

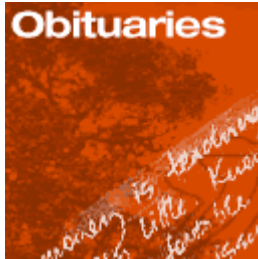


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Thom Gunn

Neil Powell
Tuesday April 27, 2004



Thom Gunn, who has died aged 74

In a poem from his 1982 collection, *The Passages of Joy*, Thom Gunn delightedly announced: "I like loud music, bars, and boisterous men."

But he immediately provided a characteristically cerebral explanation: these were things "That help me if not lose then leave behind, / What else, the self."

This relationship - balance rather than conflict - between the body's hedonism and the mind's discipline is a central, enduring theme in the work of one of the late twentieth century's finest poets.

Thom Gunn (the "Thom" is not an affectation but is short for Thomson, his mother's maiden name), who has died aged 74, was born in Gravesend, Kent.

His mother, who died when he was 15, had been a literary journalist; his father became editor of the *Daily Sketch*. His adolescence, spent in North London, apart from a brief evacuation to Hampshire, coincided with the second world war.

He was educated at University College School, and by the time he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, after two years' National Service, he was 21.

His first book, *Fighting Terms* (1954), contains poems written while he was an undergraduate: they engagingly combine youthful brashness with scholarly allusiveness.

Two Cambridge friends were especially influential: Tony White, an actor and Mike Kitay, an American who was to become for Gunn "the leading influence on my life, and thus on my poetry."

It was primarily to be with Mike Kitay, his lifelong partner, that Gunn applied for a creative writing fellowship at Stanford University, California, which he was awarded in 1954 and where he worked with the great if wayward poet-critic Yvor Winters.

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The juxtaposition of Gunn's metaphysical Englishness with Californian life and Winters' reaching is very evident in his second collection, *The Sense Of Movement* (1957), an exciting, deliberately provocative book whose distinctive energy comes from an apparent tension between form and content: traditional poetic structures and intellectual abstraction are deployed on subjects which include Hell's Angels, Elvis Presley, and a keyhole-voyeur in an hotel corridor.

From 1960 onwards, Gunn lived in San Francisco, for some years lecturing at the University of California at Berkeley. His third book, *My Sad Captains* (1961) is divided into two distinct halves: it appears superficially to be a contrast between Englishness and Americanness. But the distinction is in fact a technical one, between closed metrical forms and open syllabic ones, and it reflects an emotional and philosophical rather than a geographical division: quiet understatement replaces the seemingly aggressive stance of earlier poems.

By the early 1960s, Gunn's earlier aggressive-defensive mode had given way to a more open, flexible stance; and he was in the right place at the right time - San Francisco in the late sixties - to explore this openness. These, he said, "were the fullest years of my life, crowded with discovery both inner and outer," and the poems written then make up his most sunlit, celebratory book, *Moly* (1971); rock music and drug-induced euphoria find their characteristic counterbalance in the beautifully resonant lucidity of *The Fair in the Woods, Grasses and Sunlight*. However in Gunn's next book *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976), the dream modulates into nightmare, related partly to his actual anxiety-dreams about moving house and partly to the changing American political climate.

"But my life," he wrote, "insists on continuities - between America and England, between free verse and metre, between vision and everyday consciousness." *The Passages Of Joy* (1982) reaffirmed those continuities.

Ten years were to pass before his next collection, *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992): here, with terrible irony, the poet who had sought to lose "the self" found himself "less defined" and "unsupported" as his self-defining friends died of Aids.

In 1993, Gunn published a second collection of occasional essays, *Shelf Life*, and his substantial *Collected Poems*, which usefully reintegrated a number of previously fugitive pieces into the main body of his work. His final book, *Boss Cupid* (2000), ranges from reckless youth to elegiac age; from gossipy anecdotes to movingly meditative poems such as *In the Post Office*, in which he finds himself a "survivor" who "may later read / Of what

has happened, whether between sheets, / Or in post
offices, or on the streets." One could hardly ask for more.

Thom (Thomson) William Gunn, poet, born August 29
1929; died April 25 2004

A longer version of this obituary will appear in
tomorrow's Guardian v



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