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Thom Gunn's Poetry

Dissertation Proposal

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Statement of problem

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 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” (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 atypical in the Anglo-Saxon world but typical in French). This spatial and temporal awkwardness 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.

Having finished military service and his Cambridge education, Gunn publishes *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

California 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. 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 on 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 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. *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 has learned: immediate, honest feeling and dignified artifice are combined to astonishing effect. They grant him some fame once again (primarily because of their subject matter)—but Gunn's work as a whole is still painfully underresearched.

Statement of thesis

My dissertation will examine Thom Gunn's entire oeuvre, and discuss him not primarily as a member of The Movement or a follower of a British or American literary trend but a major gay poet of his own right, who could very well be globally significant. At the beginning of his career, writing openly gay poetry had very little tradition in the Anglo-Saxon world, so he had to find a way of doing so. As Bruce Woodcock writes, "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, he 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 imaginative (for example, the first poem "The Wound" and "The Man with Night Sweats", one of the last poems, both explore bodily harm and the idea of being someone else), but changes in sensibility: dissatisfaction and isolation turn slowly into cordiality and compassion.

While we can definitely read the changes in Gunn's poetry as a process of liberation, it is also distinctive, heterogenous and complex. (In an AIDS epigraph in *Boss Cupid*, he writes: "Although they all died of one cause, / Remember how their lives were dense / With fine, compacted difference"). Engaged as he was with American street life, drugs and sexual conquests, he was also an Englishman with a middle-class upbringing from the Hampstead suburbs, and had special interest in the visual arts and opera. His indiscriminate treatment of high culture and popular culture predates the birth of Cultural Studies: he wrote about bikers and paintings in the same disinterested manner as early as in the late 50s. In looking at beautiful things, his aesthetic and erotic vision combine. He develops ideas of communal love by writing descriptive verse, including poems about art and LSD trips. And if love is indeed communal, the muse cannot be characterised by the exclusivity of a lover. He insisted on a motherly muse (he agreed with Robert Graves), and struggled his whole life to address in his poetry the death of his own mother, who introduced him to literature in the first place. He wrote several poems about the death of motherly mythological figures until he managed to write the best among them in his last book, "The Gas-Poker". *Boss Cupid* is the same, in which he deals with coming death and the loss of eros: his main concern from the eighties on until his death.

The present state of scholarship

Research done on Thom Gunn's poetry is regrettably scarce: 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. 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.

Theoretical Background

Since I consider Gunn's sexual orientation as an integral part of his poetry, my approach is interdisciplinary from the start. I make sure, however, not to limit the poems' scope with a biographical reading. I aim to discuss Gunn's poetry primarily as poetry: my method is mainly comparative close reading, and I add context where it is necessary to my interpretation. I adopt Jonathan Culler's idea of the lyric, of which epideixis is a distinctive feature: "discourse conceived as an act, aiming to persuade, to move, to innovate" (130), rather than self-expression or overheard speech act, even if the poem in question involves dramatic and fictional elements.

Gunn is perhaps best known today as an elegist, yet his persona poetry, ekphrases and love poems are also considerable. For this reason, I employ various theories of these genres. First of all, I rely on Glennis Byron's *Dramatic Monologue*, as it gives an extensive account of the history and conventions of its topic. I found Brian Glavey's *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* particularly enlightening not only for its theory of

ekphrasis but also the analyses of Gunn's gay male contemporaries like Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. My supervisor D. Rácz István's recent work on contemporary British elegies, in which he discusses their central articulative paradox, draws attention to the formal features of the elegy. In his analysis of Gunn's elegies, he highlights an indebtedness to Romantic poetry, something that was less obvious to me than the poet's Elizabethan roots. Finally, I must mention Erik Gray's *The Art of Love Poetry*, an excellent book which reconciles theories of poetry and theories of erotic love. The concepts he works with, most notably triangulated desire is applicable to love between any gender.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* is about a more specific version of triangulated desire in which there are two men and a woman. She writes at length about triangulated desire in Shakespeare, one of Gunn's Elizabethan sources. Her most famous book *Epistemology of the Closet*, one of the milestones of queer theory is useful for my purposes at least in two ways: for one, it helps analysing closetedness in Gunn's early verse, secondly, the minoritising view and the universalising view of sexual identity and desire Sedgwick talks about mirrors Gunn's attitudes to universal and particular concerns in his poetics. Judith Butler's performative concept of gender and Raewyn Connell's term hegemonic masculinity are obvious mentions here as they are important to Gender Studies and Queer Theory.

Besides his discussion of the constructed nature of homosexuality in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, I also cite Michel Foucault as a contributor to Spatial Studies. His concept of heterotopia is essential to understand some of the significant spaces Gunn wrote about (a leather bar, among others, before they even existed). I refer to the "Spatial Practices" chapter in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* to reveal the intricacies of Gunn's addressing city spaces in his poetry, mainly his perspectives of looking at the city. Psychology and psychoanalytic theory are other disciplines I rely on when I discuss his modes of seeing, in

order to put them in the context of identity development. Jacques Lacan's mirror stage and Ruth E. Fassinger's model of gay and lesbian identity development are useful tools to unravel how Gunn's subjects look at themselves. As for looking at objects of desire, I refer to Sigmund Freud and George Devereux, both of whom discussed homosexuality in an Oedipal context, which I need for my argument on Gunn's statuesque female characters and motherly muse. By comparing the subjects of the poems in various stages of their identity development, I map out the development of ideas of subject matter to give an account of Gunn's development as an artist.

Tentative division of dissertation

Introduction

The introduction focuses on the things I find particularly seductive in Gunn's poetry: the disinterested Elizabethan manner, the playful heterotemporality of learnedness, the careful experimentation and masterful gymnastics of form, the unique blend of intellectual and sexual. This section also gives all the biographical data that is needed to contextualise Gunn's poetry (in this regard, it will be slightly similar to a critical biography), but not in a linear chronological order. Instead, I jump back and forth in time to mirror the way I read the poems. The introduction also reflects on my position as a Hungarian reader of Gunn's work: decades after his death, gay self-making has the same urgency for several poets in my postcommunist country (where he is virtually unknown), and I find his work to be exemplar.

Chapter 1. The Peeling Uniform: (Inter)subjectivity in Gunn's Early Verse

The first chapter considers subject constructions in Gunn's early verse on the apropos of the long poem "Misanthropos" (*Touch*, 1967). It describes a man who wanders in the landscape believing to be the sole survivor of a war. He is radically disconnected from society for most of the sequence, but at the end, he finds a way to rejoin. "Misanthropos" is a thematic

culmination of Gunn's first three volumes published in the 50s and 60s, and it addresses the central problems raised in them. His most burning question is this: how do I construct a self in relation to others? Such a question not only blends the social, sexual and existential: it is interconnected with a series of choices a poet must make during the construction of a poem, publishing poetry, and the development of a poetics. A fundamental choice young Gunn makes is avoiding the open declaration of his sexual orientation, which would have had serious consequences, especially before its decriminalisation. Although this self-censorship is not a direct source of other choices, it no doubt affected his poetry on various levels, whether he was conscious of the connection or not. First of all, Gunn is deeply indebted to the intellectual poetry of the Elizabethan poets, and adopted their detached way of writing, which lacks a central personality (Kleinzahler 79). The use of masks and different voices, as in the notorious "Lofty in the Palais de Danse" (*Fighting Terms*, 1954) was another way of achieving a sexual anonymity. In his essay titled "Homosexuality in Robert Duncan's Poetry" (*The Occasions of Poetry*, 1981), furthermore, Gunn discusses certain strategies Duncan employed to address his desires indirectly, for example, not specifying the gender of, or misgendering the addressee, something Gunn also admits to doing in his early poetry. His interest in existential philosophy also helped him to disguise gendered and sexualised experiences as universal human concerns, as in "On the Move" (*The Sense of Movement*, 1957). The objectifying gaze with which the speaker views the motorcyclists extends beyond the poem. In "Black Jackets" (*My Sad Captains*, 1961), the impersonal and impenetrable uniform of the biker gang masks sexual concerns. While "Misanthropos" is in no way a coming-out poem, it recognises the speaker's detachment from society as a problem, and addresses the urge and horror of opening up to another's touch: the uniform must be peeled off, in both the literal and the abstract sense.

Chapter 2. "Boudoir and oubliette": Imaginations of the Closet

The “Jack Straw’s Castle” sequence (*Jack Straw’s Castle*, 1976) is widely regarded as Gunn’s coming-out poem, in which the title character falls asleep in an imaginary castle and sinks into his subconscious. While having night terrors, he is visited by the serial killer Charles Manson who acts as the double of the speaker. He wakes up in a real kitchen and goes to bed, where he realizes another man’s presence. While the visitor seems to be at first another imaginary double, the speaker is reassured that he is quite real. The other poems discussed in this chapter, namely “The Secret Sharer” (1954), “The Corridor” (1957), “The Monster” (1961), “Bravery” (1967) and “Behind the Mirror” (1976) also involve doubles, but they leave the problem unresolved. The self is fatally divided, not only psychologically but spatially as well. This connects the poems across individual collections, and ordered chronologically, they show a gradual change in terms of the rigidity of the division. I identify the spatial division as the closet and the split self as the closeted subject. The poems render legible the entire process of an individual’s sexual identity development. They form a narrative in which the closet and the divided consciousness within are being reimagined and transformed in each poem, until, eventually, the closet is dismantled and the two selves become one in “Jack Straw’s Castle”. Gunn’s poetry gradually changed in terms of how he addressed his homosexuality: whereas in his early work, his sexual orientation was concealed, it became increasingly visible, to the point of unambiguously referring to himself as “queer” in a poem in “Talbot Road” (*The Passages of Joy*, 1982). By examining the above poems, I chronologically map Fassinger’s model of gay and lesbian identity development onto Gunn’s oeuvre. Gunn’s lyrical coming out of the closet is a recurring poetic device deliberately developed throughout his oeuvre that demonstrates his growth as an artist.

Chapter 3. “undone by sunshine, LSD, queer sex, and free verse”: The Prosody of the Nonverbal

The chapter focuses on “The Geysers” (*Jack Straw’s Castle*, 1976), a masterful sequence of poems that owes much to the developments of the 1960s. It was an exciting decade

for Gunn and a time of change in terms of form, sensibility and subject matter. As he started experimenting with irregular verse forms, his rather cold and intellectual poetry became, as he puts it in his autobiography, “a little more humane” (“My Life up to Now”, 179). This was the time when he made marked effort to capture personal (and nonverbal) experience into his poems, with titles such as “Waking in a Newly Built House” and “Flying above California” from the second half of *My Sad Captains* (1961). The first half of the volume, which is in metre (as opposed to the second, which is in syllabics) opens with “In Santa Maria del Popolo”, a poem about a painting that depicts “Saul becoming Paul”, a moment of transformation. This is typical of Gunn: with the exception of *Fighting Terms*, as Stefania Michelucci points out, all of his collections include poems inspired by visual art (39), and in various verse forms. In 1966, most notably, Gunn and his brother Ander published *Positives*, a book of collaboration that features Anders’ photographs of life in 60s London, with verse captions/commentaries by Thom (none of which are in metre). Ekphrasis, therefore, was one of the forms that defined Gunn’s career. His 1971 volume *Moly* not only takes drug use as its subject matter, but attempts to versify the drug experience itself as ekphrastic practice. To contain the experience, the *Moly* poems are mostly in strict metre. His most successful attempt at translating the psychedelic experience, however, is probably “The Geysers”. The poem showcases both metric and free verse, the former gradually loosening into the other as the speaker transgresses social and bodily boundaries by participating in an orgy. “The Geysers” stands witness to how the idea of “communal love”, a recurring theme in Gunn’s later work, is developed with his experimentation with free verse and ekphrastic practice.

Chapter 4. Mother, Muse and Metamorphosis: The Source of Inspiration

The chapter is concerned with the source of Gunn’s craft: he insisted on a female (and motherly) muse. Yet he wrote very little about women. His few “real life” female characters

are either passive, insane, alcoholic or in other ways static and two-dimensional, and so are his female mythological characters. "The Gas-Poker" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000), one of Gunn's most celebrated poems, connects his suicidal mother to the nymph Syrinx: the murder weapon is metaphorically identified with a flute. The metapoetic potential of this image has been elaborated on by Joshua Weiner in a 2017 article in *The Times Literary Supplement*. Little attention has been paid, however, to Gunn's previous poems with similar concerns. In his work, there is a small but distinguishable corpus of poems that deal with female mythological figures and sexual abuse such as of Syrinx, that range from his first book to his last. These rape narratives are put in Oedipal settings in which the mother is implied as a victim of rape and both father and son are aggressors. The poems conform to the Oedipus complex, which is generally understood as a heterosexual concept. Although Freud considered homosexuality as arrested sexual development, in Euripides, the Oedipus story is mainly about homosexual rape. Considering Gunn's homosexuality, it is striking how these poems can be reconciled with both versions of the story, and thus ultimately queer the positive Oedipus complex. The chapter seeks to expand on Joshua Weiner's ideas about the Oedipal nature and metapoetics of "The Gas-Poker" by close reading related poems, notably "Jesus and His Mother" (*The Sense of Movement*, 1957), "The Goddess" (*Touch*, 1967), "Phaedra in a Farm House" (*Moly*, 1971), "Arethusa Saved" and "Arethusa Raped" (*Boss Cupid*, 2000) to map the development of Gunn's idea onto his oeuvre.

Chapter 5. "I beg from memory each limb": Death and Desire in Late Gunn

The last chapter examines not one, but several sequences of poems from the last three collections, all of which discuss death (and the way it relates to sexual desire and the pleasures of life). Most readers know Gunn as an elegist because of his critically acclaimed volume *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) included remarkable elegies in its fourth section, those he wrote

to his friends who died of AIDS. In truth, he became preoccupied with death poetry before the epidemic. The sequences "Transients and Residents" and "Talbot Road" from the rather underrated 1982 volume *The Passages of Joy* both deal with the death of old friends. The book is said to openly celebrate gay life, and it certainly does: reading the poems together yields a wonderful account of the pleasures found in the urban underbelly of San Francisco and beyond. But all this is threatened and overshadowed by suicide (the collection opens with a poem about a young man who shot himself in the head, titled "Elegy"), drug overdose, nightmares, racism and war: the burned-out seventies. As the title of the volume suggests, pleasurable times are passing.

In *The Man with Night Sweats*, the danger is more immediate: the pleasures of gay life become the direct source of death. The poems included in part four, such as "In Time of Plague" and "Lament" are meant to stand on their own (unlike the rest of the book and *The Passages of Joy*), but they are linked thematically, and for my purposes, I shall treat them as a sequence. These poems turned out so powerful that they certainly became part of Gunn's identity as a poet. The "Troubadour" sequence from *Boss Cupid* (2000) echoes "In Time of Plague" in its curious blend of sexual desire and death, yet it is removed from the AIDS virus and allows for allegorical readings. The speaker of "Troubadour", Jeffrey Dahmer is confronted with the perishability of the body, the burden of unsatisfied desire and the loneliness that follows. The Biblical David, the speaker of the "Dancing David" sequence that ends *Boss Cupid*, is even easier to read as a mask for the poet himself because of his gift of singing. The last section titled "Abishag" is Gunn's swan song: the accomplished David is on his deathbed, feeling cold. To warm him up, the virgin Abishag is lying on his body, providing small comfort before "the final leap" and the death of pleasure. Their togetherness in the poem has an improvisational quality to it, something refreshing, but the placement of the poem is very much calculated. David's sexual ambiguity and the genre tie the last poem neatly to the poems of the very first volume.

Conclusion

The conclusion will summarise how my comparative reading of Gunn's work renders legible his artistic development as a gay poet. Reading poems from his early work shows that he how slowly sheds the uniform of intellectualism, objectivity and isolation to reveal a naked desire of human connection. Like that of concealment, the recurring theme of divided consciousness is being reimagined and transformed in several poems, until, eventually, the closet is dismantled and the two selves become one. In a similar manner, the dissertation also tracks how the idea of communal love is developed by experimenting with poetic forms and ekphrastic descriptions. The loving figure of the mother, whom Gunn identified as a source of his inspiration, is addressed in various poems across the oeuvre, until he finds a way to make his tragic loss public. Reading his last three books together sheds light on how the gay self in a gay community experiences desire and death: first the latter threatens the former, then it becomes its source, and finally, the end of it.

Implementation plan

Unit	Length (pages)	Months required to write	Completed by
Introduction	20	3	December 2020
Chapter 1	30	4	May 2021
Chapter 2	30	4	September 2021
Chapter 3	30	4	January 2021
Chapter 4	30	4	May, 2021
Chapter 5	30	4	September, 2021
Conclusion	15	1	January, 2022
Total	185	24	June, 2022

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