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In reference to British expatriate turned American poet Thom Gunn: Gregory Woods claims in *Articulate Flesh,* that "many commentators say nothing about the poet's homosexuality" (212). There is no doubt that Thom Gunn is a homosexual. He moved from Britain to San Francisco, California (a Mecca of the gay world), enjoyed life with his male lover Mike Kitay, proudly demonstrated his affiliation at gay events, and spoke of his sexuality often in both his interviews and later poetry. However, Gunn's early poetry is arguably vague, concerns multiple personalities, and focuses on violence and isolation more than love. (Woods actually makes a notable association between the aforementioned violence and homosexual sadomasochism.) Nonetheless, Gunn's only option for expressing sexuality in his early poetry was through the unclear. Simply, in the 1950s and 1960s, it would have been difficult for openly gay poetry to be published or achieve any readership. Despite critics' opinions, the homosexual side of Gunn has always been present.

From *Fighting Terms*, his first published work, to *The Man with Night Sweats,* (a later work concerning blatant sexual issues, such as AIDS) Gunn's poetry has become increasingly open in its examination and portrayal of homosexuality. While the homosexual psyche and respective culture have been historically objectionable, difficult to make palatable or easy to understand, Thom Gunn writes about it elegantly, with modest but increasingly frank verse, which communicates and illuminates the inherently unclear.

Gunn's first poetic explorations into homosexuality were done through his theory of "pose," where, "everyone plays a part, whether he knows it or not, so he might as well deliberately design a part, or a series of parts, for himself" (Gunn 162). Homosexual acts were illegal in England until 1967 so it is logical that Gunn would examine such a defining aspect of his identity through a separate character. Furthermore fitting to his theory, Gunn believed defiantly at first that homosexuality was a choice, which explains the strong willed nature of his poetic personas. *The Sense of Movement*, published in 1957 after beginning life in America, broadened Gunn's use of the ideals of freedom of choice, determination, and individualism. Additionally there is a departure from classical heroes such as Achilles, replaced with contemporary glorification of motorcycle gangs and Elvis Presley for instance, all of course still subtly sexualized. "Will" becomes the "essential concept for Gunn; to some extent an evolution of "pose," "for it conveys the action by which we create a self, by which we rise above meaninglessness not by meaning but by the assertion of meaning" according to critic Robert Martin. Homosexuality is far more directly referenced in the 1961 collection *My Sad Captains*. *My Sad Captains*, according to Jonathan Levin, is an important transitional work. The concept of "pose" is less blatant; Gunn is "less mesmerized by heroic posturing" and more open to feelings and connections with others (Levin 262). Also, while still formal, throughout the books second section he is less concerned with sustaining rhyme patterns and adhering to iambic meter. *Moly* in 1971 is exuberant and more rebellious. Gunn utilizes a more orderly meter to give his experiences

structure, as the subject matter deals superficially with drugs. Beneath the surface *Moly* is focused on metamorphosis, literally and figuratively. Gunn's language becomes more explicit and his writing style and character shed more of their ambiguity. To conclude, Gunn's 1976 collection *Jack Straw's Castle*, while still years from his latest works, signifies the illumination of his sexual haziness. Not only does he out himself in the collection, but with vivid verse he speaks from his personal perspective and outwardly praises the glory of sex. In due course, this is a momentous leap from his first works.

As mentioned, Gunn starts with the ideology of "pose" in *Fighting Terms* which features many "persona" poems. The opening piece, "The Wound," set around the *Iliad*, is written from various perspectives, including that of Achilles. The poem describes a "wound" healing in the wake of Patroclus' death, which "not doctors would cure" (line 5), and that reopens upon "rage at his [Patroclus'] noble pain" (22). Achilles homosexual love with Patroclus comes immediately to mind, and the "wound" itself is quite likely the famous (but in the 1950s, abhorrent) love the two soldiers share: no doctors can cure it (referencing the deep rooted nature of sexuality); it reopens upon remembering Patroclus and therefore their love. And, finally, in the *Iliad*, as Alfred Corn notes in his essay "Existentialism and Homosexuality in Gunn's Early Poetry," Achilles receives no actual wound to the head. While "The Wound" could certainly refer to numerous other traumas, a sexual interpretation certainly fits perfectly; Corn of course supports this interpretation as well.

Gunn abandons the classical Achilles in "The Wound" for "posing" as the biblical Lazarus in "Lazarus Not Raised." According to George Klatwitter, Gunn often relies on biblical figures to present gay themes (208). Klatwitter asserts that because Gunn departs partially from the biblical text (similar to Achilles' allegorical head wound) the poem is actually about sexual maturation. He references the phallic pun-like nature of the verb "rise" and Lazarus' "frozen glands" (line 9). More importantly Lazarus, "When first aroused and given thoughts and breath/ He chose to amble at an easy pace/ In childhood fields imaginary and safe," or as Klatwitter describes him, afraid to commit to sexual maturation and community (16-18). Lazarus' punishment is accordingly "to take slime on the deepest bed/ Of vacancy," or unabashedly, to masturbate in bed alone. Klatwitter's continued study of the biblical Lazarus character and Gunn's history yields significant support to this reading.

"Carnal Knowledge," another poem in *Fighting Terms* opens with the line "Even in bed I pose: desire may grow/ More circumstantial and less circumspect/ Each night" (lines 1-3). The narrator's desire grows out of circumstance, a compulsion to be heterosexual, as being gay was unacceptable. The verse goes on claiming "an acute girl would suspect/ That my self is not like my body" (3-4), and "I am not what I seem" (7). These lines suggest feigning heterosexuality, a false persona for Gunn. In "The Wound," Gunn expresses this struggle with identity: "I was myself: subject to no man's breath:/ My own commander was my enemy" (16). Returning to "Carnal Knowledge," the line "I know of no emotion we can share" (33) further reinforces the isolation and divide between the heterosexual and homosexual. With the insight that Gunn is a homosexual, whether or not he is "posing" or recounting a true experience, it is effortless to read this poem as the exchange between a gay man in bed with a woman. Ironically, according to Gunn, as referenced in Colm Tóibín's *Love in a Dark Time*, this poem was written for two women and is not unambiguous in its meaning (218).

In accordance with the aforementioned irony, Catherine Stimpson finds only Gunn's most sexually ambivalent and reticent work glaring indications of homosexual connotations (393); she notes in support that Gunn doesn't write about

women as heroes but instead as merely conventional figures, apt as he romanticizes men (400). Stimpson claims "Without a Counterpart," starting with the pun of the title itself, is about two homosexual lovers; Gunn is "posing" again, but in a role perhaps genuinely close to his true self. The opening lines of the poem "Last night I woke in fright. You were not there./ I seemed to face across a deep sad plain" (lines 1-2) are particularly revealing in her opinion. Also supportive are Gunn's somewhat trademark geographical depictions of the male body such as "my cheek on prickly turf" (16) and "The bad whole in the ground no longer gaped─/ The hard land round it, flexing into flesh" (21-22). Emmanuel Nelson claims the work is about showing, "wittingly or not, that when men face disapproval from friends or family, they may find that a lover is their only source of consolation" (192). A brief note on the classical elegance of the poem: it is in iambic pentameter.

The Sense of Movement, published in the 1957, opens with "On the Move," a famous piece about the aimless and intimidating travels of leather-clad motorcycle gangs. Critic Robert Martin describes it as a "James Dean myth as seen through European eyes: America and the beautiful cowboy." Several sexual undertones immediately come to mind: the leather which the bikers wear, the image of a rider and his mount, and "Boys" in line 10 is capitalized without reason besides emphasis. Again referencing Alfred Corn's essay, he thoroughly analyzes the idea that both motorcycle and rider share in their control of motion: therefore the motorcycle which Gunn refers to as "the created will" (line 34), is an agent to the riders' existence. This is important from both an existentialist standpoint, and as Corn brings up the Elizabethan dual-meaning of the word "will": which relates of course to *William* Shakespeare, as he used the word as a pun often to suggest "penis." Therefore, the motorcycle riders are driven and given meaning from their sexuality. Even though Gunn was well versed in Shakespeare and Elizabethan English, he claims he wasn't aware of the double meaning when he penned the poem, but again according to Corn, he does not discount the sexual connotation and appropriateness when interpreting the poem. This definitely provides explanation for Gunn's fixation on using both the word (as a pun) and concept of "will" throughout his poetry.

"The Allegory of the Wolf Boy" is another masked sexual poem. In an interview conducted by Christopher Hennessy, Gunn claims it is based on a story by H.H. Munro who wrote with the pen name Saki. Gunn likens it to the first part of coming out, being closeted: the reluctant acknowledgement of sexuality and partaking in it. Emmanuel Nelson mentions "posing" again, claiming that the poem "capitalizes on the duplicity that a young man is forced into as he pretends to be something he is not" (192). The boy in the poem is posing as being at ease "At tennis and at tea" (line 4), but at night "wedges his clothes between/ Two moulded garden urns, and goes beyond/ His understanding" (8-10). The boy is stripped of clothes which mask his sexuality, and then free to "loose desires horded against his will/ By the long urging of the afternoon" (16-17); accordingly, he can partake freely in his real sexual nature, which has been troubling him throughout the entire day. Despite this freedom, the boy pays a price: "he has bleeding paws" (24). Gunn is "posing" as boy: not only trying to express the immorality of lying about oneself, but the physically and mentally painful experience of being closeted.

The Sense of Movement contains some poems of questionable purpose: the interpretably pedophiliac deviance presented in the doubled hat wearing miser in "Before the Carnival" is unrepentant, and "Market at Turk" unashamedly describes a masculine prostitute and his attractive working class apparel. He is prepared for the "unique combat" of sex with "boots, jeans, and a

curious cap," the apparel of Gunn's beloved bikers (3-4). Regardless, the purpose of these two poems besides description and desensitization perhaps, therefore trying to describe aspects of the world of "perversion," is comparatively extremely tenuous.

Conversely "The Corridor" is an excellent example of Gunn making deviance passable as a subject and perhaps even an experience beneficial to learning. The poem concerns a man who experiences social and sexual pleasures by observing others, a voyeur. While watching a couple however, he experiences a revelation that he is not isolated and moreover, may be seeing a "distorted" image. He realizes that he must enjoy sexual pleasure with a friend instead of alone. This poem can certainly be interpreted as instruction that one must partake in their sexuality no matter how ugly or cowardly, fears evidenced by surveying "an act of love that frank as air/ He was too ugly for, or could not dare,/ Or at a crucial moment thought a sin" (10-12). "Pose" is blatant, as Gunn is using a character as a lens for a topic, and the idea of "will" is implied in the voyeur's decision to seek real pleasure. Overall the homosexual references in *Fighting Terms* and *The Sense of Movement* are very guarded in most respects, and may have been lost on readers in the 1950s; conversely they are quite clear today.

My Sad Captains, a transitional work as mentioned, commences with the piece "In Santa Maria del Popolo." The poem is a curious musing concerning a Caravaggio painting of the same name that deals with the conversion of Saul into the biblical Paul. George Klatwitter alleges numerous homosexual undertones to the painting: Saul is portrayed as passive and helpless, on his back with his arms outstretched and legs spread, his sword (a phallic symbol) lies at his side, and his horse's hoof (another phallic symbol) is raised above, prominent in his view (219-222). Gunn is immediately skeptical of the meaning of the painting which is "conveniently oblique" (line 2). In his questioning poem he accuses the "wily painter" of "limiting the scene" (13); aptly he states that the painter saw "an alternate/ Candour and secrecy inside the skin," a likely reference to sexual perversion (19-20). He also questions the "wide gesture of the lifting arms" and mentions possibly with dual intentions that "the very subject is in doubt" (16 and 8). Gunn himself is ultimately skeptical as he leaves the work having been "hardly enlightened" (25).

My Sad Captains also includes poetry that Gunn likens to experiencing aspects of the gay community. The first of the two "Modes of Pleasure" poems describes "Dredging the bar with that stiff glare/ As fiercely as if each whim there/ Were passion," or more blatantly, being surveyed by a man in a bar (lines 2-4). This is a new experience for Gunn, as he opens the poem with the expression "I jump with terror seeing him" (1). Gunn himself describes the "Modes of Pleasure" poems as about leather bars; in the second poem he mentions an individual: "Dark in his doubtful uniform" (3). He reveals the loveless and promiscuous sex characteristic of such establishments with, "Yet when I've had you once or twice/ I may not want you any more:/ A single night is plenty" (13-15). Additionally telling is the query, "Why pretend/ Love must accompany erection?/ This is a momentary affection,/ A curiosity bound to end" (17-20). Sex is merely a "warm game" for them, accompanied with an impersonal, "callous and reserved" character (12 and 8). This language is somewhat vague, but clear enough (according to Gunn) to efficiently serve as "a kind of guide to leather bars for straight people, for people not into leather, so that people could see what it was all about " (Gunn). Such a topic and more easily interpretable verse are undeniably departures from his earlier poetry.

The second part of *My Sad Captains* is in part ushered in by "The Book of the Dead" which both utilizes iambic pentameter as well as "abab" and "cdcd" rhyme schemes in the first and second stanzas, as observed in "Re-experiencing Thom

Gunn." The second part includes two notable poems: "The Feel of Hands" and "My Sad Captains." "The Feel of Hands" is a very sensual piece about being touched by another individual and their exploratory nature. The poem however ends on the dark note, "It strikes me that/ I do not know whose hands they are" (lines 15-16). "My Sad Captains" is an appropriate closing work for the collection. Interpreted in a non-sexual manner, Gunn's "sad captains" may be the "heroes" he has traditionally written about, such as Achilles, Lazarus and perhaps even his infamous motorcycle gang. Sexually, it could be a reminiscence regarding men that Gunn has known or had relations with. He describes them as "men/ who, I thought, lived only to/ renew the wasteful force they/ spent with each hot convulsion," an extremely sexual line (8-11). C.Q. Forester asserts again in "Re-experiencing Thom Gunn" that these same men do not find companionship as "they withdraw to an orbit/ and turn with disinterested/ hard energy" (16-18). He furthermore claims that Gunn is capturing "the universal experience of men who cruise: erotic desire coupled with a steely posture to cover their fear of rejection." Emmanuel Nelson even states that the poem is about anonymous sex in gay bathhouses (192). These assertions are reinforced by the subject matter of other poems in the respective collection.

In 1967, preceding the LSD fueled *Moly*, was "Touch," an elegant poem about two lovers in bed. "Touch" is noteworthy in Gunn's canon because of its trademark imaginative language in addition to open intimacy and sensuality. The poem explores companionship in a way almost directly opposite to isolation of his earlier work "The Corridor." Gunn is unmistakably no longer "posing" in this work, but instead writing from his own perspective: "I lower/ myself in next to/ you" (lines 2-4), and "You turn and/ hold me tightly, do/ you know who/ I am" (28-31). Stripped down, the poem is about the narrator slipping into bed with a man and a cat. Liberally, "Touch" can be seen as a precursor to the unashamed openness in "The Geysers" and in "Jack Straw's Castle" where Gunn unarguably announces his homosexuality.

Moly again focuses on personal experience and metamorphosis. According to Gregory Woods, the five centaur poems titled "Tom-Dobbin" are the works main instances of transformation. The centaur is an extraordinarily sexual creature because it is both man and horse: both symbols of virility. Woods even suggests there is an element of sexual play-acting, treating one's partner like a horse, intimated in these examples (223). He claims it isn't about that variety of sexual relationship but "illustrate(s) aspects of the exertion of control in sexual intercourse" (223). The transformation begins in the first poem when "luminous seed" is passed between Tom and Dobbin the horse (1.2). Woods wisely continues that the second poem emphasizes the separateness of the centaur's two halves with the oneness achieved in sexual intercourse, for eventually "Tom and Dobbin join to one" (2.7), accompanied by an orgasmic "shock of whiteness, shooting like a star" (2.9). This explicit language, along with the opening to part 2, "Hot in his mind, Tom watches Dobbin fuck" (2.1), is notable because of Gunn's traditionally reserved style. The "Tom-Dobbin" collection ends with a brief fifth poem that according to Woods, indicates an end to the equine foreplay and the commencement of real intercourse. Needless to say, the narrator refers to his lover as male, questioning "which is me, which him?" (5.5). With homosexuality less concealed because of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, Gunn could afford to be candid. Additionally, fitting to Gunn's claim that *Moly* is "practically dedicated to LSD," there is a trance-like, perhaps drug induced mood that flows throughout these poems. In fact, numerous poems in *Moly* are footnoted with where Gunn was and the substances he was influenced by while poeticizing. Finally, compared to his more violent early works, his later sexually shameless and then melancholy works,

Moly glimpses a certain paradise, even apparent in the mere titles of its poems: "The Garden of the Gods," "The Discovery of the Pacific," and "Sunlight" for instance.

Jack Straw's Castle signifies an end to the sexual subtlety and uncertainty that weighed down Gunn's prior works. C.Q. Forester reads it as a mid-life evaluation, where Gunn "crosses the point of no return." Gunn speaks from his own person, not through a "persona." This is notable in "The Corporal" where he confesses his adoration of American soldiers, possibly formative in his sexuality. Gunn himself remembers "eyeing the well-fed and good-looking G.I.s who were on every street, with an appreciation I didn't completely understand" (Gunn 172).

"The Geysers" (a collection similar to "Tom-Dobbin") is described gently by Jonathan Levin as "a four-part poem about community, formed largely by the mutual pleasure people take in nature and in each other" (268). Bluntly it is the first unarguable expression of Gunn's glorification of sex. To start, "The Geysers" is about a gay bathhouse, so it is noteworthy that Gunn describes it as a beautiful place in the first poem "Sleep by the Hot Stream." Gunn begins to speak about the striking denizens of this locale in "The Cool Stream": "Some rest and pass a joint, some climb the fall:/ Tan black and pink, firm shining bodies" (2.25-26). Erotic energy abounds in the third and forth poems (respectively titled, "The Geyser," and "The Bathhouse") until Gunn is drawn to a communal orgy, C.Q. Forester quotes the lines: "Not certain/ who I am or where" (4.29-30), "The water round me thickens to hot mud" (4.37), "And still I grow/ and barely move in years I am so great/ I exist I hardly can be said to wait" (4.41-43). The intensity builds with Gunn feeling trapped at first, but giving up hope of escape as the poetic structure becomes irreparably fragmented. Gunn joins in, becoming "torn from the self" and states to conclude: "I am/ I am raw meat/ I am a god." Another less profound example of Gunn's new free sexuality is in "Wrestling." Emmanuel Nelson claims the piece "sing(s) the praises of anonymous gay sex" (193). It makes use of the biblical allusion common in Gunn's earlier works and presents the homoerotic image of Jacob wrestling with an angel (Klatwitter 223). Klatwitter supports this quoting, "a tale of wrestling with a stranger/ a stranger, like/ a man" (lines 31-33). Nonetheless, the greatest climax in *Jack Straw's Castle* occurs in the poem of the same name.

"Jack Straw's Castle" is another long work, a collection of 11 poems, filled with "visions, voices, burning smells" (1.21) and "grim images of fear and panic" including the appearance Charles Manson and Medusa (Nelson 193). The "delicate resolution to such terror" is in the last part of the poem (Levin 270). Gunn stirs in bed and recognizes that he is in the presence of another man. They lie "Facing apart, but leaning ass to ass" (11.25), and evidently Gunn is contented for "that mere contact is sufficient touch" (11.26). He essentially describes the man as the lover of his dreams: "What if this is the man I gave my key/ Who got in while I slept?" (11.30-31). Gunn is poetically but frankly acknowledging his homosexuality; and he is glad to demystify himself for "The beauty's in what is, not what may seem." (11.35).

Homosexuality as a mindset, lifestyle, and culture may never be palatable to those removed from it, nor, as first stated, an uncomplicated subject. Its proliferation has historically been prevented by the limits of society both legally and ethically. In spite of that history, Thom Gunn remains an excellent example of always representing his sexual direction and doing so completely tastefully (when necessary) without forcing it upon the reader, even in the 1950s and 1960s. Even in his earlier works, it is certainly ignorant to claim there is nothing to be said about Gunn's sexuality!

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