and light is in the mind
>
> crossing
>
> in an instant
>
> passage between the two
>
> seamless
>
> imperceptible transition
>
> skin melting downward into hide
>
> at the centaur's waist
>
> there is the one
>
> and at once it is also the other (*Collected Poems* 200)

The two creatures joining into each other is forming and malleable (like the child in "Three"), their intermingled mass is a "beginning upward" (200): their boundaries are unclear as they transform. The second section makes the image more concrete: "Hot in his mind, Tom watches Dobbin fuck" (200). The sexual roles, however, are awkwardly blurred. Since there are only two people mentioned, one can assume that Tom is both penetrated and also watches Dobbin penetrating him. The relationship between one and other are deliberately confused as the

heightened consciousness of lovemaking creates something of an out of body experience, the illusion of a third party being present.

Tom's eye serves as a prism in the sense that it multiplies the things he sees. The first section shows a transformation in which light seamlessly penetrates the eye as the sexual encounter begins. At the moment of ejaculation, their emission gains the attribute of multiplicity: "In coming, Tom and Dobbin join into one – / Only a moment, just as it is done: / A shock of whiteness, shooting like a star, / In which all colours of the spectrum are" (201).[42] The section following the moment of orgasm is accordingly in prose, surrendering all metrical control. It describes a single creature, but a creature that is one with nature:

> He grins, he plunges into orgy. It moves about him in easy eddies, and he enters their mingling and branching. He spreads with them, he is veined with sunshine.
>
> The cobalt gleam of the peacock's neck, the course of a wind through grasses, distant smoke frozen in the sky, are extensions of the self. (201)

In the fourth section, the self extends into time. It describes two platypuses, mother and child, as a result of evolution. They are both one and separated: "If you could see through darkness you could see / One breaking outline that includes the two" (201). The last section mirrors the platypus and its young. The two selves it describes are floating in a single body and are in the process of separation, but are still holding together: "we enter / The haze together – which is me, which is him? / Selves floating in the one flesh we are of" (202). The parallelism suggests that the lovers have repossessed their innocence, if not in the sexual sense, in their multiplicity.

"Tom-Dobbin" seems to solve many of the problems that characterises Gunn's early poems that describe character. In his earliest attempts, characters like Lofty, the lighthouse keeper, the dying motorcyclist and the wolf boy were unable to fit their socially prescribed roles and integrate into their environment. In the poems of the 60s and early 70s, Gunn focuses on the sameness of the characters and what connects them, hence his interest in men in uniform. But he is also sexually motivated. In an interview with Jim Powell, he admits that in his teenage years, he enjoyed "eyeing the well-fed and good-looking G.I.'s who were on every street, with an appreciation I didn't completely understand" (*Shelf-Life* 227). By the seventies, he understood it very well. In "Tom-Dobbin", Gunn comes very close to coming out since it is clear that both characters described are male. The sexual is masked as psychological (two parts of the same mind) but barely. One of the working titles of the poem was "Being Queer" (Teare 191). Even though this was changed, the homosexual content of the poem is not repressed as

[42] Gunn seems to have divined a political symbol: the rainbow pride flag, which symbolises the spectrum of human sexuality is to make its debut seven years after the 1971 publication of *Moly*.

such but sublimated as the emphasis is put on the universal aspects of the sexual union. This quasi-openness, however, comes at a price: the erasure of the particularities of the character.

The Other as an Unsolvable Riddle

Gunn breaks with his old descriptive practices in "The Release": he attempts describing a man but ends up letting him and the matter go; he accepts that the other is self-contained. The poem starts with a series of contradictions. On the one hand, the speaker makes it clear that he is doing imaginative work as he is recollecting a past experience: "And I assemble it as it was when I walked on it, / the street, it's unstable, that's what keeps me going, / the sense of mild and constant risk. // I watch him in my mind, the man I saw" (*Collected Poems* 301).[43] The first word of the poem is the connective "And", which suggests that the experience of seeing the man on the street precedes the poem, and the poem (the speaker's assembled words) is, in turn, secondary to the experience. On the other hand, the speaker makes the rather large claim that his recollection is perfect, and the reconstructed street is "as it was". Even so, the street is "unstable", and so is the man: there is "something odd or off-balance about him" (301). The syntax of the second line, which is itself "unstable", allows for both a perfect reconstruction of an unstable experience, and an unstable reconstruction of one. As a result of this ambiguity, the speaker's account of the man becomes unreliable.

The attempt at describing the man ultimately fails as he is revealed to be more than a describable object: "He eases to and fro in his consciousness, / he moves in and out of my poem" (301). The man might be on drugs, but his mental state has a profound effect on the speaker's recollection of him as he slips from the poem itself. From this point on, it is safe to identify the speaker with the implied poet. The poem becomes something like a declaration of a new poetics as he reconsiders his earlier practice: "What am I doing to this man in the yellow jacket? / Reading him, pretending he is legible, / thinking I can master what is self-contained" (301). This highlights the dangerous side of empathy. While she does not differentiate between sympathy and empathy, in her book *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis* Anna Veprinska maintains that "empathy constructs a bridge between self and other that can traverse time, space, and difference" (15), but she also discusses empathy's dangers, notably appropriation, highlighting that "the empathizing individual also assumes a position of superiority" toward the object of his empathy (18). Furthermore, empathy can focus on the feelings of the empathizer, not of its object, therefore it "cannot translate into positive action" (19). The implied poet in "The Release", in contrast, recognises that the object of his attention

[43] For a discussion of this "risk", see "A Map of the City" in the first chapter.

is a person himself with his own agency and free will. The man is different; therefore, his description can only be a true one if the poet's attention sticks to the surface: "I know only his demeanour, his clothing and his skin, / and presume an inner structure I can never be sure of" (301).

Instead of simply admitting the failure of describing the unreadable man, the poem resolves the problem in another set of contradictions. Unlike the naked family in "Three", the yellow-jacketed man in "The Release" cannot be an objective correlative for a concept the poet has in mind. Instead, he becomes the objective correlative of the concept of the unreadability of the Other. By insisting on the impossibility of authentically describing the man, the poem manages to make use of him and remain true to him at the same time. The poet, furthermore, uses his own invention, a metaphor, to describe the man unaffected by description: "I must return to him as he was, / A shimmering planet sheathed in its own air" (301). This is all the more contradictory because of the large distance between the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor. The man, in other words, can only be a planet in the poet's imagination, which is secondary to the experience of meeting the man. Thirdly, while admitting that the man has his own mind that cannot be seen into, the description still probes it: he "stares glowingly ahead as he plans some slightly stoned plan" (301). The plan may be unknowable, but the planning is clearly not. Still, the poet insists on the detachment of the man: he is "unpredictable, clean of me" (302).[44] This, however, becomes true only at the end of the poem, when the poet lets him go. In order to be true to his word, the poet must abruptly stop speaking: "as if *suddenly* resolving something / he *suddenly* unfixes his eyes, jumps to his feet / and slouches eagerly back to the street he came from" (emphasis mine, 302). It is through defeat that the poem succeeds, and this success is cunningly surrendered to the man.

"The Idea of Trust" is another poem from *Jack Straw's Castle*, in which the described character performs his own unreadability, but with more sinister consequences. The poem begins by contrasting deceptive appearance and inner attribute:

> The idea of trust, or,
> the thief. He
> was always around,
> 'pretty' Jim.
> Like a lilac bush or

[44] In a later poem sequence, "Transients and Residents" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982), Gunn celebrates "Beauty untouched by [his] personality" (*Collected Poems*, 378). He compares his character sketches to a snapshot album: "What am I after – and what makes me think / The group of poems I have entered is / Interconnected by closer link / Than any snapshot album's? / I can try / At least to get me snapshots accurate" (Collected Poems 378-9). For more on snapshots and poems, see Chapter 2.

a nice picture on the wall.
Blue eyes of an
intense vagueness
and the well-arranged
bearing of an animal. (*Collected Poems* 290)

Jim may be attractive but he is a criminal, therefore, he is unreliable, and his intentions are questionable. His nature is obscured by an incoherent chain of similes: he is compared to a plant, an object, and even an animal. As plant or picture, he seems graspable, even tame, but this is immediately questioned by his "vagueness", that is, unintelligibility. In his autobiography published in *The Occasions of Poetry* (1982), Gunn writes, "Perhaps I could say that my poetry is an attempt to *grasp*, with grasp meaning both to *take hold of* in a first bid at possession, and also to *understand*. I certainly do not pretend that I ever do completely possess or understand, I can only say that I attempt to" (185-6). Jim is not fully grasped. He may come across as natural having the "bearing of an animal", yet there is an artifice to this: his posture or walk is "well-arranged". Besides his description, Jim's riddle "trust is / an intimate conspiracy" (290) stands witness to his elusive nature, as it remains unsolved: "What did that / mean? Anyway next day / he was gone, with / all the money and dope / of the people he lived with" (290). The word "Anyway" provides no logical connection between the riddle and the theft, adding to Jim's mystery.

The second half of the poem reveals more about Gunn's poetics than the character in question. After briefly telling the story, the speaker imagines the thief at work:

I begin
to understand. I see him
picking through their things
in his leisure, with
a quiet secret smile
choosing and taking,
having first discovered
and set up his phrase to
scramble
the message of enveloping trust. (291)

The speaker begins his work of imaginative meditation after the deed has been done. While his reflection appears to yield him some kind of truth (or fraction of it), the word "understand" has no object: it is unsure what is being learnt here. It is possible that the verb is used intransitively, which might suggest that the speaker does not talk about his knowledge but expresses sympathy.

Instead of solving Jim's riddle, he expands on it by imagining him as a trickster character: the "quiet secret smile" while stealing and Jim's motivation to confuse his housemates are the speaker's augmentations of the character. No more details about Jim's inner attributes are allowed, however. Just like in "The Release", the character eschews description: "He's getting / free. His eyes / are almost transparent. / He has put on / gloves" (291).

The thief escapes not only the scene of the crime but also the poem and the poet's descriptive gaze: Jim's eyes are not the mirrors of his soul, and he leaves no fingerprints that would give away his identity. This is a curious choice considering Jim lived in the house and thus the police would surely be able to find fingerprints on other objects. His putting on gloves must be symbolic. With his gloved hand, "He fingers / the little privacies of those / who acted as if there / should be no privacy" (291). This is a self-reflective reference to Gunn's descriptive practice of invading the mind of his characters. In "The Idea of Trust", he does not only give some agency to his character but considerable power. While yellow-jacketed man in "The Release" remains silent, Jim can speak for himself, and he is able to puzzle and confuse his housemates as well as the reader: with his riddle, he scrambles "the message of / enveloping trust" in general, that is, the trust in our knowledge of the Other. Jim's riddle, therefore, is evoked with the goal of not solving it. As Gunn writes, "I like the poem because in it I ended up with more *sympathy* for him than I started with" (emphasis mine, *Occasions* 186).

Smaller pieces from *The Passages of Joy* and *The Man with Night Sweats* should be mentioned here because they too describe everyday characters the same controversial way as seen in "The Release" and "The Idea of Trust" (by which I mean they are character descriptions insisting on the impossibility of grasping the Other), with small but significant modifications. The previous poems described character from imagination by adding "I watch" and "I see". Making note of the presence of the viewer emphasised that they are subjective descriptions. The opening poem from *The Passages of Joy*, "Elegy", takes this further:

> I can almost see it
> Think, tall, half-handsome
> the thin hungry sweetness
> of his smile gone
> as he makes up his mind
> and walks behind the barn
> in his thin pointed boots
> over the crackling eucalyptus leaves
> and shoots himself in the head (*Collected Poems* 311)

The word "almost" makes it clear that this is a fictional reconstruction of the events. The poem does not attempt to profile Danny; his motivations are not analysed beyond what is blatantly obvious: "Even the terror / of leaving life like that / better than the terror / of being unable to handle it" (301). Danny's perspective of his suicide is not detailed, only guessed at: "Did he smell eucalyptus last? / No it was his own blood / as he choked on it" (311). This might seem like an intimate detail, but the intimacy is evidently second-hand: the speaker is not able to directly access the victim's feelings.

The inaccessibility of the Other is the topic of another poem from the volume, "Donahue's Sister". By being an alcoholic, the titular sister is "Fuelling her private world, in which / she builds her case against the public" (*Collected Poems* 367). Her brother, on whom she is a burden, cannot communicate with her: "He's unable to get through. / She's not there to get through to" (367). She is absent, a zombie, albeit a speaking one, "muttering / some injuction to her private world" (367). In the rare instances when she can be understood, she expresses exaggerated hatred: "That sudden tirade last night, / such conviction and logic / – had she always hated him or / was it the zombie speaking?" (367). Explosive anger is the topic of "At an Intersection" from the same volume: "I couldn't take my eyes off / the old woman raging around, / cursing at random, she was tethered to crisis / like a mobbed witch" (*Collected Poems* 369). Like Donahue's sister is replaced by a zombie, the raging old woman is replaced by her emotion. She has a "long nose / as bright and sharp as Anger" (369), and onlookers are "gazing in discomfort / at an anger / unspent, unspendable" (371). The old woman is entirely inaccessible, and self-contained as "the causes [of her anger] are forgotten" (370), that is, the meaning behind her curses remains indecipherable.

The characters described in "The Idea of Trust", "Donahue's Sister" and "At an Intersection" all possess their own language; and the way they use it alienates them from the listener. The same thing happens in "Old Meg" (from *The Man with Night Sweats*) and "The Problem" (from *Boss Cupid*), but in these two poems, the language of the Other also seems to bleed into the language of the speaker. "Old Meg" describes an insane woman "dark as a gypsy, berry- / brown with dirt" (438) and similar to the one in "At an Intersection". She is speaking to the concrete, which the speaker interprets as her having "Extraterrestrial / friends no doubt" (438), but when the speaker tries to communicate with her, she "responded with / 'Blood on you!'" (438). Considering the fact that "Old Meg" is collected in the AIDS-themed *The Man with Night Sweats*, the gypsy woman's statement can be interpreted not only as a curse but also divination: a gay speaker may have caused or can be causing the death of other men without him knowing it. If this is the case, "Old Meg" stands out from the other poems discussed in this subchapter. The woman it describes is not only an undecipherable Other but someone who can

effectively "read" the speaker. The poem, therefore, is not a one-sided description but heteroglossia: the described character describes the speaker in turn. "Blood on you", which is certainly the most powerful line of the poem, is uttered by the woman, not the speaker, and retroactively, her speaking to the concrete gains special significance: "You didn't make sense / at first I couldn't have known / who you were" (438) is something like a predicted answer to her curse/prophecy. It might as well be said by the implied poet, whose main concern in these poems is the unknowability of the Other.

Several of Gunn's later poems make use of heteroglossia. Further examples are "My Mother's Pride" (*Boss Cupid*), a short poem composed mostly of quotes by Gunn's mother, and "The Differences" in *The Man with Night Sweats*, which includes a large, translated section of a poem by Renaissance poet Guido Cavalcanti. By using heteroglossia, Gunn surrenders some of his authority as a poet and makes his poetry more sociable. This is in line with a more general development in Gunn's poetry. In his 1977 review essay of *Jack Straw's Castle*, Patrick Swinden argues that "Gunn's poems might be described as […] meditations on the inadequacy of language to express the related inadequacy of most descriptions of personal identity" (43). Swinden criticizes Gunn's attempts to escape self-consciousness by regressing into a state before personality, as in "The Geysers", for attempting the impossible:

> the only way a poet can cope with self-consciousness is with words, and words cannot carry him back to where he might have been before words ever needed to be used. Words are the instruments of differentiation. There are limits to unitary functions they can be coaxed into performing. In transgressing those the limits Gunn has tried to get beyond the power of speech. He cannot hope to have succeeded. (60)

In the poems I discuss in this subchapter, Gunn is not attempting to regress into a primal state of being in order to eschew his own self. Yet by refusing to describe the man in "The Release" and giving voice to the Other in "The Idea of Trust" and other poems, he finds an adequate way of describing a person, which leaves their identity, and the speaker's consciousness and presence, intact.

"The Problem" is characterised by heteroglossia in a different way. In the poem, "the mutual "give-and-take" with a boy […] turns out to be illusory since the lover's true passion is far beyond the sexual relationship" (Michelucci 180). The unsolved maths problem, which is written on a board in the lover's room symbolises his being self-contained and that he can only be known in the Biblical sense: "his true / Passion cyphered in chalk beyond by reach" (*Boss Cupid* 24). That is to say, the boy's passion is written in a different language, the language of mathematics, as opposed to the language of poetry. The speaker sees the maths problem "beyond the aureate hair", which could mean both the inside of the boy's head (his mind) or

beyond his head. However, the speaker discovers the boy's interest in Maths only after he is told: "After, I found out in the talk / Companion to a cigarette, / That he, turning the problem over yet / In his disorderly and ordered head" (24). The boy's head, therefore, is off-limits; the speaker may see his disorderedness (his dishevelled hair) but he cannot understand how his mind is ordered. He can only rely on what the boy communicates to him, with his own words, about the special language he understands. What is more, the language of mathematics infects the poem and becomes part of its form. The labyrinthine rhyme scheme mirrors both the boy's puzzle (the maths problem) and his puzzling nature:

Close to the top	A
Of an encrusted dark	B
Converted brownstone West of Central Park	B
(For this was 1961)	C
In this room that,	D
a narrow hutch	E (next stanza)
Was sliced from some once-cavernous flat,	D
Where now a window took a whole wall up	A
And tints were bleached-out by the sun (23)	C etc.

It takes effort to piece these rhymes together: the pattern is highly irregular, and the distance between rhyming words can be considerably great, in one case, nine lines. In one instance, a rhyme even crosses the border between two stanzas: "narrow hutch" rhymes with "couldn't touch" in the next stanza. The poem thus becomes something like an unsolved mathematical puzzle, but the boy does not seem to be affected by the poem or the poet: the barely noticeable, stanza-crossing rhyme barely implies a "touch." His bedroom is described in detail while the boy's description remains as vague as in "The Idea of Trust." Besides his hair colour and interest in Mathematics, all the reader can learn about him is that "He seemed all body, such / As normally you couldn't touch, / Reckless and rough" (23).

Gunn sums up his changed method of describing characters in an untitled poem from the "Gossip" section of *Boss Cupid*:

Save the word
empathy, sweetheart,
for your freshman essays.
Doesn't it make
a rather large
claim? Think you can
syphon yourself

into another human
as, in the movie,
the lively boy-ghosts
pour themselves
down the ear-holes
of pompous older men? […]
Try 'sympathy'. With that
your isolated self may
split a cloak with the beggar (*Boss Cupid* 73)

While the words "empathy" and "sympathy" are often used interchangeably, the poem clearly distinguishes them. It defines empathy as an intrusive idea, as opposed to comradely sympathy[45] (the lines with the cloak and the beggar obviously alludes to Gunn's poem about the altruistic St Martin). All this is offered as a piece of friendly (if a bit condescending) advice to a student, but one that Gunn himself has already taken to heart. As Michelucci contends, "From metaphorical alienation —connected to his existential angst—the poet moves on gradually towards the outside world, focusing on real outsiders" (134). Gunn has recognised that if one is to portray real-life characters authentically, they must remain autonomous. Sympathy is feeling with, not feeling into: true camaraderie and companionship can only exist between to people (poet and character) if they both have their own agency and free will. From *Jack Straw's Castle* on, the poems employ several techniques to achieve this effect. First of all, the speaker always makes note his presence as a viewer to emphasise the subjective nature of his descriptions. Secondly, he describes the character in vague terms and insists that they are unknowable; they remain unsolved riddles. Finally, he gives agency to the character: they are symbolically "let go" of the poem as they are free to do so, and they possess their own language to show that the poet is not the only agent who has power over language.

Consuming the Other

In other poems, the problem of description-as-erasure is not resolved at all, on the contrary, it is made explicit. The cannibalistic consuming of the Other, in fact, is a frequently recurring topic in Gunn's late poetry. One can think of numerous connections between (homo)sexual desire and cannibalism, especially since this is not without literary precedent. In his analysis of Melville's novels, Caleb Crain considers several:

[45] While Anna Veprinska does not maintain such a dichotomy between empathy and sympathy, the poem dismisses appropriative empathy and foregrounds the social benefits of the kind of fellow-feeling that respects the boundaries of its object, which matches Veprinska's argument.

> The body is a convenient boundary for the definition of the self. In theory, a sort of social anthropology may rationalize cannibalism or homosexuality, but in practice, the peculiar act violates that boundary. The act offers an ecstatic union; it offers to relieve the self of the burden of selfhood; it offers a chance to surrender the body, to consume or be consumed by another. [...] Cannibalism and homosexuality violate the distinctions between identity and desire; between self and other; between what we want, what we want to be, and what we are. This is why they are appealing (34)

That is to say, the love of man flesh unites Gunn's enduring themes of bodily violence, extasy, self-surrender, selfhood in relation to desire, and interpersonality. In Melville's time, homosexuality and cannibalism are both taboo topics (Cairn 35). Cairn speculates that Melville may have used his fiction, particularly *Moby Dick* and *Typee* as a space to explore aspects of his own possibly homosexual identity. Representing gay desire as cannibalistic, in turn, allowed Gunn to explore, in Crain's words, a "Love [that] can be as possessive and as irrational" and to "pay exceptional attention to the body of [the] desired" (36). Cannibalistic love recurs in the second half of Gunn's oeuvre. It appears framed in the context of playful sexual experimentation but also in more sinister contexts of disease and death.

"Sweet Things" (*Passages of Joy*, 1982) is an example of the former: it sets up a parallel between a desirous speaker and a child's promiscuous greed for sweets and fruit. The speaker stumbles upon "mongoloid Don" (*Collected Poems* 326) in front of a laundromat, and helps him cross the street as "They sell / peaches and pears over there" (326). Don's ice cream stained mouth and sticky fingers are instruments of infantile self-indulgence. He begs for money on the street to "buy sweet things, one after another, / he goes from store to store, from / candy store to ice cream store to / bakery to produce market, unending / quest for the palate's pleasure" (326). This hedonistic quest of oral pleasure is juxtaposed with the speaker's errands, namely "toothpaste, / vitamin pills and a book of stamps" (327). While these are not pleasurable things, they all have to do something with the mouth. The speaker's second encounter, with a young man named Chuck, is more pleasurable, oral pleasures included. It is charming because of its childishness. As they shake hands, the speaker feels "a dry finger playfully bending inward / and touching my palm in secret" (327). The gesture is not only playful but reminiscent of Don's sticky hand the speaker held while crossing the street. The way Don "spies" (326) at the speaker, potential means to his sweets, is repeated in the speaker's long gaze at Chuck: "In the long pause / I gaze at him up and down and / from his blue sneakers back to the redawning one-sided smile" (327). Looking and tasting anticipate the suggested sexual encounter: "In our eyes, on our tongues, / we savour the approaching delight / of things we know yet are fresh always" (328).

"Sweet Things" celebrates gay desire and casual sex but it does not glorify these. The poem opens with a close-up of Don's scabbed mouth, which implies infection or injury in connection with enjoying food, and indirectly, sex. As sexual desire is transformed into hunger, furthermore, the object of desire is degraded into food: "My boy I could eat you whole" (327), the speaker says, referring to Chuck. Besides it being a nickname for Charles, the word chuck can also refer to a cut of beef. Regardless of his telling name, the young man is misnamed twice by the speaker: "It's John, no Chuck, how / could his name have slipped my mind" (327), as well as "'It's a long time / since we got together' says John. / Chuck, that is" (327). Both men are stripped of their individuality. Earlier, the speaker refuses to give money to Don because "his unripened mind / never recognizes me, me / for myself, he only says hi / for what he can get, quarters to / buy sweet things" (326). The last line of the poem, "Sweet things. Sweet things" (328), seems to meditate on the topic of sexual objectification, as the repetition shifts the emphasis from the word "sweet" to "things". There is no moral judgment attached to this recognition. Don's mind may be metaphorically identified with fruit (it is "unripened"), the object of his desire, but the speaker is not being infantile and mindless. A few lines above the last line, the tone becomes elevated and literary: "We know our charm. / We know delay makes pleasure great" (327-8).[46] As Clive Wilmer contends, these sentences, written in strict iambic metre, are "truisms (as the context reminds us) grounded in personal feeling and personal experience. The lines […] link this transitory twentieth century moment to the ancient traditions of love poetry" (53). That is to say, sexual objectification is not condemned but merely made conscious as part of the charming erotic game.

"San Francisco Streets" from the same volume goes beyond setting up a parallel between object of desire and fruit, and connects these in a complex way. The poem follows a young man who leaves "Peach country" (Georgia, most likely) for San Francisco. At home, he undergoes something like metamorphosis: "When you went picking / You ended every day / With peach fuzz sticking / All over face and arms, / Intimate, gross / Itching like family" (*Collected Poems* 355). He is metaphorically turned into a peach in the last stanza: "Fuzz is still on the peach, / Peach is on the stem. / Your looks looked after you" (356), where peach fuzz likely refers to the fine hair children have on their faces, that is, to the man still being young. The poem tells the story of his social climb, but the details are fuzzy in the figurative sense too. His reason for leaving, likely a family conflict, is only hinted at, and that he is mugged upon arrival in San Francisco is greatly understated: "Tough little group of boys / Outside Flagg's Shoes. / You learned to keep your cash" (355). The young man's progress, from "Hustler to

[46] In "To Cupid", the poet is eavesdropping at a wedding feast, which is conceived of as erotic delay.

towel boy" (355) and to sugar boy and sales clerk must have been difficult throughout, but the simile "you rose / Like country cream" suggests the opposite. Two idioms are brought into play here. Namely, "the cream always rises to the top", meaning the inevitable success of whoever is destined to it, as well as "peaches and cream", which refers to both rosy cheeks on light skin and something going easily, even in an enjoyable way. Considerable tension and humour comes from this irony, which is reinforced by the predictability of the stanzaic form of the poem, suitable for light verse.

The young man's transformation from product to salesman/consumer is closely connected to the growing visibility of gay men in San Francisco. As Elizabeth Armstrong contends, "In the 1970s, the gay community in San Francisco acquired an unprecedented power and visibility. The number of organizations, both nonprofit and commercial, exploded. Most of the organizational growth took place in the Castro, a neighbourhood that was rapidly becoming a gay mecca. Gay men from all over the country migrated to the city" (113). Market Street, where the mugging takes place, crosses Castro Street, where the young man "got new work / Selling chic jewellery" (*Collected Poems* 356). His development is intertwined not only with the larger gay migration to the area but the bustling consumer culture there. He is on the market quite literally, as a fruit, a derogatory term fog gay men (one could also think of the word "peach" being a term of endearment typically used for women, making the metaphor an emasculating one). The Castro provides him with a decent job, a higher standard of living, and as a result, he is becoming integrated into the community: "You have at last attained / To middle class / (No one on Castro Street / Peddles his ass)" (356).

The speaker, furthermore, sees into the young man's life as if through a shopfront window. He has been watching him, including his sexual behaviour, "For quite some time now" (355), which indicates not only a prolonged gaze but voyeurism, perhaps even stalking, by which power is exercised upon the young man. At the end of his career journey, in contrast, he becomes an onlooker himself:

> 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)

As he gains agency over his life, he acquires the objectifying gaze that has belonged to the speaker. The passers-by, in effect, are synecdotically reduced to their outside features. Regardless, as Michelucci argues, the "uncertainty" the speaker notices in the young man's gaze implies that he "does not succeed in integrating himself completely" into the city (185). The advice the speaker gives him in the last two lines of the poem is to consider the safety his beauty provides him: "Your looks looked after you. / Look after them" (356). This could be easily interpreted as ironic considering the fleeting nature of beauty, but the polyptotonic phrasing suggests a web of looks in which the young man is indeed cared for.

The topics of voyeurism and food return in "Venetian Blind", a poem published in the "Poems from the 80s" section of the *Collected Poems*. The speaker of the poem is a voyeur who is peeping at a man who is cooking and eating. The meal the man is preparing serves as an obstacle of the gaze, and thus, desire:

> You know I'm watching. How I wish
> You'd come up here, dark sportive sport.
> You'd have more fun than on the court,
> And more than with that plate of fish.
> You in your sweater with the stripe
> In the correct clothes straight from play!
> You, resolutely turned away,
> Wiping the lips I'd like to wipe! (*Collected Poems* 392)

The man may not be looking back at the speaker but lets him watch. He also teases the speaker by resisting the secondary sexual meanings of eating and playing. By having played tennis instead of sexual play and cleaning his mouth instead of kissing[47], he exercises power on his voyeur. The speaker, who is admittedly a poet, chooses to supplement the object of desire he cannot possess: "I study possibility / Through rigid slats, or ordered verses, / […] Slightly adjusting them to scan / The self-possession that is you" (392). Desire is sublimated into poetry, liberating the self from the pain of unrequited affection. The "rigid" blinds which partially obstruct the view become a metaphor for the writing process: they do not allow full visibility, that is, full possession of the object of desire. The poet can only create a version of him by altering what he sees. In Michelucci's words, "The performance of passion becomes the stage for desire by means of the work of art (possession through writing)" (185), but this possession is not that of the "real" person. Instead, the double meaning of "scan" is exploited here, referring to both viewing and scansion. The iambic tetrametric lines of the poem are artificial (inasmuch

[47] In "Coffee Shop", a kiss is described as mutual feeding.

as they were created by a poet), just like the man supplemented by the poem: "The self-possession that is you, / Who cannot guess at what I do / Here, light-sliced, with another man" (392).

In "Meat" (from *The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992), supplementing direct experience by poetic means is more directly connected to food and eating. The first two stanzas compare two different kinds of meat: one coming from a pig that lived freely and one from a factory farmed animal, respectively. The occasion of the poem is eating the disappointing, second kind: "Not much like this degraded meat — *this* meal / Of something, was it chicken, pork, or veal?" (emphasis mine, *Collected Poems* 451). It reminds the speaker of the pig in the first stanza which tastes better because it was not held captive:

> My brother saw a pig root in a field,
> And saw too its whole lovely body yield
> To this desire which deepened out of need
> So that in wriggling through the mud and weed
> To eat and dig were one athletic joy.
> When we who are the overlords destroy
> Our ranging vassals, we can therefore taste
> The muscle of delighted interest
> We make into ourselves, as formerly
> Hurons digested human bravery. (451)

The experience is a distant one, as it is both past and second-hand experience. Yet the pleasures described here feel almost immediate, partly because of the deictic "this" in the third line. Besides eating, the pig enjoys its movement in the mud, as well as looking for food. Its "delighted interest" is mirrored in the onlooker, as the repetition of the word "saw" suggests in the first two lines. The pig's gaze, as well as the particular diction (words like "desire", "athletic", "vassals", "muscle") humanizes the pig. Consuming it is, therefore, akin to cannibalism, and eating the meat of the pig is something like a ritual. As Roger Davis puts it, "one common ritualistic motive for cannibalism is to retain the qualities of the other in the self" (Davis 153). Eating the pig of the first stanza thus retains its pleasurable life in the eater.

The second stanza, in contrast, does away with anthropomorphism. The factory farmed animal (which is, notably, not named a pig) retains

> the half-life that we raise
> In high bright tombs which, days, and nights like days,
> Murmur with nervous sound from cubicles
> Where fed on treated slop the living cells

Expand within each creature forced to sit
Cramped with its boredom and its pile of shit
Till it is standard weight for roast or bacon
And terminated, and its place is taken. (451)

The factories may be described as "tombs", but in them, "living cells" grow instead of muscles, and the animals are "creatures" that are "terminated", not killed. Theirs is a "half-life" because of the inhumanity they have to suffer, more specifically, the passivity of it. They are condemned to sit still, which is in direct contrast with the "wriggling" and "athletic" pig of the first stanza. In the third stanza, their lack of movement is supplemented by, ironically enough, freely moving herbs. Adam Scheffler explains that for various reasons, "including his experiences of the sixties and Gay Liberation, and his readings of Whitman, Williams, and Snyder in the 1960s and 1970s", Gunn's later characters start faring better, less like ghostly and distorted inmates and more like actual, tangible people. However,

> "Gunn's later mode of characterisation is not so much a relaxation of earlier rigour as a *counterbalancing*. It is often noted that he remains a poet of closed forms; it is less often remarked that closure and enclosure remain a threatening aspect of his temperament and aesthetic throughout his career, a force always in danger of stifling the life of his characters and returning Gunn to himself and his own dour, lyrical isolation. Ghosts, prisons, and monstrous tormentors continue to appear throughout his later work" (111)

By adding "pepper fruiting in its *climb*, / The redolent *adventures* dried in thyme / Whose branches *creep* and stiffen where they please, / Or rosemary that *shakes* in the world's breeze" (emphasis mine, 451), one can restore the "succulent liberties" (451) of the creatures by counterbalancing the cruelties they suffered. Considering the rootedness of plants, however, it could be argued that their athleticism (indeed, their essence) is also supplemented, by the poem itself.

In "Cafeteria in Boston", which follows "Meat" in *The Man with Night Sweats*, looking and eating are means of poetic discovery. The speaker recollects what he ate and saw in "Harry's cafeteria", in a way that his senses are displaced. He digests "two green peppers stuffed with rice and grease" as well as "the blunted dazzle / Sucked from the red formica where I leaned" (452). Neither spectacle, nor food are palatable, but he consumes deliberately: "I sought to extend the body's education, / Forced it to swallow" (452). That is to say, his reasons are intellectual. The pun "I took myself farther, digesting as I went, / *Course* after course" (emphasis mine, 452) refers to both dishes and educational courses. (The past tense, furthermore, foreshadows the present tense of writing the poem, in which gorging oneself on the spectacle has become synaesthesia as a trope.) He studies (by watching/eating) two

characters, the first being “the bloated man / In cast-off janitor’s overalls, who may / Indeed have strayed through only for the toilets” (452). This description echoes the themes of disgust and human connection in the *Misanthropos* sequence, and it is also sexually suggestive. The men certainly catch a glimpse of each other (“I caught his hang-dog stare”, 452), the mutuality of their gaze being indicated by the chiastic word order of the line “I stomached him, him of the flabby stomach” (452).

The speaker’s attention then quickly shifts to a newcomer, who ends up being the focus of the poem. His description dehumanizes and objectifies him: “But how about the *creature* scurrying in / From the crowds wet on the November sidewalk, / His face a black *skull with a slaty shine*” (emphasis mine, 452). The man proceeds to quickly eat the leftovers at a table, “to get a start on the bus-boys” (452). The speaker is disgusted, but the way he mirrors the man also reveals his fellow-feeling: “My mouth too / was packed, its tastes confused: what bitter juices / I generated in my stomach as / Revulsion met revulsion” (452). In addition, he assumes an animalistic pose similar to the digging pig’s in “Meat”. After having a thorough look at the man,

> I lighted upon meat more to my taste
> When, gazing off into the wide fluorescence,
> I saw the register, where the owner sat,
> And suddenly realized that he, the cooks,
> The servers of the line, the bus-boys, all
> Kept their eyes studiously turned away
> From the black scavenger. Digestively,
> That was the course that kept the others down. (452-3)

The fluorescent light signals his sudden realization, as he sheds light on the dynamics between the “black scavenger” and the cafeteria staff. It is not told explicitly what he has learnt here, or more specifically, what the aversion of their gaze means. The differences between these characters, however, are apparent: eating someone else’s scraps as opposed to sitting by the cash register points to social inequality, which is reinforced by the contrast of light and dark in the cafeteria. The blackness of “scavenger”, furthermore, is likely a racial signifier. Not looking at the man could be interpreted both as a sign of pity or a sign of discrimination. He is made invisible as an underdog by people of higher social standing, yet they also let him have his fill instead of throwing him out. This mixture of indifference and gentleness fascinates the speaker, so that he is able to tolerate the more disgusting aspects of the place. Still, the ending is ambiguous as keeping others down signals both tolerance (of food) and social oppression.

"The J Car" from the same volume also explores looking, eating and poetry but concentrates on their interconnected failure. The poem follows the speaker's meeting with a terminally ill friend at a restaurant, as well as the train ride to the place. The journey is made foreboding by an ominous simile: the yards the speaker sees from the window are "Like blameless lives we might imagine ours" (480). The train travels with some resistance, which produces a similar effect: "Most trees were cut back, but some brushed the car" (480). The friend is "smiling but gaunt", ready to "set out to the German restaurant" (480). The slant rhyme, which produces an almost comic effect, emphasizes the ironic situation by bringing together words with very different connotations. The friend has trouble eating due to his illness, yet they go out to have hearty German food rich in meat and carbs. Although the poem does not specify the nature of his illness, the Notes section specifies that "The J Car" was written for the young poet and Gunn's ex-lover Charlie Hinkle, who died from AIDS. His taste for German cuisine is, albeit very indirectly, sexually suggestive: "He liked the food / In which a sourness and dark richness meet / For conflict without the taste of defeat / As in the Sauerbraten" (480) Fighting that ends in a draw is a sexual motif that recurs in other poems, such as "Seesaw" (*The Man with Night Sweats*) and "The Problem" (*Boss Cupid*). The friend is clearly unable to have, either sexual or culinary, pleasure: "though the crusted pancakes might attract / They did so more as concept than in fact" (480). The irony turns tragic when they realise they cannot keep up the pretence: "Our conversation circumspectly cheerful, / We had sat there like children good but fearful / Who think if they behave everything might / Still against likelihood come out all right. / But it would not, and we could not stay there" (480).

The friend's declining health is signalled by his failure to eat, see, read, write and love, all of which the speaker remains able to do. Before they start eating, "since his sight was tattered now, I would / First read the menu out" (480). Similarly, the speaker replaces him as an eater: "And I'd eat his dessert before we both / Rose from the neat arrangement of the cloth, / Where connection between life and food / Had briefly seemed so obvious if so crude" (480). For the friend, food does not fulfil its function as fuel to life. He himself is being consumed by the disease. What little he is able to eat does not translate into energy as "After four blocks he would be tired out" (481). Being unable to see and eat means he cannot continue his life work as a poet: "It tears me still that he should die / As only an apprentice to his trade, / The ultimate engagements not yet made. / His gifts had been redrawing one by one" (481). His perspective is projected onto the environment in an almost Gothic manner. Getting dark refers to both the time of day and his disability: "I walked him home through the suburban cool / By *dimming* shape of church and Catholic school" (emphasis mine, 480). The presence of the Catholic church also suggests the afterlife, from which the speaker can still move away from, "Back to

my health" (481). This contrast is all the more important if one takes the biographical information given in the *Notes* section into account. Charlie Hinkle indeed "knew he would not write the much-conceived / Much-hoped for work now, nor yet help create / A love he might in full reciprocate" (481) because AIDS was still untreatable. But Gunn, poet and survivor, could: *The Man with Night Sweats* is arguably Gunn's masterpiece and Charlie Hinkle is primarily remembered not as a poet in his own right but as Gunn's ex-lover.

The motifs of not eating and being consumed return in "Front Door Man" and "In the Post Office", both from *Boss Cupid* (2000), in connection with the lack of sexual opportunities in old age. The former discusses an attractive homeless young man appearing at the speaker's front door, asking for a place to sleep. The speaker provides both food and shelter. The way the young man is asleep and being fed is described in a sexually suggestive way: "The shirt's now on the floor / When I put you in my bed / And at once you slump inert" (102). More indirectly, his "hollowness / Almost perceptibly fed / And filling out again" (102) implies sexual penetration. They do not have sex, yet the speaker hesitates between sexual and parental urges: "Is my thought love or duty? / I most want to protect – / To care for you like a mother / Although when I am faced / By your full daunting beauty / I barely can reject / The impulse of quite other" (103). The dilemma is unresolved despite the fact that the young man is clearly not a potential sexual partner. The title, for example, is a play on the term "back door man", which refers to a secret lover (who comes and goes discreetly though the back door of a house of a married woman). In the second section, which is a "plaint" addressed to Cupid, the speaker likewise admits that "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" (103). In contrast, the young man's appearance is due to divine machinations of the god of love: "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?" (103-4). The poem ends without resolving this consuming tension.

"In the Post Office" is another poem about an old speaker longing for a young man's body, which manifests itself in desperate fantasies of eating and turning into food. These arise after a prolonged, voyeuristic gaze: "I gazed and gazed / At his good back, feeling again, amazed, / That almost envious sexual tension […] / An itch to steal or otherwise possess / The brilliant restive charm, the boyishness" (*Boss Cupid* 13). The young man does not look back, but unlike the man in "Venetian Blind", he does not notice his voyeur. The speaker's gaze is one of sexual desire and envy: he wants to have the boy as a lover but also wants to be young himself. He feels "that old man's greed for youth, / Like Pelias's that boiled him to a soup" (13), which alludes to the mythological story of the king of Iolcus, whose daughters cut their

father into pieces and cooked him as an attempt to magically rejuvenate him. As he is apparently watching the young man's buttocks, he is mostly interested in the vitality being displayed: "I watched him ride / 18th street, rising above the saddle / For the long plunge he made with every pedal, / Expending far more energy than needed" (13). Being young, he certainly has energy to waste, while the speaker, being old, does not. This motivates fantasies of parasitism in the speaker: "If I could do whatever he did, / With him or as a part of him, if I / Could creep into his armpit like a fly, / Or like a crab cling to his golden crotch, / Instead of having to stand back and watch" (13-14).

The tension between sexual desire and a desire to become the other is resolved by supplementing the object of desire by writing, as in "Venetian Blind". The speaker remembers being in a love triangle in which he was envied for the interest of another young man the rival was interested in. (In "Postscript: The Panel" which follows "In the Post Office" in the volume, this young man is named Charlie, so it can be assumed that he is Charlie Hinkle, to whom this poem too is addressed.) Completely possessing the other, however, is impossible: "I thought that we had shared you more or less, / As if we shared that no one might possess, / Since in a net we sought to hold the wind" (14). Regardless, theirs is not only sexual rivalry. After Charlie's death, the rival too is on his deathbed, "he lay on the pillow, mortally thinned" (14). The rival's face is turned away in hatred, which echoes the young man's indifference in the post office. He is envious of the speaker as possessor of life energy: "I have imagined that he still could taste / That bitterness and anger to the last / Against the roles he saw me in" (14), namely "victor", "heir" (of a small glass panel Charlie had made), and "survivor" (14). The rival's averted gaze has the same complexity as the speaker's gaze in the post office. The poem ends by reasserting the speaker's role as a survivor and writer, "Recording so that I may later read / Of what has happened, whether between sheets, / Or in post offices, or on the streets" (14).

The "Troubadour" sequence (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) sums up and dramatizes the topics of earlier poems: the impossibility of fully possessing the Other, sexual desire in the form of voyeurism and cannibalism, and more indirectly, poetry as supplement. Consisting of five songs, the poem recounts events of the life of American serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer (1960-94), who was infamous for eating and having sex with the bodies of his victims. While "Troubadour" reads like a proper dramatic monologue akin to those written by Robert Browning, the title and subtitle "Songs *for* Jeffrey Dahmer" (emphasis mine) suggest the mask lyric subgenre. According to Ralph W. Rader, "the most general difference between the two groups is that the actor-speaker in the second group is not a simulated natural person in contrast with the poet but an artificial person projected from the poet, a mask through which he speaks" (140). "Troubadour" both simulates Dahmer as a person by including biographical information (his

killings, cannibalistic tendencies and sexual behaviour) and uses Dahmer as a mask by positioning Dahmer as a poet of love and by addressing Gunn's recurring topics.

The first song, in which the speaker murders the hitchhiker Jeffrey Dahmer has indeed murdered, ends with this exemplary stanza: "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" (*Boss Cupid* 87). This is intended to be a truthful account of Dahmer's motivations, who "was suddenly struck by the horrified realization that he'd fallen deeply in love with somebody—it had been love at first sight— and he was never going to see him again", and thus committed murder so that he could have the body (Campbell 55). The Elizabethan stanzaic song form and the diction, however, motivate an allegorical reading of the killings. The words "song", "reprise", "strain", and "fall" are all musical terms, and the latter two allude to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, as well as T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" (Michelucci 148), another mask lyric. The "order" which is being followed, therefore, is self-referential: besides Jeffrey Dahmer's murderous pattern, it denotes Gunn's ordering of the songs, as well as the descriptive (and destructive) practices in his work in general.

In the second song titled "Iron Man", the speaker recalls a summer in his teenage years he spent looking at pornography, which was a turning point in developing his cannibalistic tendencies. The speaker is abandoned by his parents, which leaves him starving but also allows him to experiment with sexuality. Likely traumatized and permanently intoxicated, he develops a mental connection between hunger and sexual desire: "my parents were away / Getting divorced I think, I gnawed dissatisfaction. // "The fridge was broke, but I had booze, I was seventeen / And half-drunk all day, all of the day I masturbated" (89). He is particularly interested in a picture in a beefcake magazine, "a standard out of *Iron Man*" (89). The model's "eyes stared up", he does not look into the camera to meet the onlooker's gaze. This aversion echoes the voyeuristic power play in "Venetian Blind" and in "The Post Office" and inspires the model's objectification. The speaker's gaze turns him into food as he masturbates to "his tan body burnished like a basted fowl, / Biceps and pecs, what could I do with such a buddy. // And good enough to eat" (89). His self-pleasuring act is also cognitive work: "I memorized the amorous scowl / I played with myself, played with myself, absorbed in study" (89). The words "memorized" and "study" clearly intellectualize what he is doing. The repetition of "played with myself" suggests "the mechanicalness of masturbation and reflect the obsessive, delirious character of his thoughts" (Michelucci 149), but it also dislocates the expression from its more literal meaning. On the level of the character, sexual experimentation (play) is an experimentation with selfhood since it is a milestone in his turning into a cannibal.

If Dahmer is a mask, however, sexual experimentation translates to literary experimentation as well. His self-analysing remark "I was hungry for a life, / Life of my own, life I could own" connects several things in his mouth: a desire to possess the other, a desire for agency (possessing oneself), and a greater, all-incorporating desire. This motif recurs throughout Gunn's later poetry so frequently that calling it oral fixation would not be an overstatement. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the mouth plays a central role in the psychosexual development of the infant. In the oral stage, "the sexual *aim* consists in the incorporation of the object—the prototype of a process which, in the form of identification, is later to play such an important psychological part'' (qtd. in Mijolla 1203). The pleasure of incorporation motivates the pig in "Meat", whose taste confirms its identification with what he eats. In "Cafeteria in Boston", the entire scenery is experienced orally, the same way an infant puts everything in its mouth and tastes everything indiscriminately. Similarly, in "Shit", a poem which recounts the life of Arthur Rimbaud, the young French poet "ate meaning live, / Ate all provincial France, the pasturing herd / And village-girls he once had thought to wive. / His shit was poetry: alchemy of the word" (*Boss Cupid* 40). "The Differences", an earlier poem from *The Man with Night Sweats*, discusses the same idea: "So when you gnawed my armpits, I gnawed yours / And learned to associate you with that smell / As if exuberance sprang from your pores. […] I turned into the boy with iron teeth / Who planned to eat the whole world bit by bit, / My love not flesh but in the mind beneath" (*Collected Poems* 413). In these poems, eating is the primary way of engaging the world. More specifically, it is an intellectual and poetic activity, a synonym for description; what is eaten is being sung.

The Dahmer persona is all the more literary because it evokes the Gothic mode. Besides combining elements of romance and horror, the third and fourth songs include cliché Gothic elements like the haunted mansion[48] and creating a new human out of body parts as it is done in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In the third song titled "The Visible Man", "there is a place divides / The house'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" (90). The crawlspace is both literal and psychological: the house being a projection of the villain's mind, the murderous desires are revealed to the victim. But as the victim enters this crawlspace, he too is being entered and killed. This is a place of confusion: they are both hidden and visible; the boundaries of self and other are muddled. Subjectivities continue to be disoriented in the fourth song titled "A Borrowed Man". Here the speaker is watching his own actions in the same setting from an outside perspective, in order to serve an Eros-like figure: "Loose in the twilight

[48] For another example of this, see "Jack Straw's Castle" in Chapter 1.

slot between / Floor and foundation, I have seen / Such things committed in your name, / Iron Man, Only Love" (91). By recollecting his murders, furthermore, he seems to be creating something like Frankenstein's monster:

> I beg from memory each limb
> Each body-part that spoiled with time:
> 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 someone reddened genitalia (91)

These bits and pieces, however, prove insufficient, as only real body parts will induce his autoerotic revelry in "the kitchen, where instead / I'll find more tangible effects / Than what the memory collects" (91). Instead of building a monster out of those, however, he creates himself in the process out of his disconnected pieces: "such heat as will concentrate / My scattered force into a self / Defined both by the circumstances / And the accompanying fancies / To all of my orgasms past, / Long dried, or wiped-off, but now massed / Steeply through memory's survival" (92). In the "Final Song", the solitary and dejected speaker is confronted with the fact that the memorabilia extracted from the victims are dead objects that are no longer able to sustain him. The severed head he keeps in the fridge "could not be said to last / or even to exist / though fresh and well-maintained" (93). This echoes the indifferent head of Medusa in "Jack Straw's Castle". The speaker of that poem is combusted as he is staring at the head: "In her dazzle I / catch fire / self-delighting / self-sufficient / self-consuming / till / I burn out / so heavy / I sink into / darkness into / my foundations" (*Collected Poems* 273). The speaker of "Final Song" is similarly trapped within his own psyche: "I fell into myself / nothing could raise me now" (93). The "face stared from a shelf / unreadable on guard / connection disconnection / between headcheese and lard" (93-4).

It is indeed the head's unreadability that makes the speaker a tragic figure and Dahmer a suitable mask for the poet. The averted gaze of the head, "the questioning face gazed up / locked in its own surmise" (93), foreshadows the unattainability of the Other. Regardless of his desperately violent attempts to possess him, the speaker remains a lonely, pitiable, Priapus-like character "burdened by [his] erection" (93). This tragedy provides him with an identity: "only one self remained / fresh credibly maintained" (94). This is similar to the poems I have explored in this chapter, where the unattainability of the person described in the poem ushers the speaker to reinforce his identity as an author. What makes Dahmer as a mask interesting is that it evokes the real possessive madness of the real Jeffrey Dahmer; the tangible horror Jeffrey Dahmer has

caused is an objective correlative for what exists as an abstract concept in Gunn's poetry. The cannibalistic tendencies in "Troubadour" and other poems shed light on a fundamental ambivalence: while eating the Other gives the self oral pleasure, the Other is necessarily destroyed. This corresponds to sadism of the oral stage as described by Melanie Klein:

> the libidinal development as a whole is completed only once the innate destructive instincts have been integrated into it. In her view the whole of the oral stage was oral-sadistic in nature, indeed it was the high point of infantile sadism. The libidinal wish to suck and incorporate was combined with the destructive aim of scooping out and emptying the object. In her *Envy and Gratitude* (1957/1975, pp. 180–81), Klein defined envy of the breast as bound up with oral greed, in which the destructive component instincts predominated: the desire to attack and destroy the object was not tempered by the gratitude generated by good experiences with the mother. This primal wish precipitated the split between the good breast to be retained and the bad breast to be expelled. Klein thus returns via this account of primal oral desire to the idea of a differentiation between ego and non-ego that is secondary to that between good and bad, as organized by the mechanisms of introjection and projection specific to the Freudian model. (Mijolla 1203)

That is to say, the ambivalence of oral sadism is connected to the infant's development of his individuality as he and the mother cease to be an undivided harmonious whole. The assertion of Dahmer's (and the implied poet's) identity at the end of the poem resolves a very similar ambiguity. But while oral sadism is directed specifically against the mother or the object imitating the nipple (a bottle, for example), in Gunn's poems, it is the adult objects of sexual interest that must suffer it.

Gunn has written few poems about his mother and about women in general. "The Gas Poker" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) is one of the exceptions: it describes his mother's suicide, which affected the poet deeply, especially since it happened when he was still a child. In his illuminating article "'Poor lovely statue!' Thom Gunn on the Death of his Mother", Clive Wilmer explores the "The Gas Poker" in the context of Gunn's biography and poetics. He pays special attention to the last stanza, which alludes to the myth of Pan and Syrinx:

> 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. (*Boss Cupid*, 11)

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Syrinx escapes the lustful Pan's advances by turning into reed, from which the god creates the musical instrument named after her (syrinx or pan flute). According to Wilmer, the fact that the instrument of suicide is described as a pan flute has serious implications, as it is not only the mother that is mythologised but the poet and his craft as well: "at that moment the fundamental relation between art and experience became clear to him, just as it does to Pan when he picks up the reeds from the river's edge and blows into them. The moment of loss – the loss of the loved object, the loss of generative power, however we understand it – is also the moment when *creative* force floods back to fill the emptiness" (18). Wilmer argues, very convincingly, that this moment is related to Gunn's insistence of having a female muse, regardless of him being gay: "his mother, as he thought of her, was his muse. Charlotte Gunn loved literature and encouraged her son to read seriously. [...] He began writing as a boy of ten or eleven and his purpose seems to have been to please her. […] He went on writing for her for the rest of his life" (18).[49]

The self-mythologizing moment in "The Gas-Poker" binds together poetry with orality and violence. While Syrinx escapes violence by turning into reeds, the gas poker Charlotte used was an instrument to commit violence on herself. Pan consoles himself by blowing into the flute, the poet must blow into Pan's flute symbolically, that is, to supplement the beloved mother by his craft. As Wilmer contends, "Mute as she has become, she has allowed her son an Ovidian consolation: a voice to fill the silence she leaves behind her" (18). Moreover, Wilmer connects this to the oral fixation in Gunn's poetry: "where Pan's libidinous urges, suddenly cut off, were sublimated into art, the woman lying on the ground with a poker by her mouth suggests a grotesque parody of fellatio. One does not have to look far in Gunn's work to notice an obsession with orality and a repeated insistence on images of feeding – both sexually and in terms of the poet's stance towards experience" (18). Freudian psychoanalysis explores the connections between feeding and mourning:

> Freud used the model of cannibalistic devouring and the intrapsychic effects of ambivalence in his study of melancholia (1917e, pp. 249–50). In mourning, he argued, the lost object was assimilated into the ego, incorporated as in the totem meal. Once magically incorporated in this way, it was conflated with the ego, which could either draw strength and power from this (as in identification or the totem meal), or,

[49] An interesting fact to mention here is Gunn's name change. Before he published *Fighting Terms,* he went from William Guinneach Gunn to Thomson William Gunn, by adopting his mother's maiden name Thomson as a first name. Furthermore, Gunn's name change mirrors his mother's name changes from Ann-Charlotte to Nan to Charlotte (Scheffler 39).

> alternatively, fall victim to attacks from within from this ambivalently cathected object (as in melancholic self-reproach). (Mijolla 1203)

That is to say, the allusion to the myth of Syrinx in "The Gas-Poker" suggests the way the lost object is, through magic, incorporated in the self which draws power from it. This power is the inspiration the poet draws from his muse, in the form of feeding on her, which is indirectly sexual and indirectly violent.

Catherine R. Stimpson points out how conventionally these women are depicted: "Women are fertility goddesses; rural Phaedras; warriors in a sexual battle; sexual objects" (400). I would go further as to say that, even though Gunn was not interested in women sexually, he wrote about women almost always in the context of suggested or direct sexual violence. Several of these are inspired by mythological stories about rape. "Helen's Rape" (*Fighting Terms*, 1954), emphasises that rape is not merely divine abduction: "Hers was the last authentic rape: / From forced content of common breeder / Bringing the violent dreamed escape / Which came to her in different shape / Than to Europa, Danaë, Leda: // Paris. He was a man" (*Collected Poems* 12). In "Jesus and his Mother" (*The Sense of Movement*, 1957), Mary suggests that the immaculate conception was violently done: "How could I know what I began / Meeting the eyes more furious than / The eyes of Joseph, those of God? / I was my own and not my own" (*Collected Poems* 64). "Phaedra in a Farm House" (Moly, 1971) relocates Phaedra's story of incest and rape into a modern rural context complete with soap and tractor oil (*Collected Poems* 191). The non-mythological female characters, which feature more frequently from *Positives* on, often suffer similar fates. Death approaches, for example, the old woman in the last piece of *Positives* as "a chill in her feet, a draught / in her groin" (*Collected Poems* 167). In "The Victim" (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982), the murder of Nancy Spungen, the girlfriend of Sid Vicious (from Sex Pistols) is described as rape: "Now it was with sharp things he played: // Needles and you, not with the band, / Till something greater than you planned / Opened erect within his hand" (*Collected Poems* 358).

Gunn's poetry becomes more sympathetic to women in the second half of his career, and especially by the end of it. In "Waitress" (*The Passages of Joy*), a female speaker contemplates revenge on her abusive guests: "I dream that while they belch and munch / And talk of Pussy, Ass and Tits, / And sweat into their double knits, / I serve them up their special lunch / *Bone Hash, Grease Pie, and Leather Soup*" (349). "Arethusa Saved" and "Arethusa Raped" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) re-enact the Ovidian story of the eponymous fountain in Sicily in two versions, both making the nymph Arethusa victorious. This is especially striking in the latter: even though she and the river god Alpheus "join" (*Boss Cupid* 28), "in Ortygia, that spring / has her name, for he / has entered her / meanings, his water / subdued to hers" (29).

Breaking the line enforces Arethusa's rape: "he / has entered her". But if we read fluidly, "he has entered her meanings", Alpheus is subdued by Arethusa, he is a subject to her domain. Whereas Alpheus is elemental, merely divine water, Arethusa is a creature of transformation, of abstraction, of meaning. In Gunn's later poetry, women sometimes appear as fellow artists. In "The Beautician" (*The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992), she does to a dead friend something akin to the dignifying work of Gunn's elegies: "She did find in it some thin satisfaction / That she could use her tenderness as skill / To make her poor dead friend's hair beautiful / – As if she shaped an epitaph by her action" (*Collected Poems* 455). In "Arachne", the girl-turned-spider "spins who was the monarch of the loom, / Reduced indeed, but she lets out a fine / And delicate yet tough and tensile line / That catches full day in the little room", which reads like the late poet considering his reduced energy.

Considered together, these minor poems about female characters render legible a gradual shift from apathetic violence to violence mixed with candid sympathy. Gunn's character sketches in general stand witness to a remarkable change in the relationship between Self and Other ranging from complete isolation to complete incorporation. The isolated characters who, struck with a nondescript grief, are unable to integrate into the social world in the first two volumes give way to men in groups that lose their individuality as a price of integration. In the second half of Gunn's oeuvre, he employs two strategies of resolving this contradiction. Several of Gunn's poems call forth characters just to insist on their indecipherability as a way to show sympathy for them. Other poems attempt to violently consume the Other in the process of empathetic appropriation, with the goal of possessing him. These attempts often resolve the impossibility of doing so by supplementing the Other through poetry. Oral sadism lies at the heart of Gunn's later poetry, and becomes especially meaningful in the context of grief, by the successful incorporation of loss. To revisit Gunn's idea of poetry as an "attempt to grasp", I find it remarkable that this definition is immediately followed by thoughts of his mother: "I certainly do not pretend that I ever do completely possess or understand, I can only say that I attempt to. Often it will be a long time before I can write of something. It took me years before I could begin writing about my father (and maybe I can one day write about my mother" (185-6). He succeeds only in his very last volume, yet it is apparent that the project of "The Gas Poker" is a key to his oeuvre. After all, what is being successfully grasped here is the source of his poetry, the syrinx of violence.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore Thom Gunn's development as a gay poet by contrasting similar poems from the entire oeuvre. As some of his topics remain the same, my method renders legible a gradual transition, from volume to volume, toward self-acceptance, authenticity, humaneness and social engagement in the treatment of his subject matter. The three types of poem explored in my three chapters–poems considering spatial division and dissociative paranoia (the closet), ekphrases, and character sketches–show the same change. I argue that the developments in his representation of spaces, images and characters are in accordance with the phases of the poet's successful gay identity formation process.

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 identity, 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.

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 meter.

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. On the contrary, 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 meter, 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 themes 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. As the 1994 Faber and Faber edition of the *Collected Poems* says on the back cover: "Gunn's work illustrates the debates poetry in English has pursued in this century – form versus improvisation, diction versus talk, the American way versus the English tradition, and even, at times, authenticity versus art." The back cover of the 1995 Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition adds, "Gunn has made a speciality of playing style against subject as he deals with the out-of-control through tightly controlled meters and with the systematized through open forms."

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.

Returning to 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" (309), 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 was successful, and he lived a long and happy life–a virtue in itself.

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