

## *Thom Gunn's Sense of the Movement*

Thom Gunn was a little over two-and-a-half when, on 27 April 1932, Hart Crane jumped off the stern of the *Orizaba* into the Gulf of Mexico. Yet with that leap, tensions in his art were already emblematically forming. Yvor Winters, one of Crane's correspondents and in 1927 an admiring reviewer of *White Buildings*, is said to have felt confirmed in his mature style and rigorous critical principles by this suicide. Yet Winters's neo-classicism, which deplored the notion of a self-destructive orphic responsiveness, conceals the contribution to Crane's career made by the conflicts in his parents' failed marriage, the social exacerbations of his sexual orientation, and the compulsions of his period life-style. Crane's fate could be attributed to a nihilism supposed in his æsthetics and "the danger that he may develop a sentimental leniency towards his vices and become wholly their victim, instead of understanding them and eliminating them". You could be forgiven for thinking this sentence from Winters's 1930 review of *The Bridge* referred to more than Crane's verse-vices. Gunn found himself uneasily responding to Winters's ever more tendentious exclusivities some twenty-three years later.

At Donald Hall's suggestion, Gunn went in 1954 to Palo Alto, California, to study with Winters. Their first meeting, according to Gunn's memoir "On a Drying Hill", has the retrospective air of "high comedy". The jejune English poet mentions "Hart Crane and Robert Lowell, two recent discoveries of mine" at which Winters "grunted". Gunn also mentions how he later heard details from Winters's 1927 and 1930 reviews at first hand: "Crane's line about the mammoth turtles, for instance, had remained for him a touchstone of the alive bright image through over twenty-five years" and "Crane's words to the Medicine-man in 'The Dance'—'Lie to us'—he found especially reprehensible". Gunn notes, however, that the informality of creative writing

classes allowed Winters to “cite the virtues of poems by people he would seem to have largely repudiated in print—Crane, Frost, Williams”; while, in a chapter of *Allusion to the Poets* (2002), Christopher Ricks shows how such inconsistencies extended to echoes in Winters’s own verse. When, in 1956, the American asks Gunn to call him Arthur, the British poet’s response also has a note of ironic comedy: “I felt as if I were a partner in some doomed love affair”; and during the following decade the Dear John letter of critical banishment duly arrived in response to a sheaf of poems. “He was a man of great personal warmth”, Gunn recalls in “My Life Up to Now”, “with a deeper love for poetry than I had ever met in anybody else. The love was behind his increasingly strict conception of what a poem should and should not be”.

In “On a Drying Hill”, Gunn reports Allen Tate’s comment that “Winters made the mistake of judging people by their poetry” and in the earlier memoir notes of his young self: “it already seemed to me that his conception of a poem was too rigid”. He offers Dylan Thomas’s “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower” as “good poetry” excluded by Winters’s definitions. On 9 November 1953, the day Thomas died, Gunn left a note for Karl Miller: “This is a black day for English poetry”. Not all the Movement poets would see it in quite those terms. That Gunn identified Winters’s definition of poetry with his attitudes to life is underlined when he writes that his critical “rigidity seemed to be the result of what I can only call an increasing distaste for the particulars of existence”. Crane experienced that stiffening and distaste as it was forming in Winters’s review of *The Bridge*. He prefigured Gunn’s point with a joke in a letter to Isidor Schneider on 8 June 1930: “Poets should defer alluding to the sea... until Mr. Winters has got an invitation for a cruise!” One of those “particulars of existence” may well have been why Gunn was in America—to be with Mike Kitay, the dedicatee of “The Inherited Estate”, placed after “To Yvor Winters, 1955” in *A Sense of Movement* (1957).

Back in England, 1955 also saw the publication of both Philip Larkin’s *The Less Deceived* and Donald Davie’s *Brides of Reason*. The Movement, in so far as it existed, had arrived. Gunn was included in the *New Lines* anthology (1956); Charles Tomlinson was rejected from it. Yet a comparison of two poems concerned with Shelley’s death by drowning—Gunn’s “Lerici” from *Fighting*

*Terms* (1954) and Tomlinson's "Tramontana at Lerici" from *Seeing Is Believing* (1958)—reveals that it's the latter's "air/ Unfit for politicians and romantics" which more closely resembles the fastidious æsthetics of a Wintersian restraint than Gunn's "Others make gestures with arms open wide". Tomlinson wrote a critical review of *New Lines*. This made, to the hasty eye, Gunn a Movement poet and Tomlinson, a student of Davie's at Cambridge, not one. From just such haphazard circumstances the confused and confusing clichés of literary history are forged. Similarly, in Larkin's *Selected Letters*, both one to Richard and Patsy Murphy on 8 July 1957 and another to Robert Conquest on 2 May 1974 contain references back to Hart Crane as a Jazz Age music- and booze-lover whose ability to write poetry is contrasted with Larkin's usual drought. He doesn't appear to have known about Crane's fearing his inspiration had dried up, fears which may have contributed to that suicidal leap from the *Orizaba's* deck.

The specificities of poets' lives, æsthetic experiences, and creative condensations are so much more complex than the ganglands of literary journalism. Gunn noted decisively in "My Life Up to Now": "It was around the time of the original publication of this book, 1954, or perhaps a little earlier, that I first heard of something called the Movement. To my surprise, I also learned that I was a member of it". The poet acknowledges some loosely defined formal tendencies and a rational self-consciousness of style that his early work might have seemed to share with that of the variously different Larkin, Davie, Amis, Jennings, Wain, and MacInnes. Still he concludes: "The whole business looks now like a lot of categorizing foolishness". Yet there are reasons for Davie's book being called *Brides of Reason*—ones not unconnected with the fact that a volume of criticism published in 1947 by Winters is called *In Defence of Reason*.

Gunn's "To Yvor Winters, 1955" could be mistaken for an oath of allegiance, especially if you overlook the delicate implications of its first sentence: "I leave you in your garden". Most of the poem then composes, like the following lines from towards its close, a homage-like synopsis of Wintersian æsthetics in the style of the master:

But sitting in the dusk—though shapes combine,  
Vague mass replacing edge and flickering line,

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.

The poem's opening farewell is expressed so plainly and briefly it might have been meant to be overlooked. Certainly Winters didn't dwell on that line—his comment on receiving the poem being that “he hoped he was worthy of it”. In the second verse, Gunn scouts the temptations to “renounce... empire over thought and speech” or to deny “the discriminating brain” and, as might be expected, steps back from both: “we have to live/ In a half-world, not ours nor history's,/ And learn the false from half-true premisses”. But the poet and critic echoing in Gunn's poem at this point is not so much Winters, the experience-denying advocate of Christian poems whose faith he couldn't share, as the proud-to-be-atheist William Empson of “This Last Pain”:

Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,  
(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)  
What could not possibly be there,  
And learn a style from a despair.

The dusk in “To Yvor Winters, 1955” has been “Filling the human with his own despair”. Gunn may be recalling Winters's story “The Brink of Darkness”, but he also remembers a poem that conjures a style—a means for conducting oneself through life—out of an absence of grounds for its existence. Empson's outlook is a thorough antidote to the experiential impoverishment of the Winters aesthetic. He embraced varieties of both verbal and sexual ambiguity, and he saw the need to maintain balances between the contrary pulls of axiomatic wisdoms—often with the aid of devices such as the repeated lines of the villanelle.

Was the title of Gunn's 1957 book crafty or misjudged? To have the word *Movement* so prominently displayed on your book jacket might again look like confirmation of your being on the side in the news. But a glance inside the book makes it clear that the opening line of “To Yvor Winters, 1955” also gives Gunn's sense of moving. The first poem is “On the Move”, located in California, with the unattributed (and later cut) epigraph “Man, you gotta Go”. His book underlines from the outset that his view

of what the word “movement” means has little to do with the *rap-pel à l’ordre* being staged by some English people born around 1920. Gunn published *Fighting Terms* so soon after coming down from Cambridge that you could be forgiven for thinking he was referring to university terms; and it’s partly because he was such an early starter as a prominently published poet that he would qualify for The Movement pigeon-hole at all. Born in the year of the Wall Street Crash, Gunn is three years younger than Allen Ginsberg, whose “Howl” was written in San Francisco during that same year of 1955; he is just one year younger than Andy Warhol. They look like members of the same generation if you recall that *A Sense of Movement* contains “Elvis Presley” with its slogan: “He turns revolt into a style”; and Warhol did nothing if not exemplify Gunn’s phrase—in, for instance, his *Elvis* screen-prints of 1963-4.

None of these differences was lost on Davie, who, in a 1972 review “The Rhetoric of Emotion”, found himself able to admire Gunn’s “Street Song” style but hardly his revolt:

when Gunn in another poem in *Moby* presents the spiel of a San Francisco drug-pusher in a form strikingly reminiscent of Herrick’s “Cherry Ripe” or Dowland’s “Fine Knacks for Ladies”, what can he be implying, if not that this traffic, which has called up so much agitated emotion for and against, is no more sensational than the trade that was plied by many a Jacobean Autolycus? On grounds of private morality, of personal hygiene and civic order, we may or may not agree with him; but that is another question.

Here Davie puts his life-style differences with Gunn to one side since his fellow expatriate provides him with so ready an example of what formally he would profess. Again in “To Thom Gunn in Los Altos, California” from *In the Stopping Train* (1977), Davie alludes to “The Geysers” from *Jack Straw’s Castle* (1976) to mark the distance between them: “Nothing rhymes with this/ Lethal indifference that you plumbed to even/ Once in a bath-house in Sonoma County”. The inclusion in the same poem of a reference to Winters’s “The Slow Pacific Swell” reveals Davie to have been accommodating a measured admiration for Gunn’s supposed extremities within the reiterated terms of that reason-versus-experience debate.

Gunn himself noted of *Moby* (1971) that “Metre seemed to be the proper form for the LSD-related poems, though at first I didn’t understand why”. The suggestion he makes is less challenging than are Davie’s: “Thomas Mann, speaking about how he wrote *Doctor Faustus*, tells of ‘filtering’ the character of the genius composer through the more limited but thus more precise consciousness of the bourgeois narrator. I was perhaps doing something like Mann”. But how is a metred or stanzaic poetry that could shape Pushkin’s *Eugeny Onegin*, or Vikram Seth’s Californian remake *The Golden Gate* (1986), more limited than the so-called open forms? When have “more limited” minds been “more precise”? Analytical philosophers don’t tend to be mediocrities. Such false analogies between limited consciousness and formal constraint also default into absurdities such as that Fulke Greville, first Lord Brooke (whom Gunn has anthologised), was bourgeois—or that Schönberg wrote 12-tone music on mind-expanding chemicals. Gunn speaks enthusiastically of LSD-trips, both good and bad, as a means for self-discovery and understanding. However, this may be to confuse means with end. There were people who did not achieve self-clarity through the use of the drug. Perhaps the enlightenment came from thinking and reflecting on your mind-expanding experiences, not on the experiences in themselves. Gunn’s regular forms may have been such a process’s poetic-technical equivalent.

The poet began writing in a sententious classicising code when in Britain the blackmailer’s charter was still on the statute books. In “Remembering the ’Thirties”, first published in 1953, Davie places Auden and Isherwood for “this coy/ Insistence on the quizzical, their craze/ For showing Hector was a mother’s boy”; and Larkin in “Naturally the Foundation Will Bear Your Expenses” makes his 1961 poem’s speaker an unpatriotic pansy on poppy day—off “To greet Professor Lal/ (He once knew Morgan Forster),/ My contact and my pal”. Gunn’s appearances in Larkin’s *Selected Letters* include a compliment to Robert Conquest on 20 Feb 1962: “I liked your Gunn limerick. What a genius that man has for making an ass of himself”. Then, to the same recipient on 21 September, there’s a nudge-nudge about his sexuality: “old Feel-Of-Stands Gunn”. In the November of the year Gunn published “The Feel of Hands” in *My Sad Captains* (1961), Larkin wrote those lines from “Broadcast” about Maeve Brennan’s “hands, tiny in all that air, applauding”. “The Wound”

is the first poem in Gunn's first book and it opens his *Collected Poems* (1993); it's an allegorised account of "sharing even Helen's joy" and "growing up.../ As... that stubborn boy"; in which "my bed/ Became Achilles' tent". Larkin's erection joke, and the fact that "The Wound" should be an account of problems related to the poet's sexual orientation, strongly suggest the conditions from which Gunn was emerging—and the distance he and Anglo-American culture would travel in reaching his award-winning seventh collection *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992).

In the *Collected Poems*, Gunn provides a note of apology for his poem "In Santa Maria del Popolo": "I am not sure where I read this account of Caravaggio's death. I later found that it is not the accepted one". The poem's context also includes assumptions—ones qualified in Catherine Puglisi's *Caravaggio* (1998)—about the painter's sexual tastes:

No Ananias croons a mystery yet,  
Casting the pain out under name of sin.  
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,  
Those sharpers; and was strangled, as things went,  
For money, by one such picked off the streets.

We're to take it, surely, that the man who fled Rome after killing Ranuccio Tomassoni on 28 May 1606 in a duel was strangled by a pudgy cheat who might also have been a picked-up whore, rather than by an insolent girl dressed as Venus. Gunn may be alluding discreetly to speculations about St Paul's sexuality in the "alternate/ Candour and secrecy inside the skin", or to such implications in the vigorously realistic painter's rendition of the fallen man's flesh. Certainly, Saul appears to be embracing nothing but a light-source, and the Biblical text has a voice asking why a policy of persecution is being pursued. In Gunn's final couplet, the St Paul of Caravaggio's road-to-Damascus painting has indeed "the large gesture of solitary man" who is "Resisting, by embracing, nothingness". In his 1930 review, Winters had accused Whitman and his followers of regarding "annihilation, complete negation, as the only good"; so "these poets, and Mr. Crane as well, are headed precisely for nowhere". Gunn's continuing debate with

Winters can be heard in that parenthetical addition: "Resisting, by embracing".

In *The Life of Metrical and Free Verse in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (1997), Jon Silkin cites the line "I heard you wake up from the same bad dream" in "Lament" from Gunn's 1992 collection and observes that "Under the pressure of grief the language... breaks down the metre so that there are—to my ear—no stress syllables and only two final durational ones. One must count the syllables to perceive the prosodic structure". Here is the passage:

In hope still, courteous still, but tired and thin,  
You tried to stay the man that you had been,  
Treating each symptom as a mere mishap  
Without import. But then the spinal tap.  
It brought a hard headache, and when night came  
I heard you wake up from the same bad dream  
Every half-hour with the same short cry  
Of mild outrage, before immediately  
Slipping into the nightmare once again  
Empty of content but the drip of pain.

There are problems in Silkin's account: one is his technical analysis of the line; another his description of relations between a presumed state of feeling "the pressure of grief", an art medium "the language", and a formal resource "the metre". Gunn's line is a decasyllabic pentameter with notional stresses on "heard", "wake", "from", "same", and "dream". That's its metre. Its intonational shape ruffles this underlying pattern by insinuating a tetrameter structure with the four feet as perhaps an iamb, two anapæsts, and a spondee. The combination of these two gives a further shape with three points of stressed-pitched focus ("heard", "wake up", and "same bad dream"), a lengthening sequence of syllable groups in which the pitch level rises through the two verbs to climax on the rise and fall of the elongated syllable in "dream". Thus the line's main point of attention is the other person's "same bad dream"; it is more interested in "you wake up" than in "I heard", and it is more interested in "heard" than in "I".

Silkin argues that Gunn "has learned to evacuate the ego" by teaching himself "to co-operate with free verse, with the result that the metricality, with or without rhyme, is not permitted to



dictate to experience". Silkin's terms here hark back to the polarities in Winters's criticism of verse and syntax for courting unreason and chaos, and the retort that he and his followers are shying away from experience with their closed forms. Yet Silkin's "not permitted to dictate" suggests a counter-diktat on the part of those who should "cooperate with free verse". So here again feeling and experience are aligned with the "free", and dubious control management strategies with the "metrical". Gunn notes in his essay on H.D., Marianne Moore, and Mina Loy, that "hardness, softness, and derivative terms used in literary criticism look back to an obviously sexual origin". I would add that none of these tendentious dualisms derived from sexual stereotyping is likely to be helpful or experientially convincing. What is the "feeling" in a poem except a reading of "the language"? What is the "pressure" except, in large part, a "rhythm" which, whether metred or not, only exists in so far as it is the words of a unique poem's lines. Gunn doesn't "evacuate his ego"; he places an "I" pronoun in the first foot of an iamb so that it is pronounced unstressed with the reduced vowel sound. Such details are suffused with the thinking and feeling, the ethics and æsthetics of the narrated moment, and their consequences are as relevant for "free" verse as for poetry in a metre.

The experience of visiting a man dying of AIDS has precious little to do with reading a poem about visiting such a man. What little the reading does have in common with the visiting is generated by the poem's technique and not by the experience. The "pressure of grief" that Silkin detects must be heard (and he must have heard it) in reading the poem, not as something pressing on the poem from outside. Context is created by an understanding of text. I don't exactly disagree with Silkin's notions about the poet and his ego, notions borrowed from a comment of Gunn's on Christopher Isherwood's style; but it's presuming too much to attribute his poem's meanings and effects to anything other than the techniques of language that Gunn employs. In "Lament" he has a first person singular pronoun that narrates the events of the "courteous" man's last days without drawing discourteous attention to itself, and this is expertly done by means of the metre and rhythm of his lines. "Henry VIII's court was a much more dangerous place than a singles bar in San Francisco", Gunn writes in his review of the *New Oxford Book of Sixteenth-Century Verse*. He could as equally have learned the technical-ethical principles

manifest in “Lament” from the stoic formality of his beloved renaissance courtier-poets composing farewells when fortune’s wheel has turned fatally against them.

His recent elegy “To Donald Davie in Heaven”, published in the *TLS*, begins with a reported change of mind: “I was reading Auden—But I thought/ you didn’t like Auden, I said./ Well, I’ve been reading him again,/ and I like him better now, you said”. Gunn then admires the older poet for “your ability to regroup/ without cynicism”. It’s something that Yvor Winters, despite all his inconsistencies of precept and practice, seems never to have been able to do. In the 1959 essay “Remembering the Movement”, Davie was not only “regrouping/ without cynicism” but also looking back in “anger—with myself as well as with others”. Among the things he criticises is “the insularity”, and not only one of national literatures or literary æsthetics, “which has ready its well-documented and conclusive sneer at Colette and Marianne Moore, Cocteau and Gide and Hart Crane”.