

Jay Parini

## Rule and Energy: The Poetry of Thom Gunn

IN AN EARLY POEM addressed to his mentor, Yvor Winters, Thom Gunn writes:

You keep both Rule and Energy in view,  
Much power in each, most in the balanced two:  
Ferocity existing in the fence  
Built by an exercised intelligence.

These potentially counterdestructive principles exist everywhere in his work, not sapping the poems of their strength but creating a tense climate of balanced opposition. Any poet worth thinking twice about possesses at least an energetic mind; but it is the harnessing of this energy which makes for excellence. In Gunn's work an apparently unlimited energy of vision finds, variously, the natural boundaries which make expression—and clarity—possible.

The exact balance of Rule and Energy occurs rarely enough in even the greatest poets. For the most part, a superabundance of either principle damages the final product, so that one is left wishing that, say, Ginsberg had Rule equal to his Energy or, conversely, that Wilbur had less control over more content. This is not meant to disparage either poet, both of whom have on many occasions achieved the precarious balance of great art. My purpose here is to suggest how Gunn, over roughly a quarter century, has effected a balance of Rule and Energy all his own, creating in the process a body of poems able to withstand the closest scrutiny.

Gunn has lived in the U.S., mostly in San Francisco, since his graduation from Cambridge in 1953. But his early poems, especially, reflect his British heritage and the interest in "formalist" poetry characteristic of poets identified with the so-called Movement. "What poets like Larkin, Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, and I had in common at that time was that we were deliberately eschewing Modernism, and turning back, though not very thoroughly, to traditional resources in structure

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and method," says Gunn.<sup>1</sup> This return to traditional resources was common to the period of the early fifties in general, not only in England, as the work of Ransom, Roethke, Wilbur and Lowell shows.

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. "The Wound" is among the best poems here, the first in the book; its speaker is variously Achilles or "the self who dreamt he was Achilles" (Gunn's description):

The huge wound in my head began to heal  
About the beginning of the seventh week.  
Its 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.

The slightly "sprung" pentameter, the emblem of the wound that runs through the poem, and the hallucinatory progress of the narrator/persona together produce the wonderful tautness found in Gunn's earliest verse. Achilles's "real" wound is the death of his friend, his lover, Patroclus:

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

The poem represents a young man's effort, via the form of dramatic monologue, to distance himself from his subject; this stage is crucial in any poet's development. The beginning writer rarely has sufficient space between himself and his material. The use of a persona helps, for it allows the poet to search for a sympathetic alter-ego, to study himself indirectly, safely. The poem acts as a grid through which the light of self-expression passes; with luck, something of the poet's true nature remains.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Gunn for allowing me to quote from his unpublished autobiographical piece, "My Life Up to Now," from which most of the prose passages from his work are taken. This essay will appear eventually as an introduction to a bibliography of Gunn's work to appear in England, edited by Jan Hagstom.

The warrior-lover figure in these poems is self-consciously aggressive at times, but Gunn succeeds by sheer force of will in a poem like "Carnal Knowledge," his most striking early poem:

Even in bed I pose: desire may grow  
More circumstantial and less circumspect  
Each night, but an acute girl would suspect  
My thoughts might not be, like my body, bare.  
I wonder if you know, or, knowing, care?  
You know I know you know I know you know.

The speaker knows himself to be a poseur, and self-contempt gathers through the poem, leading ultimately to feelings of inadequacy: "I know of no emotions we can share." He asks her, then, to abandon him to his ineffectual stammering. Gunn affects a simplicity of diction reminiscent of the Elizabethan "plain style," but it is also the casual diction of an adolescent, full of a young lover's painful self-consciousness and disposition to emotional complexity. "Carnal Knowledge," owing to its sheer verbal dexterity, stays in the mind where many of the poems in *Fighting Terms* fade.

Among the accomplished poems from this early phase of Gunn's career is "Tamer and Hawk," which treats of the Rule/Energy conflict in tightly rhymed trimeter stanzas (though the last line in each has two instead of three feet):

I thought I was so tough,  
But gentled at your hands  
Cannot be quick enough  
To fly for you and show  
That when I go I go  
At your commands.

The poem is a swift, bold stroke; its central conceit is a subtly worked-out metaphor—the hawk is possessed by but in turn possesses the tamer: "You but half-civilize, / Taming me in this way." The theme of possession and control, of the positive and negative aspects of any intense relationship (whether between man and woman or poet and his language), has rarely found more distinct expression. "Tamer and Hawk" is equal to anything in Gunn's later volumes, and it points the way to the direction of his next book.

*The Sense of Movement* (1957) fulfills the promise of Gunn's first book, displaying a new range of assimilated (or half-assimilated) voices

and refining, somewhat, the central metaphor of his work—the conflict of intellect and emotion. Having left Cambridge, Gunn passed nearly a year in Rome and went to California, where he has remained. More importantly for his work, he began reading Yeats, whom he later refers to as "the second most disastrous influence after Milton." Yeats is disastrous because unassimilable; the Yeatsian cadences can only be parodied, not imitated; Yeatsian mannerisms possess a fatal attraction for young poets because they are too easily mimickable. But this overstates the case (as does Gunn).

The Yeatsian manner lent a new richness to Gunn's verse. His most widely anthologized poem, "On the Move," derives explicitly from the master:

The blue jay scuffling in the bushes follows  
Some hidden purpose, and the gust of birds  
That spurts across the field, the wheeling swallows  
Have nested in the trees and undergrowth.  
Seeking their instinct, or their poise, or both,  
One moves with an uncertain violence  
Under the dust thrown by a baffled sense  
Or the dull thunder of approximate words.

The attribution of "some hidden purpose" to the animal world, the seeking of "signs," the epithet "wheeling," the intense feelings controlled by a blank verse that is heavily enjambed: these traits recall Yeats, specifically, though the influence is not overbearing. On the contrary, Gunn adds something of his own to a great modern tradition (as do Roethke and Larkin in their own ways).

"On the Move" opens for examination throughout the volume one of Gunn's central ideas: that *action* is crucial to existential self-definition and that individual freedom depends, necessarily, upon the freedom of others. Poets are rarely philosophers; they "lift" ideas which seem compatible, which affect their sensibility and set their own language in motion. Gunn's arguments come, explicitly, from Sartre's lecture *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*:

When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. There are many, indeed, who show no such anxiety. But one affirms that they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it.

So Gunn's heroes race up the highway "as flies hanging in heat." Their uniforms—leather jackets and goggles—lend an impersonality which is terrifying to spectators. "They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust— / And almost hear a meaning in their noise." Yet Gunn admires them: "Men manufacture both machine and soul," he asserts. This supreme existential notion, that *soul* as well as machine has its ontological basis in the creative will, lifts "On the Move" out of the realm of commonplace observation or glorification of the motorcyclists. "It is a part solution, after all," the poet says. The Boys are, at least, self-defined; they have *chosen* their form of life. Gunn concludes the poem:

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

A Zen master would no doubt object; nevertheless, Gunn isolates an important "belief" of our times: that motion is itself a positive quality, a denial of death, an assertion of will over inert matter.

Much of *The Sense of Movement* was written while Gunn studied at Stanford under Yvor Winters, and these poems reflect his teacher's aesthetic to some extent. To Winters, says Gunn, poetry "was an instrument for exploring the truth of things, as far as human beings can explore it, and it can do so with greater verbal exactitude than prose can manage." Yet Gunn's notion of poetry goes well beyond the narrow strictures of Winters, admitting a wider range of feeling. Indeed, his belief that reality inheres in the particulars of experience almost works against Winters's dedication to abstract reason. Gunn's poetry is not intellectual, finally; rather, it explores concrete reality in a sensuous manner. The worst poems in this book, in fact, could be called "arguments." They make assertions about the human condition (as in "Vox Humana") such as the following: "Much is unknowable." The best work here embodies the texture of Gunn's own life, as in "At the Back of the North Wind":

All summer's warmth was stored there in the hay;  
Below, the troughs of water froze: the boy  
Climbed nightly up the rungs behind the stalls  
And planted deep between the clothes he heard  
The kind wind bluster, but the last he knew  
Was sharp and filled his head, the smell of hay.

His sense-receptors come alive here, pricked by experience, registered in tough, clear language. These traits carry over into his next, and better, book.

*My Sad Captains* (1961) can, without strain, be called a "watershed" in Gunn's career. Its two parts neatly separate the early style (formal poetry about the creative will and self-determination) and the later, freer style (largely concerned with the interplay of man and nature and the necessity of love). Gunn never abandons metrical verse, but the echoes of Yeats and others disappear. *Captains* is possibly Gunn's strongest book to date.

Part I bears an epigraph from Shakespeare's *Troilus* relevant to my overall theme: "The will is infinite and the execution confined, the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit." Again, Gunn's preoccupation with Rule and Energy surfaces. The book opens with one of his finest poems, "In Santa Maria del Popolo," a meditation on Caravaggio's famous "Conversion of St. Paul." In the painting Paul makes a crucial existential choice, and this appealed to the younger Gunn; Paul sprawls before his horse, arms uplifted:

I see him sprawl,  
Foreshortened from the head, with hidden face,  
Where he has fallen, Saul becoming Paul.  
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?

Gunn's conception of an existential moment widens with this poem; where previously his self-defining heroes asserted themselves willfully, even recklessly (as in "The Beaters," a poem about sadists), here the poet focuses on the act of contrition as a heroic gesture. Saul *limits* himself in becoming Paul, much in the way Caravaggio limits his scene to "the one convulsion" or the way Gunn himself concentrates on one image. These acts of limitation, in effect, gather the energies which might otherwise disperse.

The Gunn who celebrated soldiers and motorcyclists is not quite finished, however; most of the remaining poems in Part I resurrect earlier personae. "Innocence" treats of a young soldier's schooling in indifference, "A compact innocence, child-like and clear, / No doubt could penetrate, no act could harm." The irony here can, indeed, be called an advance from the early celebration of the soldier-hero. "Black

Jackets" represents a critique of the heroic mode of *The Sense of Movement*; the red-haired boy who drove a van on weekdays is metamorphosed on Sundays—becoming *not* an individual hero but a parody of the rebel he affects, no longer possessing even the simple virtue of movement which implies a physical if not metaphysical inclination toward the future:

He stretched out like a cat, and rolled  
The bitterish taste of beer upon his tongue,  
And listened to a joke being told:  
The present was the things he stayed among.

Part I is the culmination of Gunn's early style, participating in the same mode it criticizes.

The last stanza of "Waking in a Newly-Built House" could serve as an epigraph to Gunn's mature style:

Calmly, perception rests on the things,  
and is aware of them only in  
their precise definition, their fine  
lack of even potential meanings.

From here on, Gunn will aim more to describe than to prescribe experience. The poems in Part II, written in syllabics, move beyond the rigid expectations of formal verse; syllabics force on the poem a nerve-rackingly regular irregularity: the reader *feels* the arbitrary restraint of a given number of syllables per line. When syllabics work, the effect is stunning, unsettling: the lines seem cut off like fingers, raw, unbandaged.

"Flying Above California" takes up the theme of perception, extending it:

Sometimes  
on fogless days by the Pacific,  
there is a cold hard light without break  
that reveals merely what is—no more  
and no less. That limiting candour,  
that accuracy of the beaches,  
is part of the ultimate richness.

"That limiting candour" is a new restraint, a new Rule to harness Gunn's Energy of vision. The poet longs to see *beyond* what is there; he wants description to give way to revelation. But seeing things "exactly as they are" (in Wallace Stevens's phrase) places a necessary formal restraint upon the poet; he must learn to keep his eye on the object. "*La poète*," says André Gide, "*est celui qui regarde*." The hard light of sustained attention will yield, for Gunn, a batch of his finest lyrics.

"Considering the Snail" seems to me the best poem in this book. The poet's vision here filters through a wide-angle lens: "The snail pushes through a green / night." A deep image unifies the poem, this magnified view of a creature moving "in a wood of desire, / pale antlers barely stirring / as he hunts." Gunn's old interest in *will* emerges for reconsideration. There is no will here, perhaps: "I cannot tell," he admits, "what power is at work, drenched there / with purpose." Gunn examines the life-force at its most elemental level, and this snail's low fury is not finally of a different substance from that of the gang-boys gunning their motorcycles in "On the Move," merely of a different order. The poet draws no profound or abstract conclusions from his close-up of the snail; he allows meaning to assert itself subliminally. Surely the snail is not really "self-defining"? It cannot be blamed for this fact. Indeed, Gunn moves quietly here toward a poetry of celebration. His early preoccupation with the heroic ideal is subtly undermined by the snail's deliberate progress across a heap of litter.

The thirteen poems in Part II are a cluster of Gunn's best work, marked by a passionate eye for detail and sustained by a new exactness of diction; his imagery has a new sharpness, the poems glitter like cut glass. "My Sad Captains," the title poem, completes the sequence; it is Gunn's farewell to the past, to his obsession with heroism. It constitutes a deeply felt elegy to his old self, taking its title from Mark Antony's moving speech in Act II of *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Come,  
Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me  
All my sad captains, fill our bowls: once more  
Let's mock the midnight bell.

For Gunn, "One by one they appear in / the darkness," his friends, a few historical persons whom he felt close to at one point. Now, "before they fade they stand / perfectly embodied, all / the past lapping them like a cloak of chaos." Gunn's elegy is a tender yet fiercely self-critical piece, a farewell to what has been, a resolution to approach life

and art from now on with greater flexibility and humaneness.

This new direction finds direct expression in *Positives* (1966), a unique event in Gunn's career, a collaborative sequence of poems and photographs done with his brother, Ander Gunn. "I had always wanted to work with pictures," says the poet; he was looking for a "form of fragmentary inclusiveness which could embody the detail and history of that good year," a year spent home again in England. He also borrowed consciously from William Carlos Williams, whose openness of form proved useful on this specific project and suggested a way into Gunn's later verse.

The problem of free verse, of course, was with the attendant loss of energy; metrical verse forces a poet to control his language energies, as Gunn says very neatly: "it is the nature of the control being exercised that becomes part of the life being spoken about." If the control dominates the poet's energy too thoroughly, bombast occurs. But, with free verse, the danger lies "in being too relaxed, too lacking in controlling energy." I find the poems in *Positives* tense and unconstrained at the same time; their language adheres firmly to the images evoked, images which move from birth to death, from childhood to old age, always with compassion and wit. Although Gunn's sympathies lodge clearly with the downcast of the world, those on the fringe, there is an acute worldliness about these poems, an ironic bite that redeems them from sentimentality, as in the following lines which gloss a photograph of a woman eating a slice of cake through a painful grimace:

You have no idea what a  
hard life a rich person leads.

What with servants and jewels,  
and having to go to Harrods  
every day so as to  
purchase a big article  
and help use up the imports.

It's quite a relief sometimes  
to sit down for a while with  
an expresso and a tiny slice  
of expensive cake.

You have no idea, either,  
how hard it is  
seeming to lead such a life.

The following year Gunn published *Touch* (1967), establishing what I take to be his "mature" style—a mixture of free verse, syllabics, and metrical verse in poems largely concerned with what Wallace Stevens called a poet's "sense of the world." Gunn writes, movingly, of personal love, of sunlight, of his pity for mankind, of himself among others. *Touch* begins with an invocation of the life-force itself, the goddess Proserpina, whose implacable energies must assist "vulnerable, quivering" mankind. The forces of darkness cannot contain her, "she will allow / no hindrance, none, and bursts up / through potholes and narrow flues / seeking an outlet." These energies are necessary for the man who would sustain his own—"without love, without hope, but / without renunciation."

The poems in *Touch* present a sustained analysis of man's fallen condition. In "No Speech from the Scaffold," for instance, the reader watches a condemned man ("What he did is, now, / immaterial") move through dewy grass, nodding to friends the last goodbyes, putting his head on the block for chopping: nothing now matters, "rather, it is his conduct / as he rests there, while / he is still a human." Gunn's message is important and fresh. The efforts at self-definition which obsess his early personae reach outward here in the greater effort simply to be human, which involves (as Bertrand Russell said beautifully) "the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind."

The title poem itself, "Touch," is among Gunn's permanent achievements. He addresses his sleeping lover as he lowers himself into bed, "next to / you, my skin slightly / numb with the restraint / of habits . . . the black frost / of outsidersness." Eventually, warmth overcomes this frosty separateness:

You turn and  
hold me tightly, do  
you know who  
I am or am I  
your mother or  
the nearest human being to  
hold on to in a  
dreamed pogrom.

It is touch that loosens a whelm of human feeling "seeps / from our touch in / continuous creation." Two individuals touching, instinctively, in the darkness opens a conduit to that "dark / wide realm where

we / walk with everyone." Gunn writes here with magisterial control of great emotion, and "Touch" is the best poem in this volume.

*Misanthropos*, a series of linked poems about a man who survives a global war and imagines himself alone in the world, occupies much of the book. It is an ambitious and partially successful poem, central to *Touch* as a whole, and worth treating at some length. The first part is "The Last Man," a five-poem sequence in which the scene is established. The narrator wants to survive, and he does so by stripping away those layers of disguise which were previously of some use in a "civilized world." He confines himself to one hill, avoiding "the momentous rhythm / of the sea." He is not heroic; indeed, "If he preserves himself in nature, / it is as a lived caricature / of the race he happens to survive." The only feeling he can trust, he learns, is disgust. His poverty becomes, finally, "a sort of uniform." And he takes pleasure merely in perception of, say, the starlight, realizing himself to be condemned "in consciousness that plots its own end." He retreats to a remembrance of the sun, with its attendant hopes, "The clearest light in the whole universe." This light has a curious abstractness, a Platonic radiance, but it is unredeemptive. The central character is reduced here to a level of instinct where identification with the landscape is complete: "Nothing moves / at the edge of the mind."

Six poems follow in "Memoirs of the World," in which the hero recalls the world he has lost, his various disguises, poses ("Who was it in dark glasses?"). He clings to perception: "I must keep to the world's bare surface," stripped of everything in the end but pure consciousness. At this nadir, an upward turning begins, embodied in "Epitaph for Anton Schmidt," which celebrates a man who "helped the Jews to get away" from the Nazis and was executed. This example, somehow, redeems the whole section; it is enough for our narrator-hero that one good man existed. What follows, "Elegy on the Dust," pictures a world wherein everything human is erased: "They have all come who sought distinction hard / to the universal knacker's yard." This elegant poem ends by recalling Eliot's "Gerontion," each grain of sand "hurled / In endless hurry round the world."

"The First Man" completes *Misanthropos* as its hero now creeps "mole-like . . . over mounds of dirt." His human qualities have diminished: "If he is man, he is the first man lurking / In a thicket of time." It is as if time has turned backward on itself, biting its tail like the mythical world serpent. The last man has become the first man, "An unreflecting organ of perception." His humanity has no chance

to reassert itself until, amazingly, in the fourteenth poem, he looks from his hill and sees a smudge of humanity, a group of men approaching, and his "Mouth struggles with the words that mind forgot." In the next poem, forty men and women appear. The hero hides behind a rock—until he is moved by human compassion to help one poor soul to his feet. The others, bewildered, pass him: "They turn and look at me full, / and as they pass they name me." This is truly "a bare world, and lacks / history." Nonetheless, the hero asserts, speaking in the first person:

By an act of memory,  
I make the recognition:  
I stretch out the word to him  
from which conversations start,  
naming him, also, by name.

In this act of naming Gunn discovers the origins of humanity; the word becomes the vital link between one man and another, and a way of contact that the individual and inanimate sands hurled about the world had no means for. The sequence concludes with a meditation on the Biblical "dust to dust" theme: "The touched arm feels of dust, mixing with dust / On the hand that touches it." But Gunn draws his own conclusion, suggesting that mutability *is not* the point; survival is what matters, plus "all there is to see." *Percipi est percipere*.

While *Misanthropos* is Gunn's centerpiece in *Touch*, I prefer many of the other poems, such as "Snowfall," "In the Tank," and "The Produce District," poems of exact observation, marked by a deep sense of controlling intelligence. They point the way toward *Moly* (1971), Gunn's most personal book to date.

Most of these poems evoke Gunn's Californian experience in the late sixties, "the time, after all, not only of the Beatles but of LSD as well," he writes. His fascination with LSD is apparent from the title; *Moly* was, of course, the magical herb given to Odysseus by Hermes to protect him when he entered Circe's house. The poet's drug experiences opened to him new veins of reality; his concern with perception takes on a stunningly new dimension; for LSD presented Gunn with intensely fresh visions of both the physical world and his own nature. The old problem of Rule and Energy became all the more acute as well; Gunn writes: "The acid trip is unstructured, it opens you up to countless possibilities, you hanker after the infinite. The only way I could give myself

control over the presentation of these experiences, and so could be true to them, was by trying to render the infinite through the finite, the unstructured through the structured."

Gunn uses formal meters and rhyme to restrain, precariously, the strange new feelings which attend this widening of consciousness. In a brief statement prepared for the Poetry Book Society (*Bulletin* 68, London, 1971) the author writes of *Moly*: "It could be seen as a debate between the passion for definition and the passion for flow." These terms, of course, recollect Rule and Energy: the poet's feelings are intense and threaten to overwhelm him, but his intellect (and the imagination) modify and restrain this passion with equal force; always, the balance of opposites is sought after. There is constantly in this new work that sense of "continuous creation" mentioned in "Touch," a rare and irrepressible life-force beyond constraint but trapped, temporarily, by the artist in his poem.

Gunn catches the sense of impending transformation in the opening poems, such as "Rites of Passage," where he says that "Something is taking place." Now "Horns bud bright in my hair. / My feet are turning hoof." The transformation even into a pig is complete in "Moly," the title poem. Having failed to discover that miraculous and saving flower, the narrator has become, literally, a pig, transmogrified by Circe: "I push my big grey wet snout through green, / Dreaming the flower I have never seen."

"For Signs" follows, a remarkable poem written with that luminous clarity which always attends Gunn at his best:

In front of me, the palings of a fence  
Throw shadows hard as board across the weeds;  
The cracked enamel of a chicken bowl  
Gleams like another moon; each clump of reeds  
Is split with darkness and yet bristles whole.  
The field survives, but with a difference.

The poet's eye is passive here, the eye of an Impressionist painter, wide, open to fluctuations of atmosphere and light. But the imagination, as Coleridge observed, takes what is given and transforms it, dissolves and recombines that object; "the real is shattered and combined," says Gunn. Outward vision gives way, rapidly, to inward: "I recognize the pale long inward stare." The process of continuous creation cannot be checked, but it has its own laws, seen here as analogous to zodiacal fluctuations, this "Cycle that I in part am governed by." The

poem ends cleanly and with force:

I lean upon the fence and watch the sky,  
How light fills blinded socket and chafed mark.  
It soars, hard, full, and edged, it coldly burns.

"From the Wave" is a central poem in *Moly*, though a modest one. Its theme is controlled innocence, balance; though ostensibly a poem about surfing, its theme again is Rule and Energy, this time with a new metaphor. One could easily substitute poets for surfers in the following passage:

Their pale feet curl, they poise their weight  
With a learn'd skill.  
It is the wave they imitate  
Keeps them so still.

A line from Theodore Roethke comes to mind: "This shaking keeps me steady." Herein lies the paradox of art, that true art is eternal but created out of the temporal; the finer the balance of antinomies, the finer the poem. "Balance is triumph in this place, / Triumph possession," Gunn concludes. Capturing the innocence of the surfers, men wedded temporarily to nature, "Half wave, half men," the poet himself rides easily on the waves of his emotion, tracking the waves steadily with artful poise. He affects a model of linguistic control.

The antinomies of motion and stillness give way, in "Tom-Dobbin," to the parallel opposition of mind and instinct; Gunn creates a centaur-like figure: half man, half horse. Only in the moment of orgasm does fusion take place:

In coming Tom and Dobbin join to 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.

Gunn explores this paradoxical union in a five-part sequence, in effect a meditation on the possibility of union between lovers, "Selves floating in the one flesh we are of."

Many of the later poems in *Moly* re-create the mood of the late sixties: drugs, hard rock music, ecstatic experiences—all are evoked, beautifully. Gunn has written movingly of this period in his prose as well:

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And now that the great sweep of the acid years is over, I cannot unlearn the things that I learned during them, I cannot deny the vision of what the world might be like. Everything that we glimpsed—the trust, the brotherhood, the repossession of innocence, the nakedness of spirit—is still a possibility and will continue to be so.

*Moly* culminates in "Sunlight," a poem of lyric grace and verbal control. "What captures light belongs to what it captures" sums up Gunn's meaning; he captures sunlight, his metaphor for that luminous concentration of experience in language which is called poetry; the poem demonstrates Gunn's miraculous poise, his balance of conflicting powers. The sun's "concentrated fires / Are slowly dying," but this matters only a little. "The system of which the sun and we are part / Is both imperfect and deteriorating." And yet, the sun "outlasts us at the heart." He ends by hymning the sunflower, the "yellow centre of the flower" which inherits the light, transforms color and shape, "Still re-creating in defining them." Of the flower, he asks:

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

In a sense, *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976) is an extension of *Moly*. The poems spring from the same source, that quasi-mystical sense of "continuous creation." These latest poems examine, especially in the eleven-part title sequence, the consequence of heightened self-consciousness and the necessity of human community and communication. Gunn ranges widely here, from his English past to his Californian present, but a strange new continuity obtains, as if the poet's life had ceased from previous linearity. Past and present now inform each other—exist simultaneously in the Bergsonian *durée* of the poem.

"The Geysers," a four-part sequence, is the heart of *Jack Straw's Castle*, and its language is richly descriptive, physical, imagistic:

This is our bedroom, where we learn the air,  
Our sleeping bags laid out in the valley's crotch.  
I lie an arm-length from the stream and watch  
Arcs fading between stars.

The poet loosens, gradually, his grip on self-consciousness, and the poetry itself loosens; meters break down as barriers break; the poet

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enters that liminal border between himself and others in the bathroom:

torn from the self  
in which I breathed and trod  
I am  
I am raw meat  
I am a god

An attitude of benevolence and communal love emerges as a solution to self-confinement.

Yet its obverse, self-entrapment, obsesses the poet in the title poem, "Jack Straw's Castle." Whereas self-containment was, in his earlier books, seen as a positive move in the direction of existential self-definition, now only anxiety attends this limitation:

isn't there anyone  
anyone here besides me  
sometimes I find myself wondering  
if the castle is castle at all  
a place apart, or merely  
the castle that every snail  
must carry around till his death

Within the metaphorical castle, hero Jack examines each room in turn, especially the cellars. One cannot be sure whether these are *real* rooms or the rooms of each dream; "dream sponsors" occur, such as Charles Manson and the Medusa, adding to the nightmarish quality of the poem. In fact, the poem may be thought of as a descent into the infernal regions of the unconscious mind. Jack drops into levels of subliminal mentality, digging away roots, delving into the foundations of selfhood, entering into a pure world of necessity where "They, the needs, seek ritual and ceremony / To appease themselves." The hero gets trapped here, temporarily, where there is "nothing outside the bone / nothing accessible." He says,

I sit  
trapped in bone  
I am back again  
where I never left, I sit  
in my first instant and where  
I never left  
petrified at my centre.



Led by the demonic killer, Manson, who appears a second time, Jack assumes that something other than himself exists, even as the mere existence of evil implies a moral context. A strange staircase appears, the symbolic exit to another realm; but there is another temporary set-back when this staircase ends at a sheer drop-off, with "bone-chips which must / at one time have been castle" heaped below it.

It is finally the urge to contact a reality beyond the castle's boundaries which brings the sequence to its tensely beautiful and haunting conclusion. Jack awakens to realize that someone is in bed with him; he is no longer alone: "So humid, we lie sheetless—bare and close, / Facing apart, but leaning ass to ass." This merest contact, ass to ass, is a hinge between Jack and something other, a bridge, a way out. Is it a dream or not? He shrugs: "The beauty's in what is, not what may seem." And in any case, "With dreams like this, Jack's ready for the world." So the poem ends, not conclusively, but with some optimism.

In essence, the sequence re-creates in miniature the entire journey Gunn has undertaken from *Fighting Terms* to the present, from self-consciousness to an outward turning; he recognizes the possibilities for love, for attachment to the beautiful and terrible flux of "continuous creation" in which all that matters is what Dorothy Parker, referring to Hemingway, called "grace under pressure," what I call a delicate balance of Energy and Rule.

The final section of *Jack Straw's Castle* exhibits some of Gunn's finest work to date, including "Autobiography," which recollects the poet's adolescence in Hampstead:

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

"The Cherry Tree" moves from literal memoir to mythic time; Gunn takes the tree for his metaphor of self-transformation, the organic metaphor of inclusion; for as the tree grows, it appropriates its surroundings, it participates in the flux:

it starts as a need  
and it takes over, a need  
to push  
                  push outward  
from the centre, to  
bring what is not  
from what is, pushing  
till at the tips of the push  
something comes about

From metrical to free verse, Gunn shows himself capable of mastering his experience, of translating *chronos* into *mythos*, of creating a language at once energetic and supremely under control.

Already Gunn is a poet of considerable status in contemporary British poetry. He has added to the language a handful of lyrics which may well survive the terrible winnowing process of time. And surely his struggle for existential self-affirmation, his reaching beyond self-confinement into the realm of community and love are central to our time if we do not wish to become barbarians. His effort to rule by intelligence the natural energies which lead, too often, to self-mutilation and, worse, the destruction of others, is exemplary. Thom Gunn is, in short, an essential poet, one for whom we should be grateful.